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Nutrition and great taste: In a Jia Yen ready-to-eat food pack

Utter the word “housewife” and several associations will come to mind. The woman does not work and her full-time “job” centres on the home and its occupants. Her role is synonymous with managing the household, such as performing chores, cooking and taking care of the family. *It definitely does not include serving store-purchased, ready-to-eat convenience meals!*

But why not, especially if the dishes are at least as good as any home-cooked ones? Not only are they hygienically prepared, they are nutritious and tasty; *plus*, the home-chef benefits from the time saved as she does not have to whip up authentic dishes from scratch. With this vision and mission in mind, JR Foodstuff Industries was established in 2001 with the aim to become the leading manufacturer of quality, ready-to-eat convenience meals.

Over the years, the company has built on its expertise to produce and supply an extensive range of ready-to-eat, chilled and frozen products spanning Chinese and Asian cuisines. The food items, which include *dim sum*, appetisers, soups, finger foods, main dishes, rice meals and desserts, cater to both the retail sector and food service institutions. Its clientele comprises mainly airline caterers, hotels, restaurants, food caterers, cafes, pubs and supermarkets.

Marketed under the Jia Yen brand, each product is the culmination of years of experience and stringent quality standards throughout the full value chain. From veteran chefs to specially-selected suppliers, best-in-kind processes and state-of-the-art equipment, JR Foodstuff ensures that everything meets the strict quality criteria of its inhouse QA and procurement team.

Mum’s not cooking

Singapore is known for its flourishing food culture where foodies are constantly on a lookout for new eating places. They are willing to traverse the island, and will willingly fork out a premium for satisfying dining experiences. A recent research reveals that they do not eat out as often as they used to. On the average, they head out to the restaurants about three times a week, mostly to celebrate special occasions. Local cuisine ranks as the top preferred food choice, followed closely by Chinese cuisine.

Dining habits are shifting as people are becoming more health conscious. They are cutting back on what’s bad, like salt and oil, and opting for more of what’s good. It appears that home-cooked food is hip again, whether it is a home-prepared lunch eaten from a tiffin carrier in the office pantry, or dinner with the family in the evenings. The same survey shows that 72% of the respondents dine with their families between three to five times in a week.

Given the above food-related trends, most people are likely to be tucking into local food or Chinese cuisine when they sit down for meals at home with the family – these are the cuisine types that Jia Yen specialises in. Loyal supporters of the brand appreciate the authentic taste and ease of preparation offered by the brand’s ready-to-eat meals, but they are in the minority. Other consumers routinely shun such pre-prepared or instant foods because of the long-held belief that fresh is best; they also hold the mistaken notion that such meals fall short in hygiene standards, taste and quality. Yet other grocery-shoppers have little awareness of the Jia Yen brand and its products, or they cannot locate the products on the supermarket shelves.

Time is a premium, and there is huge potential for healthful, tasty food that does not take hours to prepare. With its extensive array of ready-to-eat, chilled and frozen products, Jia Yen products can

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provide home-chefs with new ways to optimise their limited time. Clearly, match-making efforts to introduce “Demand” and “Supply” to each other are necessary

It does not matter that mum’s not cooking, as long as a hot, delectable meal is served during mealtimes.

What’s in it for me?

People are creatures of habit who stick to the familiar, and the tried-and-tested. This is why brands organise promotions, distribute samples and run marketing campaigns. Such activities are useful in introducing new brands and raising awareness of existing ones.

A sustained series of activities is often needed to etch a permanent impression and convert a non-supporter, while emotional attachment – *a la* “I love the product because ...” or “It’s really good!” – will sustain the relationship for the longer term.

With competing demands for limited time, manufacturers across all industries, including JR Foodstuff, need to clearly present themselves and their value propositions; they need to constantly reinvent themselves to answer the “What’s in it for me?” question. The better the answers are, the tighter the bonds that will bind the consumers to them. Iconic lifestyle brand Apple is an expert at this, with its frequent launches of new or improved products and services that fulfil its devotees’ as-yet unknown needs. Its branding is one of a kind, and its packaging is distinctive. Its supporters will willingly queue for hours to be the first to *taste* the new products – while holding on to their *tried-and-tested* iPhone, iPad or iPad.

Mmm, the food’s not bad at all

Unlike the big boys such as Apple, SMEs do not have the resources for expansive market research or run big brand campaigns once a year. But ironically, because of their smaller sizes, market feedback and brand building are all the more important help them in strategic planning and business growth. Rather than rely on their “gut feel”, JR Foodstuff had turned to the SME Consulting Programme, managed by UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance, for a brand audit based on scientific principles.

“Our expectations were for field research and data collection, both of which were exceedingly well met,” said Tony Chng, Chief Operating Officer of JR Foodstuff. He complimented the student-consultants on their report, which he found to be very “professional”, thus giving the company a “headstart to look into issues in greater depth”. The consulting team had examined the company’s market standing in relation to pricing, brand perception and channel management. As many of the recommendations were useful and applicable, the company was “seriously looking” into their implementation.

For the student-consultants, the project was an opportunity to put textbook theories to the test. Although they would have preferred to learn more about the challenges faced by the business, the 12-week timeframe and the research model limited their exposure to the company’s internal business processes and operations. In the process of data collection however, they learnt “more about the B-to-C market in general,” said a student-consultant.

Project Adviser Jorg Dietzel lauded the SME Consulting Programme for “forcing” the students from the classroom into the market, and giving them the opportunity to “get their hands dirty”. The practical way of doing things is very different from an academic approach, enabling the team to “look strategically” at the project and pay attention to the details. These are real skills that would help them when they join the workforce.

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