

Tantalising Treats: Dessert First Pte Ltd



Established in 2009, Dessert First Pte Ltd is a family-owned dessert company that sells a wide variety of hot and cold desserts. From a first outlet in Liang Seah Street in 2009, it has brought its array of delicious desserts to consumers through a second outlet in Takashimaya Food Court.

Dessert First prides itself as a dessert place with signature durian and mango offerings, affordable pricing, and an unparalleled level of service. Being hip and on-trend, it constantly creates and modifies its homemade recipes to encompass the latest dessert trends, to meet the evolving tastes and preferences of its customers.

Dessert First's current menu consists of shaved-ice and snow-ice desserts, waffles with ice-cream and traditional Chinese desserts. Shaved-ice and snow-ice desserts make up more than 50 per cent of the total sales.

When Mr Wong Kai Sun, Owner/Director of Dessert First approached the UOB-SMU Asian Enterprise Institute (AEI), it was on the advice of an SME Centre that had encouraged him to "start small". He was considering engaging the services of a branding consultant, which would likely have set him back by a five-figure fee. Turning to the Institute's flagship SME Consulting Programme instead, his brief was a practical one – to identify and analyse issues relating to Dessert First's brand perception and positioning vis-à-vis its key competitors in the local dessert industry.

Coffee, tea or desserts?

The brand audit project was undertaken by a team of three student-consultants under the supervision of a Project Advisor, and supported by a team from UOB-SMU AEI.

The use of scientific methodologies – the hallmark of the SME Consulting Programme – provided the students with a proven framework and a sound basis for their investigations. They conducted primary and secondary research to gather insights on Dessert First's target customer segment and consumer behaviours, perform an analysis on the SME's competitors, discover its customers' confidence and acceptance level of future price increases, and validate its current unique value proposition and/or improve on it.

The secondary research gave the team a preliminary review of the purchasing patterns and consumption behaviours in the hot and cold dessert industry in Singapore, as well as its standing there. An understanding of the market helped the team better identify and define the target customer segment, in particular, their perceptions, preferences and decision-making processes.

The team undertook three main modes of primary research – in-store observations, online survey and in-store interviews. To ensure that the data was sound, the observational studies (in-store observations) were carried out during both peak and off-peak periods, and covered different periods of the week including weekends and weekdays. The real-time, on-site observations promoted the student-consultants' understanding of the demographics, inclinations and actual buying behaviours of customers, and gave them insights into the respective outlets' frontline operations and level of customer service in Dessert First's two outlets as well as at its competitors' locations.

Similarly, to increase the reliability and value of all the data, the online surveys and in-store interviews were carried out using a methodological approach.

Traditional... but with a new twist

A careful analysis of the data revealed that Dessert First needed to address three main issues in order to attain a leading edge in the market and on its competitors. These pertained to the SME's brand identity, brand awareness and unique value proposition.

Having identified the issues, the team proposed a brand strategy with a comprehensive list of tactics. Tapping on Porter's Generic Competitive Strategies for a broad differentiation strategy for the SME's products and services, the student-consultants determined the unique attributes that are valued by Dessert First's customers – attributes that the customers would perceive as being better than or different from the competitors' products and services.

The team also proposed a unique value proposition that was different from the existing one, as the new proposition would better encapsulate the recommended brand positioning and target market, and align with the direction that the SME was headed.

A robust brand encompasses many elements, one of which is a compelling visual brand identity that would apply across all its collateral; another is a sustained marketing plan to ensure top-of-mind awareness, promote customer loyalty and expand customer base. In the report, the team provided specific examples drawn from existing companies to illustrate how these companies reinforced their brands. The report features examples of logos, physical layouts and décor of dessert outlets, menus, website interfaces and social media content, etc.

Looking beyond the present, the report also has detailed recommendations to grow the business through different distribution channels, opening hours, new product categories as well as locations for future expansion. Being cognisant of the lean resources that characterise SMEs, the team added a "Risk Analysis and Mitigation Measures" section to address the issues that may arise.

Uniquely distinct palates

When Dessert First's Mr Wong approached the UOB-SMU AEI, he had expected only to gain some knowledge about how to improve Dessert First's branding. What he got was a "comprehensive business 'health check' – we got to know our strengths and weaknesses from the customer point of view, and also how our closest competitors are faring compared to us," he says. Calling the recommendations "useful" and "relevant", he adds that the SME has already embarked on several of the proposals. The methodological and scientific approaches were a huge plus as they yielded updated and objective data.

Due to the tight project timeline – the student-consultants were simultaneously juggling the demands of school work – and the urgency to understand the SME's industry in order to begin a meaningful brand audit, the students had decided that the best approach was to "set clear goals, objectives, timelines and deliverables early to keep ourselves on track". This enabled them to optimise their returns as they gained hands-on experience working with a mentor, and they also had the opportunity to work on a consultancy project that required them to generate impactful strategies that added value to a client's business. They credited Project Advisor Ms Dolly Chin for providing them with "plenty of industry insights drawn from her wealth of experience".

On her part, Ms Chin reminded the students to put themselves in the shoes of the SME, "asking what sort of resources the SME has upfront (at the start of the project) so that the recommendations can be

practical". Showing examples of real-life concepts and ideas was her idea, as she felt that this approach would help convey what they say in more "tangible" ways.

Ms Chin complimented her young charges, especially their "impeccable teamwork, energy and enthusiasm – the team had started researching and checking out the SME even before the project kicked off," she says.

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