A Seamless, Automated Process: Cloude8

Established in 2015, Cloude8 is an information technology (IT) organisation that specialises in affordable, localised enterprise resource planning (ERP) solutions for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Some of the impetus to serve the SME community came from the two co-founders' personal experiences – they noticed that their business-owner friends were spending a lot of time, after office hours, catching up on business administration. Also, anecdotal evidence showed them that few SMEs were aware of ERP, or, if they did, they believed it to be an expensive tool that only large corporates and MNCs could afford; others were of the view that small organisations do not require the functionalities of the perceived-advanced systems.

The co-founders call ERP a "fancy way of describing an integrated system that helps you manage and automate your business processes and operations". One system is all that is needed, as it can take care of the full spectrum of business needs, from customer relationship management to financial, human resource, manufacturing, supply chain and reporting activities. In fact, Forbes lists having such a system as one of the biggest reasons for business success.

Cloude8 wants to "bring affordable ERP solutions to every business, enabling people to grow their businesses more efficiently while giving back precious time to focus on things that really matter". As co-founder Tony Ta likes to say, "We exist to transform businesses so each can succeed in its place of greatness." Being an SME itself – with the typical challenges facing SMEs, such as having limited resources and/or robust marketing strategies – the company had hitherto taken a general approach to target its market. However, this approach did not maximise the returns on the time and resources spent. Mr Ta thus approached the UOB-SMU Asian Enterprise Institute to address this issue.

Under the Institute's flagship SME Consulting Programme, a team of student-consultants, supervised by an industry veteran as Project Advisor, and supported by a Project Manager from the Institute, undertook this project, with the objective to identify Cloude8's target market segments and help it to make an impact there.

Who, where and what

The business environment is rapidly becoming more complex. Disruptive technologies are challenging traditional business models; the regulatory regime is more stringent; consumers are demanding more and within a shorter timeframe. Many companies have turned to technology to enhance their efficiency and competitiveness. In fact, the global ERP software market is projected to hit USD41.69 billion by 2020, with a CAGR of 7.2% between 2014 and 2020. Cloude8 stands to benefit from this optimistic projection… but to whom, exactly, should it sell its ERP solutions, and how?

To understand Cloude8 and the business environment in which it operates, the student-consultants conducted research use a methodological, scientific approach – the hallmark of the SME Consulting Programme. They commenced preliminary research via secondary sources to identify three to five sectors in Singapore that have potential need for ERP systems as business solutions. They then delved deeper into these shortlisted sectors to understand the outlook and trends, tapping on publicly-available information from the SME centres, trade associations and online sources. Primary research comprised in-depth interviews with key executives of companies from these identified sectors.

The student-consultants analysed the data and Cloude8's relative market positioning using business frameworks and tools including SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), 5Cs (situation analysis of company, customers, competitors, collaborators, climate), and PESTEL (to examine and monitor the macro environment).

Aligning with national objectives

Singapore's transformation into a Smart Nation, and the continued restructuring of the economy, can provide a boost to Cloude8's business. The government-led Smart Nation initiative casts the spotlight on the need for businesses to harness the power of technologies and networks to enhance productivity and efficiency. And, under the multi-year Industry Transformation Programme, the government will develop roadmaps for 23 industries with the aim to prepare them for the future economy. Cloude8 sits in the middle of the government's growth plan.

In their recommendations, the student-consultants evaluated the value of riding on the government's IT and economic focus, and aligned their proposals accordingly. Not only will this alignment add credibility to, and strengthen, Cloude8's messaging, the government's various schemes to help companies go digital or restructure can be used to offset some of Cloude8's business development and marketing costs. More importantly, the government's financial incentives can help Cloude8's potential customers to offset the cost of installing ERP solutions. Put simply, the government's push for SMEs to restructure, and to tap on the technology to enhance operations, along with its numerous assistance schemes, can help to lower the barrier of resistance towards Cloude8's ERP solutions.

A new tagline was proposed for Cloude8 to enhance its solutions-driven image, along with a comprehensive plan to improve brand recognition and product credibility. As government accreditation goes a long way to enhance credibility, the student-consultants proposed that Cloude8 gets certified as a pre-approved digital solution vendor through schemes such as "SMEs Go Digital". With a trust mark endorsement, the company will be elevated to a better market position where SMEs can choose to work with it.

The final project report featured details of the brand audit as well as B2B marketing strategies comprising a detailed action plan. The three phases of Brand Development, Business Development, Sales and Marketing Strategy featured tactical actions of high, medium and low priorities, set against their respective implementation timeframes comprising short, medium and long terms.

From A to Z, seamlessly

According to Mr Ta, "Our initial expectations were that the students could only provide data from market research and maybe some academic proposals" but the final report showed that "the students took the initiative to gain better insights into the market research and provide logical, research-backed, actionable proposals". He was "pleasantly surprised at the depth of knowledge and quality of work the students put into this project" and pronounced his expectations "more than met". Cloude8 is in the process of implementing some of the recommendations.

The student-consultants participated in the SME Consulting Programme to gain practical experience in consulting and to gain more IT domain knowledge. "All our objectives were met." They shared that they had learnt "client management and communication on top of the groundwork of research and analysis. The academic frameworks were put to practical use, to derive feasible solutions". Having little training in the B2B context (they were more familiar with the B2C context), they appreciated the guidance of Project Advisor Pamela Wu, especially when they needed to "modify some of what we were familiar with, to achieve the end goals".

"My approach was to engage the students in interactive discussion, and encourage them to have creative thinking and ask questions, and not simply adopt my suggestions," said Ms Wu. The team did this and more, "working closely as a team and taking ownership of the different tasks to complement each other". Calling them "remarkable", she complimented the students' enthusiasm to learn – "and they learn fast!" – their "good attitude and full commitment". Along with the support of the Project Manager, the project met its objectives, and deliverables were "on target" and "on time".

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