

CHALONÉ

Intimately Yours

What began as a joke in a casual get-together soon took on a life of its own, and today – two decades later – the joke has morphed into a robust lingerie business that has a presence in Singapore as well as overseas.

“We were aspiring entrepreneurs looking for an industry where we can carve a niche for ourselves,” said Gary Lee, Managing Director (MD) of Chaloné International. “We had no job, no money – we were 25 years old! – and no skills,” the 45-year-old exaggerated, laughingly. The “we” he was referring to were Chaloné’s other co-founders, Justine Ng, Head of Operations at the company, and Vera Tay, General Manager. That fateful coffee session in 1999 spawned a few brainstorming sessions, before the trio decided to venture into the haloed world of women’s underwear – with no commercial experience, no domain knowledge and little savings of their own.



From left: Vera Tay, Gary Lee, Justine Ng

An early marketing strategy was to distribute and retail lingerie sourced from Lyon, France, to departmental stores as well as independent stores, but this proved untenable as there were few takers. Undeterred, the team operated from its own concession stand in a departmental store instead. In 2000, they opened their first Chaloné boutique in Millennia Walk. It was an eye-opening experience as they had to do everything themselves. “We learnt to design a store, create a mix of merchandise, guess the quantities and sizes (of the products) to carry, and even design the paper bags,” said Mr Lee. While the ladies manned the shop, Mr Lee became the “delivery man” because he drove, as well as “handyman” who climbed up and down the ladder. When they had their first customer, the trio snapped a picture to memorialise the watershed in their business.



Chaloné boutique in Jewel Changi Airport

Business soon picked up and they garnered a regular clientele that appreciates European-style lingerie. However, as companies moved away from the Millenia Walk vicinity, and people tightened their belts in the aftermath of the 1998–1999 recession in Singapore, Chaloné, too, moved – this time, to a centralised location at Wisma Atria in Orchard Road. Today, in addition to the Wisma Atria store, Chaloné has boutiques in Jewel Changi Airport, Marina Square and Tampines 1. Their inhouse brand of lingerie is also carried at OG People’s Park, Robinsons Raffles City, Robinsons Jem and Takashimaya S.C., and the online business is registering steady growth.

Setting trends

That it was relatively easy for the trio to establish their business in Singapore also meant that the barrier to entry was equally low for its competitors. Foreign brands like La Senza and Etam – distributed by large, multi-brand organisations in Singapore – and Victoria’s Secret had “bigger budgets, better ideas”, but Chaloné

continued to focus on what it does best and “doing it better – our personalised customer service”, Mr Lee informed.

Even in the early days, paying attention to customer feedback was central to Chaloné’s customer service. Thus, as lifestyle trends evolved and it became apparent that people did not want to pay so much for clothing, the founders made the strategic move to develop their own line of lingerie that would better meet the customers’ expectations and price points. “Singaporeans are international in consumption and taste, so we knew our products must have an international look but an Asian fit,” shared Mr Lee.

It can be said that Chaloné did its part to set the local trend for affordable, European-inspired, Asian-fitted lingerie that is pretty, functional and comfortable. Its exquisite and practical styles resonate with the modern woman who is confident, empowered and attuned to the world of fashion.



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Outside Singapore, Chaloné inhouse brand items are particularly well-received in Thailand, where it is a leading lingerie brand. It has significant presence in big departmental stores including Central, Siam Paragon and Siam Takashimaya. “Thailand is a price-sensitive market, and we have the right products and pricing strategy,” Mr Lee elaborated, citing a loyal following among the affluent. While the company employs a direct business model in Thailand through a fully-owned subsidiary to manage the business there, they are looking for partners in promising markets like Malaysia and Indonesia as the policies there are “more complex” and they are “unfamiliar with the regulations”.

Listening to lingerie talk

Quality and value are the defining characteristics of Chaloné’s products, while top-notch personalised service delivers a “unique experience” that puts the customer at its heart. Put simply, “we want customers to be happy with their purchases, and come back for more”, said the MD. For example, for every new customer who places an online order, Ms Ng or Ms Tay will follow up with a WhatsApp message or phone call. If the buyer is willing to share a little more, such as the purpose for the purchase – be it for a strapless dress, a low-cut blouse, a body-skimming outfit, etc – she will be able to provide advice on whether the selected item is suitable. “Sometimes, customers may need to go one size up or down, depending on the style, or, a different style might do the job better,” explained Ms Ng. “We sometimes ask for a photo of the outer wear so that we can provide a more tailored consultation.”

This solutions-based approach is replicated at Chaloné’s boutiques, where experienced consultants attend to the customers. More than 50% of the retail staff have been with them for over five years; the longest-serving consultant has chalked up 18 years. Their seasoned eye – they can pinpoint the customer’s size without the use of a measuring tape – and professionalism have created a bond of trust with their regular customers. “They will recommend what fits you, not what is on promotion,” said Ms Ng. This has resulted in a win-win situation for the customers as well, because knowing their size means they have the option to go online for their next purchases. The SME’s omni-channel approach also extends to a vending machine for some of its smaller products. At its latest boutique in Jewel Changi Airport, for example, customers can purchase a box of three panties quickly and easily from the vending machine there, without having to queue and pay at the cashier.



Chaloné Vending machine

Chaloné is on-trend with its designs, drawing inspiration from exhibits at major tradeshows, including the Paris lingerie expositions that Mr Lee attends thrice a year in Paris. The new designs also arise from “fashion demands” from the customers. To date, they have launched “thousands” of designs, each in a whole range of sizes, said the MD.

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- Straps can be removed, or adjusted for racer-back styles, single-strap tops and off-the-shoulder trends.

Delivering unparalleled customer service means constantly innovating the products to complement customers' changing lifestyle preferences. To this end, Chaloné has tapped on innovative technology and quality materials in their production process so that every detail is properly taken care of. For example, to address Singapore's humid climate, the fabrics tend towards moisture-wicking and quick-drying. The strapless brassiere, which is the hottest-selling item here, is "truly seamless", said Ms Ng. She highlighted the well-trimmed and sealed edges, the hidden wires that sit flush against the body without causing discomfort, and cups and fabric that do not separate. The size runs from the smallest to the largest. "You can run and jump, and it will stay in place", she said confidently – "it has been extensively tested for functionality and practicality".

The men get it too

Mr Lee, as MD, is the public face of the brand at corporate events and meetings. Any awkwardness about discussing the finer details of women's intimate wear is quickly dispelled because he is usually the one to make the first move. To him, getting the products right – providing comfort, function and perhaps seduction – is actually "quite scientific" and "some engineering" is involved. For example, "having the right underwire to keep a bra in shape so that it does not flip over is a mechanical engineering issue". An added advantage is that unlike

female colleagues who may have personal biases or preferences about the product lines, his decisions are based on more "objective" perspectives.

On the consumer side, as male customers are increasingly buying lingerie as gifts, Chaloné's consulting service helps them make more informed choices. "We want them to get the correct size and style, so we ask questions to get a better feel of what the recipient might like; we also ask for photos to gauge the fit, so that what they buy can make the perfect gift," said Ms Ng.

For Chaloné, what started as a joke among friends has become a serious business. While lingerie is an industry that still elicits the occasional giggle, the founders are the ones enjoying the last laugh.