



Effective and Appealing: Ah Zi Design Pte Ltd

Ah Zi Design (AZD) is a creative agency based in Singapore. Founded in 1996, it has served clients not only in Singapore but in the region and further afield. With a business model that has enabled it to retain a core client base – with many clients having confidently referred AZD’s services to others – the SME is known for its quick delivery of top-notch work that leaves a deep impression.

The firm prides itself as a multidisciplinary agency, with its website declaring, “We are designers, strategists, researchers, storytellers and creative problem solvers. We believe that ideas should be crafted beautifully and easy to understand.”

The SME is constantly on a lookout for talented, like-minded people to join its team but its human resource (HR) efforts have been met with limited success. Hence, AZD decided to approach the UOB-SMU Asian Enterprise Institute to explore strategies that can attract suitable candidates to fulfil its manpower needs. Under the Institute’s signature SME Consulting Programme (SCP), a team of student-consultants, supervised by an industry veteran and supported by a manager from the Institute, undertook the project.

A creative review

“Our strategy for the project was to identify the root cause of the problem before coming up with suitable recommendations to tackle the issues,” shared a student-consultant. The team tapped on primary and second research to discover why AZD faces low applicant and acceptance rates in its search for people with the desired attributes to join the company. Other objectives were to “identify our client’s unique value proposition in order for them to better market themselves to the prospective applicants”.

The narrative surrounding the creative industry is an optimistic one. According to the team’s research, the market is thriving in Singapore, with the design and advertising sectors contributing S\$1.7 billion to the nation’s GDP in 2016. The numbers were cited by the Ministry of Trade and Industry in 2018 and attributed to the Department of Statistics. Singapore is ranked fifth among various cities for having the right conditions to attract global creative talents. However, as with several other industries, finding people with the right technical skill set and attitude is a challenge – and one that AZD also faces.



For the SCP, the student-consultants looked within and outside the agency to discover the perception that others have of AZD, such as its brand positioning, company culture and desirability as an employer. Internally, the team examined the firm’s HR policies and employee benefits, and sought to understand the firm and its employees better through in-depth, one-on-one interviews. The internal feedback was augmented by external

data, which was obtained through an online survey as well as on-site surveys carried out at two polytechnics. The SME's presence on various social media platforms was also scrutinised.

The SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis is a framework that is used to evaluate a company's competitive positioning, and to develop strategic planning. In this case, the student-consultants used it to provide a clear summary of the intelligence they had gleaned. For example, the sections under "strengths" included the work environment, nature of company and marketing initiatives, while "opportunities" showcased economic trends, social media trends, and hiring and technology; these can be used to forward the project objectives while "weaknesses" and "threats" are areas that the project has to address.

Based on their findings, the student-consultants crafted their recommendations comprising internal HR proposals and external marketing strategies.

A curated solution

The student-consultants analysed the findings, paying particular attention to the qualitative comments from the AZD staff, and the other respondents who fell within the desired demography. The team discerned a clear need to strengthen AZD's brand presence in order to boost its position in the industry and in the mind of a jobseeker.



According to the student-consultants, within the firm, the company's mission and vision can be ingrained among its staff as they are all brand ambassadors of AZD. Not only will this increase employee engagement, it will enhance the employer brand when it comes to recruitment. The firm can maintain employee engagement through sustained HR activities such as regular, scheduled "chit chat" sessions and an online feedback channel designed for honest, constructive and anonymous feedback.

As for AZD's talent attraction strategies, the team advocated a recruitment campaign that revolves around a consistent theme and the values that the firm is looking for in its applicants. Given the prevalence of social media use among youths, the agency's brand communication campaign should run across all applicable social media platforms to optimise its reach; the brand identity should also be consistent across the firm's collateral.

The final SCP report featured a comprehensive proposal with clear strategies and action plans in four phases, namely, Project Initiation, Recruitment Strategies, External Brand Initiatives and Evaluation, with the corresponding timelines for implementation.

A lasting impression

Putting the company values to action is in the firm's DNA to "constantly seek better creative solutions", according to AZD Founder Dave Wee. In its collaboration with the Institute, the SME received "very useful insights (on) specific issues" – valuable information that would not have been uncovered if not for the SCP's methodological



and scientific approaches to addressing business issues. “We were pleasantly surprised at the level of dedication and professionalism demonstrated by the SCP team. They have exceeded our expectations in all areas,” said Mr Wee.

Working on the project helped develop the student-consultants’ confidence in consultancy work. Bringing their individual areas of expertise to the project, the team combined their marketing skills, analytical abilities and knowledge of HR to present workable business solutions that addressed the SME’s issues. The student team acknowledged the guidance of Project Advisor Kellin Chan and Project Manager Jennifer Leow in helping them “crystallise (their) thinking and presentation skills”. Ms Chan’s eye for detail and her “probing questions” made them think more deeply about their work at every stage.

Ms Chan called the SCP a “mutual learning experience for all parties”. She found it especially “heart-warming” that her young charges were very “enthusiastic to explore new approaches” and commended them on their “positive attitude and open mind to learn and adopt feedback and suggestions”.

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