



Keeping The Memories Alive: Life Corporation Services

Life Corporation Services (Life Corp), together with its subsidiaries, provides a range of death care services in several countries. In Singapore, Life Corp's vision is to become a premium, one-stop funeral and bereavement services provider, and a leader and innovator that sets the standards in the funeral services industry.

Life Corp's mission is to provide compassionate care for a dignified departure, and to this end, it has tendered for and won a bid for leasehold land in the Sengkang-Punggol area for its Goldhill Memorial Centre (GMC). The company will be investing an initial S\$30 million to build a fully-automated columbarium service at the location, which would have the capacity for some 8,000 niches (for urns holding the cremated remains of the deceased). The new facility will feature private booths as well as VIP Suites for relatives and loved ones during their visits.

What sets the GMC apart from other death care establishments is its innovative use of technology that brings ancestor worship up-to-date with today's market and consumer trends. When it is up and running in 2020, GMC will be Singapore's first fully-automated memorial centre with a columbarium system that is integrated with funeral parlour facilities. It is envisioned to serve people of different faiths.

In the longer term, the company's expansion plan will include providing a full suite of premium death care services spanning pre-planned funerals, funeral services and columbarium packages. With its dedicated and experienced team, its focus on quality and the use of innovation and technology, Life Corp is confident that GMC will become a sustainable business.

Life Corp wanted to tap on the UOB-SMU Asian Enterprise Institute (UOB-SMU AEI)'s SME Consulting Programme (SCP) for a viable business plan to forward its objectives. A team of two student-consultants, under the oversight of an industry veteran as Project Advisor, and supported by a Project Manager from the Institute, undertook the project.

No place for nimby

Death and dying is a taboo subject in many cultures, even though it is something that everyone faces. As written by Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the United States, in a letter dated 1789, "nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes". Yet, much negativity surrounds the subject, even in modern societies such as Singapore. In fact, in 2015, the city-state saw a visible expression of unhappiness – in the form of a "not in my backyard" (nimby) objection – when the future residents of build-to-order government flats in Sengkang opposed the construction of a planned Chinese temple-with-columbarium adjacent to their flats.

With Singapore's aging population, the government has started the conversation on death, albeit indirectly. Each time there are discussions about the elderly; medical, hospice or other care services, or even the need for an Advance Medical Directive or Lasting Power of Attorney, the topic of death and dying gets an airing. Organisations like the Lien Foundation have been bolder in their approach to talk about death. For example, in 2010, the Foundation initiated its Happy Coffins project, part of its Life-before-death campaign that also included die-logues – dismantling the taboo surrounding end-of-life discussions. For the Happy Coffins project, three residents from a nursing home worked with a community of Singapore artists and designers to create personalised coffins for themselves. "The traditional negative associations surrounding the coffin were transformed into a celebratory symbol of

courage, life and beauty,” explained Mr Lee Poh Wah, the Foundation’s CEO. “It gets people to focus on how the departed have lived.” Still, much remains to be done to lift the veil on an open discussion about death, and it was against this backdrop that the student-consultants worked on the SCP for Life Corp’s GMC.

Given Singapore’s death rate of 4.5 deaths per 1,000 population, there is a huge demand for death care services ranging from funeral services to the settlement of the deceased’s remains, according to the student-consultants. Using scientific methodologies, they examined the landscape for death care services vis-à-vis market and consumer trends, demand and supply, and GMC’s target market segment. The SWOT analysis was used to determine GMC’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats compared to its competitors. Although GMC, which offers a *suite* of services, does not have direct competitors for its complete suite, its individual product offerings may face competition from different service providers.

After an objective, comprehensive review of the research data, the student-consultants crafted a unique value proposition for GMS that would form the basis of its business plan.

Celebrating a life well lived

When it opens its doors in 2020, GMC is envisioned to be a premium columbarium that operates on an automated storage and retrieval system (ASRS), which is a first in Singapore’s death care industry. The technology, though, is not new; it has been used in the logistics and warehousing sector since the 1960s.

GMS’ unique value proposition addresses the customers’ concerns, including the need for a final resting place for the ashes of the deceased, the convenience and privacy of viewing, and costs and fengshui. Mindful of GMS’ attractiveness to customers, Life Corp will be relying heavily on innovation and technology to rein in costs, and to ramp up its appeal to the next generation.

On another level, GMS’ unique value proposition aligns itself with the needs of the government. Leveraging on technology fits in with Singapore’s aspiration to be a Smart Nation while the overall design is conceptualised for land-scarce Singapore.

The final report that was submitted to Life Corp for GMS went beyond its opening date in 2020. It includes Kotter 8-Step change management model to support GMS as a disruptor in the industry, a business expansion plan, a strategic roadmap for sustainability and a timeline for the successful implementation of the action plans from 2018 through 2023.

Departing with dignity

Commenting on their initial expectations for “just a company business plan”, Mr Klint Thian, Life Corp’s Group General Manager, said that the UOB-SMU AEI team “delivered beyond our expectation”. He appreciated that the team had taken independent action to understand the business and, “best of all, (the project also) involved primary research”, thus lending credibility to the findings. He added that Life Corp has “engaged a PR agency to beef up our branding and marketing” – an affirmation of the team’s sound recommendations on the areas that required strengthening.

The student-consultants, who had participated in the SCP to gain real-world experience, were happy that their contributions could make a difference to their SME client. “It definitely provided us the opportunity to take things into perspective,” they said. “We learnt that no business operates in silos or in a void; strategies must be applicable” and “tailored to the company’s needs.” They credited Project Advisor Mr Paul Teo for “directing” them and “giving critical feedback”.



On his part, Mr Teo complimented the two student-consultants on their “commitment, determination and resilience”.

Project Advisor

Paul Teo

Student-consultants

Solomon Soh Zhe Hong

Bachelor of Social Science/2015

Teng Hao

Bachelor of Economics/2016