



Timeless Luxury: H2 Hub Pte Ltd

An icon of Singapore, H2 Hub Pte Ltd prides itself as a leading watch and optical retail chain store with its finger on the pulse of the ever-changing consumer wants and trends. Renowned for watch servicing and repair, the company – established in 1979 – has expanded over the years to become a retail powerhouse representing over 40 specially-curated list of international brands.

With the setup of its flagship outlet at Nex Serangoon, H2 Hub continues to raise the bar as a curator of a spectrum of exciting brands and memorable shopping experiences. At its flagship outlet, the SME has unveiled the new Watchsmith concept which features customisable watches – the first such concept of its kind in Singapore – taking the lead in providing chic and personalised timepieces.

With a keen eye for fashion and style, H2 Hub believes in keeping ahead of its competitors through on-going innovation and enduring customer service. In another first, the watch retailer has pioneered an online shopping portal (www.newfashionwatch.com) so that shoppers can access its range of time pieces whenever they wish, from wherever they may be.

Today, H2 Hub is the only watch retailer to offer free lifetime battery replacement for purchases made at any of its 11 outlets – at Nex Serangoon, AMK Hub, Century Square, Bedok Mall, The Clementi Mall, Westmall, Bugis Plus and Jurong Point.

As the company looks towards long-term sustainability and expansion, it turned to UOB-SMU Asian Enterprise Institute (AEI) to perform market research and gain insights on brand strategies for its Aries Gold brand. Under the Institute's flagship SME Consulting Programme, a team of student-consultants, supervised by an industry veteran and supported by the Institute, undertook the project to help the SME achieve its objectives.

What time is it?

The student-consultants embarked on the project to identify the key challenges and opportunities for Aries Gold, H2 Hub's home-grown signature brand. The objective was to help the SME surmount the challenges and build Aries Gold into a lasting brand with strong brand recognition in its target market.

Leveraging best practices and scientific methodologies, the team used a combination of primary and secondary research to gather salient insights. Research was thorough, and included an online survey, one-to-one interviews with H2 Hub's sales representatives, one-to-one phone interviews with existing customers, and site surveys at H2 Hub's selected outlets. The student-consultants also used Perceptual Mapping to ascertain Aries Gold's market positioning vis-à-vis the market and its competitors.

According to the team's findings, locally, there is a growing interest for mechanical watches. This trend bears testimony to a potential market of discerning customers who would appreciate the quality, movement and craftsmanship of Aries Gold. In terms of design, brand and price – which customers have listed as their main purchase considerations – Aries Gold has the potential to carve a niche for itself.

Keeping track of time

After analysing the data, the team discerned Aries Gold's value propositions and proceeded to craft a comprehensive set of marketing strategies to boost the brand's standing in the marketplace. The marketing strategies were categorised by time periods – short-term (within the next six months), mid-term (within the next one to three years), and long-term (within the next five years).

For example, research revealed that customers would patronise physical stores after sourcing for information online. Customers also regarded sales representatives as reliable sources of information to validate the information they had found online. Given the important role played by the sales staff, the student-consultants proposed a standard "guideline" for sales representatives at the storefronts. The guideline would (subtly and tastefully) emphasise the value propositions of Aries Gold while establishing an emotional connection with potential customers. The team also suggested new programmes and campaigns aimed at promoting customer loyalty while simultaneously boosting the bottom line.

Recognising the rapid changes in the commercial landscape where disruptive innovation is a reality, the team raised a cautionary note for H2 Hub to keep track of the rise of smartwatches, as smartwatches have the potential to unsettle the long-term viability of analogue watches.

Time for action

One of the benefits of the SME Consulting Programme is the use of methodical and scientific approaches to address business issues. In this respect, H2 Hub's Creative Director Woo Enyi said that "the strength of the facts and data balances the vibes and the creative energy often formed from pure intuition". Many of the findings "ring similar to what we already know, and they reinforce our instincts so that we are bolder when making decisions, knowing that they are backed by true data and professional analyses," he shared.

The SME had approached UOB-SMU AEI for a better understanding of the market and how it reacted to its Aries gold brand, as well as marketing strategies to promote it. "Yes, our expectations were met," said Mr Woo. "The findings were quite detailed and the analyses were thorough. There were also a few findings that our team did not expect, and these would be helpful for us to craft small strategies to improve our brand."

The project "far exceeded our expectations," said the student-consultants. They discovered the "many facets of a business" that only emerged during their hands-on experience, such as the numerous concerns and logistical matters that must be considered for each of their proposed programmes. Managing a real-life project was vastly different from an academic assignment, and they came away from the project with newfound skills and knowledge. The team members expressed their gratitude for Project Advisor Victor Kwan, who "provided key industry insights" and shared his "vast knowledge".

For Mr Kwan, "both learning objectives for the students and practicable recommendations for the SME go hand in hand". So when students participate in such consulting projects, they get to "apply what they have learnt to real-life situations, with all the practical constraints". A properly-completed project would naturally help them achieve their learning objectives.

Mr Kwan had enjoyed working with the team, calling the experience "great". He explained, "They are energetic, creative and passionate about the SME's business, and their enthusiasm rubbed off on me as well!"

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