

Mr Jeffrey Tan and Ms Angelina Ong find that working on a cloud system and having their information systems intertwined and communicating with one another have really helped their business. They will open a shop at West Coast Plaza, where there will be an area for staff to demonstrate different ways of cooking different types of fish.
ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN



SMESpotlight

Digital strategy nets fish retailer bigger catch

DishTheFish straddles a wet market stall in Beo Crescent and an e-commerce platform, with plans to expand into a mall next month. Husband-and-wife team Jeffrey Tan, 32, and Angelina Ong, 29, speak to Annabeth Leow and outline how their accountancy and tech backgrounds led them to shake up a traditional sector with digital solutions in 2015.

Q: How did you enter this retail segment?

Mr Tan: My dad used to run a wholesale business but he passed away when we were very young, so my second brother started his own fish stall in a market. Back then, I was just 12 years old.

I started helping him, and I started cutting fish when I was 15. It was quite funny to see a young boy like me holding a chopper.

Along the way, I discovered that there was a gap in the market, because every Chinese New Year, I was answering three main questions: What is this fish? How do you cook it? Do you steam, grill, or do anything to it? I repeated myself thousands of times during Chinese New Year alone.

After we had worked for a few years, Angelina convinced me to start this business.

Q: And now you're opening a second outlet - this time in a shopping centre. Why expand at this point?

Ms Ong: Revenue is on an uptrend, and we thought that with this positive momentum, we should try to maintain it by growing our presence. We know that our main target audience is families, people who cook at home, and we wanted to find another place that would attract families.

Mr Tan: More importantly, in a wet market, we are not able to demonstrate how a specific dish is being cooked. This new shop actually has a corner where we will demonstrate how we steam the fish, how we do sous-vide as a new way of cooking.

Q: Besides hip marketing, you have also taken a high-tech approach to a traditional business. How does your unified digital system work?

Mr Tan: We adopt a cloud system a lot. One benefit is that the information systems are all intertwined so they can communicate with one another.

Our point-of-sale system, Vend, will record the retail sales, and our online Shopify will record the online sales. All this will come to our (accounting and online book-keeping) Xero account and then we have our HReasily, a human resource management software. Essentially, all of these are part of the UOB BizSmart package.

Ms Ong: It's very easy to track when things are not tallying because now my UOB bank account is directly fed - we get direct bank feeds into Xero - so if I see a cost coming up or revenue that is unaccounted for, I can trace if any order is pending fulfilment.

It even helps me to send chasers. I'll put in the accounts payable date... so I don't need to go and be a loan shark myself.

I was adamant about not having an accountant, given that I have an accounting background. I really don't need this kind of headcount when I can dedicate more of my headcount to operations.

Q: Did either of you struggle to adapt to the technology?

Mr Tan: Back in our school days, I'd already researched this. That was back in 2010, when nobody believed in cloud, nobody even cared about cloud, and everyone thought that I was a crazy man because I kept introducing them to this cloud thing that was so interesting.

At the end of the day, technology is not supposed to take away the processes, it's supposed to be an enabler. You still need people to manage it, otherwise it'll go haywire.

Ms Ong: I already had the intention of finding all the elements that could be linked. Since those days, we were already very aware of how proper enterprise resource planning could really facilitate everything.

Mr Tan: There is very low capital expenditure involved. If at any point in time you don't feel like using the systems, you can actually terminate

them. On the other hand, you need not worry about support. It's very easy - we can chat with someone 24 hours a day.

Ms Ong: We actually like to chat with the Shopify people on Saturday nights.

Q: Mr Tan, is your brother, who is 14 years your elder, still running a fish stall?

Mr Tan: Oh yes, we source for fish together. My brother is still running his own stall the traditional way. I think this new shop would totally shock him if he ever sees the actual concept.

Q: How does the way you do things differ from his methods?

Mr Tan: For me, because I have data, I know exactly what fish I want to get, but my brother will think, "Maybe today I can sell more", so he'll just get a bit more... I've spoken to my brother and told

BIG PICTURE

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MS ONG, on the advantage a digital system has given the business.

him about this system, but he seems quite reluctant to adopt it because it will change his current workflow.

He will ask me, "Why do I need to measure the fish stocks? If I can sell it, I can sell it. Why do I need to keep inventory and keep records of all my customers digitally? I write their names on my wall using markers."

Angelina and I use an iPad to see who our loyal customers are, how much they spend. My brother will say, "Oh, this person comes every day. I have the numbers of customers, I can always call them."

Q: What advantage has the digital system yielded for you?

Ms Ong: All this data and the communication that we get on digital outlets actually give us the ability to plan forward. We can observe when sales are dipping for a certain product, for instance, and when sales are increasing. So we can observe, for example, if it seems like fillets are doing well and plan to sell a lot more fillets, a wider variety of fillets, to attract a bigger group of young clientele. All this wouldn't have been possible without our digital tracking and our social media.

Q: Are you planning to digitalise further?

Ms Ong: I would like to spend as little time as possible on HR and admin matters, so the system is really good in the sense that I just need to put in the monthly salaries and things like that. I intend to integrate Deputy, which is the rostering system, with the HR system, HReasily, which is already integrated with Xero. All this integration is making me so happy.

Q: And what about business expansion?

Ms Ong: Besides opening at West Coast Plaza, we'll also be expanding into the wholesale space. Actually, most of the other seafood players in Singapore started in wholesale and went into retail as an afterthought. But we wanted to do it differently. We want to do retail first because we feel that is the best way to understand the needs of consumers.

Given that it is so ultra-competitive in the retail space - essentially, anyone that sells fish to a customer who cooks at home is our competitor - expansion helps us to survive in this competitive industry. It also gives us validation that we're doing it right and gives us the confidence to move on with our plans.