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Date: 3 July 2020

Headline: Conquering The Computer Market With Custom PCs: Marcus Wee, Aftershock PC Founder

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Marcus Wee stepped into the Vulcan Post office on a Thursday afternoon, looking comfortable in casual clothes. His hands were clutching on to a paper bag that he had stuffed his blazer into.

He had scrambled to find a decent formal attire of sorts for the photoshoot later, he said.

On any regular day, Marcus is typically clad in his usual uniform of a basic tee and jeans — a fuss-free dress code popularised by the likes of Mark Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs.

Much like these tech CEOs, Marcus is also disrupting the computer market in his own way. He is the founder of Aftershock PC, a homegrown company that specialises in custom-built, boutique PCs at accessible price points.

But how did a young, introverted lad go about building a multimillion-dollar custom PC business with an initial funding of only \$150,000?

### **Being Obsessed With Games Since Young**

With his booming voice and confident personality, Marcus easily turns heads; but unlike what you see, the 36-year-old is actually an introvert.

Since young, he prefers to bury himself in games rather than socialise.

His exposure to gaming started when he was just six years old. A neighbour had invited Marcus and his older fraternal twin brother Joe over to play on the Nintendo, he recounted.

Marcus was immediately hooked on to the game and begged his grandmother to buy him and Joe a video console; she relented.

“My dad found out and I told him that Joe was the one who bought it and in the end, he got beaten up,” he said, bursting into laughter.

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'Have you always been the feisty one between you and your twin?' I asked incredulously.

In between laughs, he said that he "often got beaten up by [his] father for arguing back," while Joe is the "quiet one".



Sharing more about his personality, Marcus said that he has an obsessive nature. This was something he realised only later on when he became a competitive gamer — he was always strategising and thinking of ways to win the game.

For the record, he represented Singapore in competitions and was world-ranked in strategy games like StarCraft 2 and Warcraft 3.

He would spend hours at gaming. In fact, the longest he has gone without leaving his room was 15 hours.

In the end, his parents resorted to sending the two of them to boarding school in Australia when they turned 13 because they feel the duo were "out of control."

*For four years, we learnt how to take care of ourselves, grow up and saw a bigger world out there. In Australia, I also experienced racial discrimination as a minority there which led me to learn that the world can be cruel.— Marcus Wee, founder and managing director of Aftershock PC*

By now, I have noticed that Marcus is very eloquent. Every question I throw at him, he would respond almost immediately. He also talks very fast; words rushed out each time he opens his mouth.

It was clear to see that his brain was working at the speed of a bullet train to match his speech.

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Upon completing boarding school, the brothers returned to Singapore in 2005 to pursue a degree.

Marcus chose to take up Information Systems at the Singapore Management University (SMU). When asked about his choice of study, he professed that he “didn’t really put thought into it, but it turned out to be a good choice” as SMU focuses on presentation skills which he was lacking in.

He continued to invest his time into playing computer games while juggling school, but he would plan his timetable in a way where he could “attend the least number of classes,” he said cheekily.

### **The Turning Point That Sparked Him To Start A Business**

In his second year of university, he went to the University of Waterloo in Toronto, Canada for a five-month student exchange — this was when the idea of Aftershock PC struck him.

During his time there, Marcus realised that he needed a high-performance notebook for gaming and ended up buying from a boutique PC brand there.

*The (buying) experience was awesome — all the way from when the agent communicates to you when you are customising the PC, to the point when you receive the PC and after-sales support.*

*It had me thinking, “Why wasn’t there someone doing the same in Singapore?”*

– Marcus Wee, founder and managing director of Aftershock PC

Feeling inspired, Marcus presented the idea of Aftershock in his technopreneurship class when he returned to SMU. It was a good business idea, but he was still young and didn’t have enough capital to start up.

He decided to put the idea on hold while he finished university. It took him four years (instead of three) to graduate though. Marcus shyly admitted that he wasn’t the best student as he was often “distracted with gaming.”

After graduation, Marcus was jobless for about six months before he landed a role as a Project Manager.

“My dad had threatened to smash my computer if I didn’t get myself a job,” he confessed.

He moved on to an IT administrator job the following year and worked there till late 2011. It was a good job and fulfilled his interest in tech, but he felt he “wasn’t appreciated there.”

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It also fuelled his desire to start Aftershock PC because it became clear to him that he didn't want to work for someone else.

He formed a rough business plan, but knew that there was no way he could juggle a full-time job and grow Aftershock PC at the same time.

The choice became obvious to him: he quit his job, though Marcus said that he was already planning to do so anyway. They counter-offered him a higher salary, but Marcus rejected it.

*My parents said that I was nuts. They didn't think that I have a chance against other MNCs and SMCs such as Acer, which had bigger product line-ups.– Marcus Wee, founder and managing director of Aftershock PC*

### **Their Initial Plan Was To Be A Reseller**

Despite his parents' disapproval and scepticism, he partnered his classmate to start Aftershock PC in 2012.

Both of them had wanted to go for a "middleman kind of approach." However, there are a lot of downsides when it comes to being a middleman, one of which is building a brand that is not yours.

*If you act as a middleman, you don't actually have to build a brand and instead, you build someone else's brand, which is a double-edged sword. We realised that building a brand together with our own products would result in a better, longer-term outcome.*

– Marcus Wee, founder and managing director of Aftershock PC

This makes sense because while a middleman will get a headstart riding on the coattails of an established brand, he would be left out in the cold if he loses the distributorship.

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They ended up scrapping the idea, and worked on building their own products instead. But first, they had to source the parts from original equipment manufacturers (OEMs).

Reaching out to an OEM the traditional way — sending a generic email and liaising back and forth — was, by all means, inefficient. Moreover, they tend to work with long-standing clients instead.

To add on, OEMs require a huge minimum order quantity (MOQ) to grant them a sale.

“Through the email, we could tell they were not sure about us and we felt that we couldn’t push (the deal) quick enough through that conversation,” said Marcus.

Eager to take things forward, Marcus and his co-founder took the leap and flew to Taiwan’s Computex, which is also Asia’s biggest tech show, to meet the suppliers — these are the same people who make the hardware for some of the biggest brands.

*They were very surprised to see a bunch of young guys showing up at the booth who couldn’t meet their MOQ.*

*We ended up having dinner with them, presented the business model and plan to them and showed them why they should give us a lower MOQ. They gave us a shot and we got our first batch of goods.*

– Marcus Wee, founder and managing director of Aftershock PC

Marcus added that when they first started, almost all of the Singapore computer market was focused on do-it-yourself (DIY) PCs.

Boutique PCs were always a huge thing in the US market and they wanted to bring that personalised element — which he experienced first-hand in Canada — into Singapore.

To kickstart the business, they rented their first space — a small and dingy shophouse — on Serangoon Road.

“It wasn’t the ideal place, as just across the street was the red light district,” said Marcus, but the rent was cheap at only \$4,000 per month.



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They then converted half of the space into a LAN shop (his co-founder's idea) and the other half for Aftershock PC's operations.

They started developing the website, planning the launch, learning how to reach out to the media, writing press releases, securing coverage, engaging their first reviewer, and even getting a fire safety certificate.

It was a "steep learning slope" and he was "definitely very, very lost" at the start, said Marcus.

"There isn't a book that you can pull out to start learning how to start a company," he added.

All their efforts were not in vain, as they quickly earned their first sale in two weeks.

They bootstrapped for the first two years, before securing an initial investment of \$150,000.

### **Disrupting The DIY PC Business**

In the early days, the duo did everything themselves, from marketing to assembling to delivery.

A year later, Joe joined them after quitting his job in New Zealand. Marcus had needed help, so he came back to Singapore and wrote the press release for the X11 model — one of their earliest products.

At the same time, his co-founder pulled out from Aftershock's business as he had wanted to operate a cybergaming cafe only and found the custom PC business very stressful.

It was just Marcus and Joe left in the company and for a long time, they were their own teammates.

It was no walk in the park as they have had their fair share of arguments over what they wanted for the business, especially in the first year where roles were not cut out clearly.

Some arguments even got physical, shared Marcus.

"He punched me in the face once. We were arguing, and I said the wrong thing. I crossed the line so it was my fault."

Despite the occasional clashes, Aftershock was thriving. When the business became profitable in the second year, they converted the shophouse into a showroom and service centre.

For the next three years, the pair of brothers "grew a typical startup into a substantial, well-known company" and "moved from 30 notebooks a month to building thousands".

After witnessing Aftershock's success, their dad finally warmed up to their business venture.

### **Attaining Recognition**

In the fourth year of business, Aftershock hit a major milestone when The Straits' Times Digital Life crowned them the Editor's Choice Gaming Notebook of 2015 .

'What was the most expensive PC Aftershock has built for a customer?' I inquired.

He whipped out his phone and showed me the video of a custom-built machine they made for an Australian customer.



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I gawked at its beauty. Every single part of the PC was water-cooled with a liquid reservoir. Costing a whopping AU\$19,000 (S\$18,300), it was the ultimate rig.

“Someone had to measure all the bands and craft the machine by hand. So it was very bespoke,” he said.

Marcus also counts top local gamer Daryl “iceiceice” Koh” as one of their customers, whom they customised a Dota 2-themed laptop for.

Aftershock offers exterior customisation — such as automobile paints and vinyl car wraps — because they want to make the process “very personable”.

In the next year, they received the Readers’ Choice Award from HardWareZone, which they bagged for three consecutive years from 2016 to 2018.

They also recently received a Best Gaming PC Brand Award, voted by consumers in Australia. They were lauded “a disruptive company that is changing the status quo”, and their sales had spiked 300 per cent after the coverage.

There are two key factors that contributed to their success: competitive pricing, and customer service.

*We brought the prices very close to those of DIY PCs, while maintaining all the benefits that come from buying boutique PCs. We popularised it to the point where we saw many companies started to do boutique PCs again.— Marcus Wee, founder and managing director of Aftershock PC*

Aftershock also adopts a customer-centric approach, which is evident by the abundance of five-star reviews on their Google business listing.

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“I guess what makes us stand out is our strong emphasis on customer service,” said Marcus.

“Whenever we face challenges, we have always placed the customers first. We always tell our staff to always try to put themselves in the shoes of the consumer.”

Beyond the multiple awards, Marcus said that he feels the proudest of his business when he once entered Starbucks and saw three people using Aftershock laptops.

### **Dealing With Challenges And Expansion**

While they have a string of credentials under their belts, their success didn't come without challenges.

*We have always had a very disruptive approach in the market. In the process, we ruffled some feathers and there were companies who took an aggressive approach towards us including slandering.— Marcus Wee, founder and managing director of Aftershock PC*

He was very taken aback at first, but later learnt to let it go as “taking things personally was just a waste of time,” said Marcus.

Turning all serious, he added, “We became so impactful to the point that the middlemen, after watching us doing it for a year, also started doing the same thing.”

However, he is very confident that he can trump the competition.

*If you are always focusing on your business, your mission, delivering a better product, delivering better customer service, there's no way you will lose in the long term.— Marcus Wee, founder and managing director of Aftershock PC*

Likewise, when they decided to diversify and started several new businesses such as PRISM+ and Omnidesk in 2018, they met with much competition.

Omnidesk is a standing table brand where customers can custom-build the ultimate desk set-up.

At that time, with Aftershock and its expansion, Marcus had too much on his plate. Therefore, he reached out to his good friend and asked if he was keen to spearhead Omnidesk.

“Of course, for an entrepreneur, one of the big questions that come to mind is that if you start a new business with a partner, there is going to be equity and obviously, you have to share,” he said.

This particular friend eventually became a partner. He was extremely keen and dropped everything he was doing at that time — a job he was unhappy with — and embarked on the Omnidesk project.



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Marcus mentored him on everything — from learning about their products and suppliers, building the team, marketing, advertising, to taking measured risks.

There was a lot to swallow but because the partner was so committed, they were able to cramp the learning into six months.

They launched Omnidesk at \$600 to \$700 price points, with similar, if not better, mechanics than their \$1,200 to \$2,000 counterparts.

*We learnt with Omnidesk that you have to bring in really talented people and give them an incentive, a reason to want to see the business succeed.*

*In this case, he has built the brand up — it grew from a team of two to today's 11 and is moving into its own large, 4,000 sqm office.*

– Marcus Wee, founder and managing director of Aftershock PC

Today, Aftershock has a total of 150 employees worldwide across their entire business: Aftershock PC, Omnidesk and their monitor company Prism+. In Singapore alone, they have 60 staff.

Sales across the three companies “increased by two to three-folds” during the COVID-19 period as many people invested in PC setups at home.

## **2020 And Beyond**



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Looking back on Aftershock PC's eight-year journey, Marcus said that he would have told his younger self to focus on how to make himself one or two steps ahead instead of "trying to see and know everything, because you can't".

Citing the tussles with competitors, he added that he would "focus a bit less on what's going outside the company and not worry about things beyond your control".

Another thing he would do differently in his business is expanding a lot faster in other markets and be less risk-averse.

Sharing Aftershock's immediate business plans, Marcus said that they are planning to expand to at least two new markets. Currently, they have offices in Singapore, Malaysia and Australia.

Australia, by far, has seen the highest growth. For such a huge, established market, "it's phenomenal," said Marcus.

He is also excited about building a new and bigger service centre to deliver better customer service, as well as growing Omnidesk and Prism+.

On where he sees the biggest opportunity for disruption, he answered, "Smart home gadgets".

Does that mean they will be venturing into the smart home market soon? "We are thinking about it," he replied.

It's clear to see that Marcus has an immense passion for what he does, and is constantly thinking of ways to disrupt the industry.

Entrepreneurs should always be on the look-out for opportunities — "always fight first, (then) stabilise," he quipped.