



A Healthful Concoction of Tradition and Technology

The story of Heng Foh Tong Medical Hall (HFT) has always been about supporting families and caring for people. Since its establishment in 1957 by Madam Ng Sock Eng, a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) practitioner, the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) has stayed true to its mission to empower customers to live a full life complemented by TCM herbs and solutions.

Madam Ng, now 92 years of age, continues to play an active role in the family business alongside her son Peter Lee and his wife, both TCM veteran practitioners, and their elder son Chin Siong. “Four people is just right,” said Chin Siong. “My grandmother and parents take care of the shop and herbal blends while I oversee business development and other matters.” His Vice President designation is “merely functional”. Given the SME’s lean resources and his relative youth, he rolls up his sleeves whenever there are things to be done, including “renovating the shop, painting, putting in all the LED lights; creating an online presence, and also making deliveries”, he said good-naturedly.



Heng Foh Tong Medical Hall, before renovation (pic on left) and after renovation (pic on right)

The techie’s brew

When Chin Siong came out of retirement to join the family business two years ago, the then-49-year-old brought with him decades of experience in the commercial world, business acumen and media-savvy. It was only natural that he would tap on technology for HFT’s new business model, and bring it up-to-date for today’s fast-moving world. After all, the consummate corporate executive is engineering-trained, holds a Master in Business Administration, and enjoyed a career that had given him deep insights across a myriad of industry segments. “I don’t want their years of hard work to come to nothing,” he said, referring to his elders’ decades of service commitment. “I want to keep the family business going.” With his family’s blessing, he had embarked on a brand renewal and business development strategy that marries technology and TCM solutions.

“When I was discussing my plans with some friends, they thought my approach sounded like something for a tech startup,” he said, laughingly. But there was sound basis for doing it this way.

Without the deep pockets of the big boys in the TCM scene, he has to “work smart”, and this means leveraging on the shifting trend towards the use of technology.



Chin Siong’s first task was to develop the HFT brand, including refreshing the brick-and-mortar shop and strengthening HFT’s online presence. His efforts were soon visible. From the consistent visual identity to the way the products are categorised and marketed, from the website’s e-commerce functionalities through to order fulfilment and service delivery, HFT extended its mom-and-pop shop image to a vibrant SME offering a variety of nourishing wellness solutions for everyone. On the website, a chatbot provides answers to simple questions, and customers can contact the team by phone, messaging platforms including WhatsApp, SMS and email, or fill in an online form.

According to Chin Siong, people in their 30s and above are “generally accepting” of TCM, but not so the younger generation which has little knowledge of it. To plug this communication gap and “gain a foothold among future buyers”, he engages them on social media. “Our content on Facebook and Instagram is designed to get youngsters excited, and ‘sell’ them the idea of TCM.” To date, the SME’s social media campaigns have been well-received; contests attract a robust number of participants and hit 1,000 Likes very quickly.

TCM herbs as part of life

At the same time that HFT is implementing its multi-pronged, multi-channel brand strategy, it continues to serve its regular customers, many of whom are filling prescriptions for chronic conditions. “With more than 300 herbs, we are looking at more than 1,000 combinations. My grandmother and parents are the ones with the TCM expertise, and they have their hands full filling and packing the prescriptions,” he shared.

HFT is a family business on many levels. Chin Siong sometimes turns to his children when he wants a younger person’s perspective – his 4 children are 14 to 24 years of age – or when he needs more hands on deck. “My daughters help with video shoots and my sons are the web master and technical support,” he said with pride. During the Covid-19 circuit breaker¹ period, when the online orders soared some 2,000 per cent from a month earlier, his children had chipped in to “make the boxes and package the orders nicely” while he made the deliveries.

¹ The government-mandated “circuit breaker”, which lasted about two months from 7 April 2020, comprised a series of stringent measures aimed at slowing down the Covid-19 chain of infection.



TCM herbs have always been a part of Chin Siong’s life; they are in his daily diet and when he is unwell, they are his remedies. “My mother uses herbs as ingredients for the dishes she cooks, so to us, herbs are food.” This consideration, that herbs are food, is what he wants to inspire in the communal mindset. So while the HFT online store features standalone herbs, it also offers easy-to-use, pre-packed herbal solutions where the food preparer just needs to “add the meat and water, simmer, season and serve”. The preparation process is intentionally made as “non-labour-intensive as possible” to gain wider acceptance, he explained.



Given Singapore’s open economy and excellent connectivity, people have a lot of access to scientific research. And this, Chin Siong believes, has helped to “enhance the credibility of TCM as complementary alternative to western medicine, change behaviours and boost sales of TCM herbs”.

HFT’s bundle remedies, comprising packaged herbs for an extended period, are especially popular with people looking for longer-term therapies. For example, the Immunity Boosting 4-week Bundle flew off the shelves during the circuit breaker period, and orders for the Student Essential Vitality Bundle (4-week programme) tend to spike a month or two before the school examinations.

Conservatively innovative

Already planning HFT’s next phase of growth, the SME wants more people to experience the affirmative effects of TCM through three complementary elements – internal (herbs as food), external (physical treatments such as acupuncture, tui na, gua sha), and martial arts (example, tai chi). He is also working with a polytechnic to “imagine apps” with TCM. “I have a technical mind,” he said by way of explanation, before outlining his new concept.

Drawing inspiration from wearable technologies which can capture and analyse data, such as those powering a sports watch or fitness tracker, Chin Siong wants his TCM apps to “measure and evaluate the wearer’s vital markers, and customise recommendations related to TCM”. It could be a cooling

drink on a hot day, a revitalising herbal remedy or a concoction to strengthen the body system. “The possibilities are endless!”

Although his friends have commented about his “tech startup approach” towards HFT, he decries the almost-cavalier “think big-fail fast” style typically associated with the entrepreneurial tech craze. Instead, his preference is “step-by-step, conservative and realistic”, borne of experience and upbringing. But he appreciates the novel perspectives, bright ideas and unbridled enthusiasm that young people bring to the table.

Addressing the youths who believe they are on to the next big thing, he said, “Singapore has a great environment for entrepreneurs as there is a lot of support. Go ahead and chase your dreams. More importantly, whatever you do, enjoy the journey.”