

SUHAIMI YUSUF/THE EDGE

Prioritising kindness

For Ng Ping Ho, one of the biggest takeaways from the pandemic is that when times get tough, there is a need to return to the reason for starting the business in the first place

SURVIVAL TIPS FOR ENTREPRENEURS



★ **Stand by your team. Don't think of your team as a cost but as an investment. Invest in building a stronger team because if you invest in your people, they'll repay the trust with commitment and results.**

★ It is during the low times that your marketing budget has to go up. You have to keep thinking of ways to come out on top when things get better, instead of waiting for the situation to lead you somewhere.

★ **Communicate, communicate, communicate. Having a plan is not enough if your team is not aware of it. Imagine over 50 people in your team, all with different priorities, fears and ambitions. Add a pandemic, with all the noise from different updates, news and rumours every day. I realised that sharing our plans and, more importantly, listening to people were the most important things to do. Whenever I didn't communicate enough, it always led to problems.**



Producing television shows may not, at a glance, share similarities with running a hospitality group, but they do in fact have one key aspect in common — the strength of the team in driving business success. And at a time when businesses are facing tremendous challenges as a result of the pandemic and the measures to stem the spread, it is no understatement when Ng Ping Ho says, “it’s the team that keeps me going”.

Ng (or Ping as he’s often called) began his entrepreneurial journey as a screenwriter, director and producer. He’s known to most Malaysians as the creator of the sitcom *Kopitiam*, which ran on local TV from the late 1990s. In 2009, he dipped his toe in the hospitality business — opening a backpackers’ hostel called BackHome Hostel in a row of heritage shophouses in Kuala Lumpur’s central business district. In 2012, Ping and his wife, Cheryl Samad, opened a café right beside the hostel on Jalan Tun H S Lee called LOKL Coffee.

In 2019, Ping started the hospitality group, Kindness of Strangers, and a year later the group’s maiden hotel, KLoé Hotel, opened its doors.

Located in the heart of KL, the 80-room boutique hotel, which boasts five artist lofts, got off to a promising start. “We had a media launch on Feb 27 last year followed by a soft opening, and we received a lot of good feedback and interest and we were getting bookings,” says Ping. But then the Covid-19 pandemic worsened, leading to the imposition of the Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 18, just weeks after KLoé Hotel’s opening.

In those early days, Ping admits to being in denial. “I told myself that it was just going to be two weeks and we’d focus on training the staff and getting things ready in those two weeks ... but obviously, it didn’t just last two weeks,” he says, revealing that he fell into a funk. “I went through a few days of feeling really down. I did not want to face anyone because this project had taken some 10 years of my life. When this thing struck, it was a crash, and it took me a while to get over that,” he says. What lifted him from his depression was how the core management team at Kindness of Strangers and the heads of department at KLoé Hotel rallied together.

At the hotel, this senior group of people took turns going in daily just to make sure the hotel was running. “Then we started doing Zoom calls twice a day and it was very intense because we talked about what we needed to do to be sustainable. There were disagreements along the way, but I came out of that experience feeling very inspired. Without asking, the team pulled together and were working harder than usual just to ensure that things stayed on track. This made us really bond and we started functioning better,” says Ping.

Against the backdrop of downsizing and pay cuts, Ping saw how important it was to have the team’s trust. “From some of the businesses within the group, there were team members who had been with us for 10 years, so there was that element of trust where they would tell the others not to worry and that the bosses would take care of them. But we didn’t have this level of trust at the hotel because it was such a new team. There was a lot of mistrust and suspicion as to what management would do. We had to word our statements carefully, and I had town halls to reassure them, and eventually we pulled people together.”

During the first MCO in 2020, what helped was Ping’s decision to take up the government’s Wage Subsidy Programme. A lifeline for small and medium businesses, the programme stipulated — among other things — that companies could not retrench workers during the subsidy period and for three months after.

“It was an easy decision for us because it meant that we got to keep everyone together. I felt that if we started getting rid of people and started cutting pay so soon after opening, then we’d lose the trust. And just to rebuild that trust would take the rest of the year, so for me it was an easy decision to make.” Ping concedes that he was also luckier than most because he had sufficient reserves to ride out the challenging period.

But with the pandemic not showing any signs of letting up and coupled with the prolonged lockdown, Ping found in February this year that pay cuts

or unpaid leave were inevitable if the business was to survive.

“This led to some people leaving. Nevertheless, we kept to our overall commitment to not downsize or reduce the workforce. But this latest lockdown from May has been the toughest time for us because of how long it’s lasted. It has been tough for me personally — juggling between taking care of our team and keeping the business sustainable. We have once again scaled our operations team to the minimum, and we’re patiently waiting for the light at the end of the tunnel,” he says.

The biggest takeaway from this experience, he says, has been the importance of returning to the reason for starting the business. “When I started Kindness of Strangers it was to spread kindness by inspiring others. We believe that if you take care of your team and treat everyone with kindness and respect, they will do the same for the guests we serve. The first priority is always the team and supporting the team. So, if I have the resources then I’ll keep supporting the people until the time comes when it doesn’t make sense for the business anymore.”

Showing your vulnerable side

Being in the hospitality business, Ping says, has changed him. “I found that I enjoy serving people. Witnessing people’s reactions, seeing them experience a place that is so different ... that gives me that extra push. The internal brand is that we’re kind to strangers. Our style of service is based on the hotel being the home, and what we teach the staff is that they are the host. What that means is they are in charge of delivering the best experience to the guest.”

The past year, as well as his years in television, has reinforced the importance of communication and how a leader who communicates effectively can make or break a business.

The weeks of virtual meetings during the various lockdowns taught the self-confessed introvert that there is no such thing as over-communicating. “It’s when you under-communicate that issues will crop up. Communication is also about keeping everyone aware, being very open with people and also showing your vulnerable side and telling people ‘I don’t know’.

“As a leader, I realised that if you have good people and they are perfectly capable people, then actually what they need from you as a leader is just a bit of guidance and perspective. You’re not there to tell people what to do; you’re just giving them your perspective as a leader and having that conversation with them about your point of view and listening to their points of view,” he says.

Creating something special

Looking back on his entrepreneurial journey, Ping admits that he did not envision the road he has taken despite having a big imagination as a child. “Even when I was playing with my toys the stories I told had a beginning, middle and end, and in my imagination I was always doing my own television shows but it never occurred to me that I would actually one day do that.

“In the same way, when I was in my teens, there was a trend of old buildings in KL being refurbished and repurposed, which inspired me, and I imagined that one day I’d open a café or have a hotel.

“Later when I got to direct TV shows, which I never thought I’d be capable of doing, it gave me the confidence that I could do anything I wanted. So next came the hostel, then the café, and then the hotel. So it was more a kind of confidence, not really a conscious plan,” he adds.

What’s next for this entrepreneur? Apart from ensuring that KLoé Hotel reaches its potential and is up to world standards, in August last year the group also began accepting the first tenants for its condo, Kapas, located on Jalan Kapas in Bangsar. To date, the low-density development has recorded 50% occupancy.

Later this year, the group will begin work on another hotel in downtown KL. “It’s an adaptive reuse of an existing building. This is exciting for me personally because when I first wanted to venture into hospitality, the original reason was to take over interesting old spaces and create something special.” — *By Sreerema Banoo* ■

Chen plans to have a hospital in every state and venture into the food business

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Chen believes that it is only with an open heart that one is able to listen to comments, receive feedback, evaluate and make changes where necessary. “You’re able to be more focused and creative, and as a result, be able to do better than yesterday,” she says, adding that the top management plays an important role in continually reinforcing positive messages to all employees.

The path ahead

A devout Christian, Chen says without her faith and belief in God, she would not have been able to weather the challenges and difficulties. The last decade, she says, can be divided into the early, middle and late stages. “In the early stage, the challenge was getting doctors on board. The middle stage was not having sufficient funds to pay salaries and purchase new equipment. And the late stage, which is where we are now, is looking at how we can combine the best of Chinese and Western medicine to provide the most advanced cancer treatment.”

Chen’s plan is to expand and establish a Beacon Medical Centre in every state so that patients need not travel to KL for treatment. At the same time, these hospitals can provide local low-income patients with free check-ups and treatment. Plans are already underway to open a Beacon Medical Centre in Klang in the third quarter, in Kuantan and Seremban by the end of the year, and in Melaka next year.

There are also plans to develop the Beacon Hospital in PJ into a medical hub through the construction of a 200-bed hospital in the current location as well as another medical facility offering alternative treatment.

Chen also has plans to venture into the food business. “Most of what we eat now is imported, so I want to make some contribution to Malaysia’s agriculture industry,” she says, adding that Beacon Hospital has already begun selling antibiotic-free chickens grown on its natural farm.

Beacon Chicken are fed a specially formulated feed comprising seaweed, moringa leaves, herbs, hawthorn, chrysanthemum, probiotics from Japan, proteins, trace elements and vitamins, and are bred in a temperature-controlled farm with piped-in music to create a conducive growing environment.

Having experienced the ups and downs of business from a young age, Chen is keen to lend a helping hand to budding entrepreneurs through this new food venture, called Beacon Mart.

“We hope to set up retail shops that can be owned and operated by these entrepreneurs. We’ll put in the capital and that way, we can help them grow,” she says. To date, seven Beacon Mart outlets have been established — retailing organic produce, seafood from Sekinchan as well as Beacon Chicken products.

Through her words and deeds, Chen is showing that there is a place for love and kindness in business. — *By Sreerema Banoo* ■