



Ms Joey Goh and her business partner got designers to put together a virtual showroom for FIF, their newly opened furniture store. PHOTO: FIF



Mr Jeremy Lee (left) and Mr Clewyn Puah were quick to produce hand sanitisers when the virus started appearing in Singapore. PHOTO: SIMPLYGOOD



Mr Alex Teh (in black shirt and cap), co-founder of Little Red Ants Creative Studio, watching as director Chua Seng Yew (in white T-shirt), 34, and producer Ng Hui Ching, 29, work on a shoot from their office in Lavender Street. PHOTO: LITTLE RED ANTS CREATIVE STUDIO

No lights, no camera but action aplenty

Small firms, not letting virus crimp their style, come up with tech-savvy ways to operate

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 Senior Correspondent

When Mr Alex Teh and his team shot a corporate video for a client last month, they did it without professional cameras or lights or being on location with the actors.

Instead, his director gave instructions and yelled "Action!" via video calls. A simple iPhone and tripod were used so that the actors' family members could help with the camera work, as well as their wardrobe.

The shoot – to promote a communication software – saw the production firm working within circuit breaker rules stipulating safe distancing. All production work, except for that relating to Covid-19 or essential services, is suspended.

Mr Teh, 36, co-founder of Little Red Ants Creative Studio, told The Straits Times: "We are trying to work in a new way... There are a lot

of things we can't do, but with help from everybody we try to come up with work we can still be proud of."

The company has done two such shoots including one for a government agency. It has other projects such as animation work which allow editors to work from home. While its directors took a 20 per cent pay cut, its 43 full-time employees are still on full pay.

The circuit breaker, which kicked in on April 7 and led to the closure of most workplace premises and the adoption of safe distancing measures, has meant that many businesses are unable to operate.

But some, such as Mr Teh's company, are trying to find their way around the situation.

Ms Joey Goh and Mr Javier Ang, who run furniture store FIF, put together a virtual showroom, and managed to win some 30 online orders last month. The duo, both aged 24, had just opened their brick-and-

mortar store in Outram Road on Feb 2. Amid signs that the virus was spreading in the community, the number of walk-in customers dwindled to just five on a week day.

The pair worked swiftly to create a virtual showroom featuring about 300 products spread over 20,000 sq ft. To help customers visualise how their furniture would look in their homes, the store's designers created 3D mock-ups of the furniture in specific home settings described by prospective buyers.

"When it comes to shopping for furniture, most customers are still not comfortable buying online. So we do what we can to help them visualise how their purchases would fit in their homes. We also send them fabric samples," said Miss Goh. These services are complimentary. She declined to give the company's revenue figures.

Experts and industry players said tech-savvy firms that can accelerate their digital transformation would have a better chance of surviving this pandemic unscathed.

And often these tend to be helmed by younger people.

PREPARED AND NIMBLE

Companies that are nimble and prepared to adopt technology during this time are better-positioned to make a quicker shift. Start-ups and companies run by younger people might be able to adapt more easily. But they will have to grapple with their own set of problems during this crisis, such as financing, market access and experience in dealing with crisis.



SINGAPORE BUSINESS FEDERATION CHIEF EXECUTIVE HO MENG KIT, on how businesses must move fast to meet changing demands during this pandemic.

Mr Hau Koh Foo, director of the Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Singapore Management University, said he has noticed how young people are often the first to transition to digital.

He cited examples of how Airbnb and Uber were created by people in their 20s and early 30s, during the last global crisis in 2008-2009.

"I think what matters more is the ability to react fast. To be able to look at all the data that's coming and chart a path," said Mr Hau.

But Singapore Business Federation chief executive Ho Meng Kit cautioned: "Companies that are nimble and prepared to adopt technology during this time are better-positioned to make a quicker shift."

"Start-ups and companies run by younger people might be able to adapt more easily. But they will have to grapple with their own set of problems during this crisis, such as financing, market access and experience in dealing with crisis."

Mr Ho singled out some sectors, such as retail and food and beverage, that have adapted by adopting e-commerce. "Services providers

like consultancy firms have also seen a surge in demand from companies seeking their advice on restructuring business operations in the wake of Covid-19," he added.

Another firm with young leaders is UglyGood which was in the business of recycling fruit waste. The company jumped in to fill the demand for hand sanitisers in February, when Singapore saw a shortage of the disinfectant.

Its owners Clewyn Puah, 26 and Jeremy Lee, 27, said they were monitoring the situation in China when the virus first emerged there.

In February, Mr Puah tapped an industry partner with a ready supply of food grade ethanol and managed to produce 4,000 litres of sanitisers from then to April. A new brand name, SimplyGood, was created for the hand sanitisers, available online at \$27 for a 1 litre bottle.

Mr Phua said he is working with other firms to sell a care kit for children when schools reopen. He also plans to hire more people to help with the distribution of products.

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