

PLANTING THE SEEDS FOR FUTURE PROSPERITY: FAR EAST FLORA MARKET

The pandemic proved a steep learning curve for this wholesaler of fresh-cut flowers in Singapore. Yet it has emerged from the crisis leaner and more agile than ever.



When Singapore imposed a Circuit Breaker in April 2020 to combat COVID-19, fresh flower wholesaler Far East Flora Market saw its on-site team shrink from 50 to just six employees

overnight, as older staff were made to stay at home. The younger and more task-focused employees found themselves having to hold the fort and take up new and challenging responsibilities in a period of uncertainty.

Leading the operations during this tumultuous period was Ms Shayner Chioh, a third-generation member of the family-run Far East Flora Holdings, who had joined the company only five years earlier. “In light of this uncertain health situation, the health of our employees, especially the older ones, was our priority. We decided that the older staff would stay home until we had more clarity of the situation and next steps. That also meant that the younger and less experienced employees, like me, were left to decipher and put guesses to tests,” recalls Ms Chioh, who is today the Division Head of Operations & Marketing at Far East Flora Market.

“It was a very steep learning curve for me,” she shares. “Before COVID-19, I was responsible for procuring flowers from suppliers globally. This pandemic forced me to hit the accelerator in my then-role and take the reins of leading the company’s operations, including making changes to existing processes.”

With the adoption of more innovative and efficient operational processes, Far East Flora Market — under the new generation of leaders at its helm — has since transformed, and emerged from the crisis as a leaner and more nimble enterprise.

Ensuring that relationships flourish

Far East Flora Holdings — which, besides the wholesale business, includes retail and landscaping arms — was founded in 1965 by Ms Chioh’s granduncle and his two brothers. Armed with a van and a healthy dose of grit, the trio peddled flowers and eggs to households across Singapore. A few years later, they entered the wholesale business in exporting orchids. Far East Orchid, rebranded as Far East Flora Market in 2020, was established in 1976 to focus on the distribution of wholesale fresh-cut flowers. Today, Far East Flora Market is widely regarded as a leading wholesale flower company in Singapore — supplying fresh-cut flowers, foliage, preserved flowers and floral accessories to florists, event planners, wedding planners and retailers. The company’s success has been built around consistently developing close relationships with its network of more than 20 global suppliers.



A leading wholesale flower company in Singapore, Far East Flora Market has a strong network of over 20 suppliers worldwide.

Since joining the business in 2015, Ms Chioh has expanded the company's supplier network and product offerings by attending tradeshows locally and globally, resulting in her successfully inking deals with quality suppliers in countries such as the Netherlands, Italy and Kenya. Far East Flora Market has nurtured these critical relationships by emphasising "honour" — one of the five values guiding the family business based on the acronym FRESH: Family, Refresh, Earnest, Service and Honour. Simply put, working with honour means always being honest and paying suppliers on time. "The relationship with our long-term suppliers is very important to us. Even though Singapore is not a big market, they still support us because we have been with them for a long period of time," Ms Chioh explains. "When we have a big event or in cases where we need a large number of flowers at the last minute, they will still deliver because they treat us like family."

Growing the business as a family

Family is a recurring theme in Far East Flora Market's success story. This concept extends beyond Ms Chioh's family to the company's workforce, which boasts several long-serving employees with over 10 years of service. Ms Chioh herself has benefited from the guidance of the group's second-generation leaders, in particular, Far East Flora Market's General

Manager, Chioh Sok Hwang. “Our employees are the arms and legs of the company, and Far East Flora Market would not be where we are today without them,” says Ms Chioh. “Our founder constantly emphasised that employees are our most important stakeholders, and we must treat them like our own family, with regard, respect and love.”



The employees, shown here during recent Chinese New Year festivities, are treated like family and enjoy a sense of belonging at the company.

Recognising that the wholesale flower business is hard work, she admits that one of the challenges in this business was making decisions on the fly. One particularly challenging episode occurred on Mother’s Day in 2020, when the company’s logistical capabilities were stretched to the limit by an overwhelming number of orders from retail customers. To cope, the company outsourced deliveries to retail customers to a third-party logistics provider for the first time, while the in-house drivers focused on meeting demand from florists. The team of six ended up working late into the night. “The biggest lesson for me was to think on my feet and come up with the most practical decision within ‘a snap of the fingers’ because any hesitation could risk our operations and reputation,” says Ms Chioh.

The other challenge Ms Chioh currently struggles with in her new capacity as the Operations Lead is finding younger talent, especially in a tight and competitive labour market. Fortunately, the company has managed to attract and retain younger talent through partnerships with polytechnics and ITEs in Singapore — these students get to experience what working in a horticultural industry is like. Retaining these younger employees is also

possible because of the camaraderie forged with their colleagues. These experiences have not only led to a growing sense of accountability and ownership in Ms Chioh, but also a huge sense of belonging among the employees.

A fresh approach to streamlining processes

Far East Flora Market has always been looking for the next opportunity for their business. For instance, the company implemented an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system to streamline operations and reduce manual and time-consuming processes which were prone to human error. The company also went through a job redesign process using a Japanese management philosophy known as “*kaizen*”, or “continuous improvement”, to cut redundant roles and give employees refreshed responsibilities to eliminate waste and improve efficiency. Furthermore, the company adopted the use of cold chain containers to transport boxes of flowers — each weighing over 20 kilograms — from Cameron Highlands straight to its shop floor in Singapore. “It was an expensive investment that paid off,” Ms Chioh reveals. “We no longer need 12 people to complete the unloading of supplies. We successfully managed to reduce the manpower needed by more than 60%.” COVID-19 was a reality check for the company, as it highlighted that change was inevitable. Following that experience, the company now has the confidence to move on with their transformation journey.



A standard lorry transporting flowers from Malaysia to Singapore. The vehicle does not have cold chain facilities to keep the blooms fresh, and many workers are needed to unload the heavy boxes.



In a move that has helped to transform the business, Far East Flora Market now uses cold chain container lorries to transport flowers from Cameron Highlands to its shop floor in Singapore — reducing manpower by over 60%.

The blooming of new business

In the past two years, the company has rebranded and expanded into new lines of business, selling fruits and vegetables, signalling its intent to sell more than just flowers. Today, a visitor to Far East Flora Market can not only pick up fruits and vegetables, but also snacks such as ice cream and chocolates. The company used to sell fresh produce from shop owners, but the markups were high and quality inconsistent, resulting in low sales and high wastage. Undeterred, the company looked at direct sourcing from local and quality suppliers. After a few trials, the company is now managing a daily delivery of many varieties of fresh produce from local suppliers and has expanded its supply from three to 10 fridges. They have also seen an increase in return customers buying their fresh fruits and vegetables.

The sweet smell of success

The next step in parent company Far East Flora's evolution is already in the works, with the ongoing construction of a new nine-storey headquarters at Clementi Road. Set to be completed in 2023, the new facility will house the group's different business units — including Far East Flora Market — forming the foundation of business synergies across the

group. “Each company in the group has its own business and processes. Our intention is to look for ways to work together and serve our customers as one,” says Ms Chioh.

With seven successful years in the business and an exciting future ahead, Ms Chioh decided to attend the SMU Enterprise Leadership for Transformation (ELT) programme, designed for SME leaders, hoping to expand her knowledge and skills within the family enterprise network. “The programme has given me the peace of mind that there is no ‘one size fits all’ format in building your profession in the business. Most importantly, stay hungry, curious and humble. And, for me, remember FRESH”, remarks Ms Chioh.



A “purr-fect” companion guards the first van that the company used to deliver flowers.