

# FASHION FORWARD

FASHION icon Coco Chanel once said: "Fashion changes, but style endures."

Endurance is certainly what all the retail brands in the world are trying to achieve, in the face of passing fads and trends that change with each season.

Fashion may be a fickle creature, but Singapore businesses are certainly not letting this stop them. In spite of rapid changes and keen completion, the two fashion brands featured are leading their industry and leaving global footprints.



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN

## SHOO-IN

"GIVE a girl the right shoes, and she can conquer the world," said Marilyn Monroe.

Tom Ng, founder of home-grown shoe label Pazzion, must have taken this to heart when he started the company in 2002.

It was initially a footwear distributor exporting to various countries across the Asia-Pacific region and Europe. Then Mr Ng noticed the lack of well-made and trendy shoes for the modern Singaporean woman. Taking a leap of faith, he set up Pazzion's first brick and mortar store in Singapore three years later.

As one of the pioneer shoe labels here, the company met with initial resistance from customers who thought that local brands were of sub-par quality and inferior design. To overcome this hurdle and build trust, the company at the start benchmarked itself against the very best in the international industry.

"We began to slowly but surely win these individuals over with the unwavering quality in our materials, manufacturing process and designs," says Mr Ng.

The homegrown brand now has eight stores in Singapore with approximately 70 employees, as well as a global footprint in 10 countries.

The retail industry has been facing turbulent times due to the slow economy, but Mr Ng is taking things in his stride. "All businesses are susceptible to the volatile and ever-changing external market conditions," he reasons.

Lately, major shifts in consumers' buying patterns such as online retail shopping and bulk retailing are reshaping the industry, and this means that retailers like Pazzion have to anticipate market changes and customers' buying patterns in order to stay competitive.

One such business development was the launch of its e-commerce store in 2013, which offers a convenient platform for local and international customers to browse and purchase their products. Mr Ng says that this has allowed the company to remain at the "forefront of trends", by leveraging on its online presence to showcase its latest designs as quickly as possible.

After more than a decade in the industry, he



◀ **SIZING THE FIT**  
Mr Ng (at Pazzion's VivoCity outlet) reveals that mystery audit checks are conducted once every quarter to check on service excellence

has observed a unique buying pattern for women in Asia. "They no longer focus on dollars and cents but tend to compare their options based on more sophisticated considerations such as the quality, design and material of the products. The affluent know what they want and do not mind paying a little more for quality and comfort."

To meet expectations of customers, the company uses high-quality calf leather and lambskin to construct each shoe, ensuring not just comfort, but also style. The brand's fresh, European-inspired designs have been well-received in the Singapore market, says Mr Ng.

But as competition gets stiffer, Pazzion is also taking steps to stand out from the pack. For one thing, the company has been proactively researching and forecasting trends through regular market research in countries where it operates and other potential markets.

"From foldable flats, sneakers to our limited-edition off-duty leather sneakers for men, we continue to explore and introduce shoes and products that cater to those who value both taste and craftsmanship," says Mr Ng. "It is very important for us to understand the demands of each market so we can continue to remain on-trend."

While the labour crunch is an inevitable challenge in the retail industry, the company is not letting this affect customer service - on which it prides itself. Pazzion was one of the first stores in Singapore to provide customers with in-house shoe repairs, an innovation which has now become an industry standard.

No expense is spared in making sure that the

team is equipped with the right knowledge and skills to provide quality service. Between 2014 and 2015, the company embarked on the Customer Centric Initiative Programme where all staff underwent service excellence training to improve overall service standards at all retail stores.

Mr Ng reveals that mystery audit checks are conducted once every quarter to ensure that the same level of service excellence is being rendered to all customers. A reward and recognition system is also in place to recognise stores that have performed well in the mystery audit. This has proven to motivate staff to maintain overall service standards.

Going forward, the company is projecting a 50 per cent growth and expansion in its online retail business. It is also looking at expanding its regional presence beyond existing geographies, with a new store recently opened in Kuala Lumpur, and two more in Qatar this year.

Mr Ng adds that the brand is also in the midst of discussions with potential investors from Europe to take Pazzion into Western markets. He credits the company's growth from its humble beginnings to a brand with a global footprint to his dedicated and committed team.

"I have always adopted a more nurturing approach in our recruitment strategy, to give the right talent the necessary time and training to grow in the company. As a result of that, I have managed to build highly competent teams to manage different segments of the business and day-to-day operations, so I can focus on the bigger picture which is the strategic direction and expansion plan for the business." ■

## A STRONG SUIT

ASK any young man from where he intends to get his first suit, and Benjamin Barker is likely to be one of the names mentioned.

Founded by Melbourne-based designer Nelson Yap, premium menswear label Benjamin Barker has come a long way since its rather humble beginnings in 2009, right smack in the middle of the Asian financial crisis.

Seven years on, the Benjamin Barker group has expanded beyond fashion into lifestyle and food & beverage (F&B) with 10 stores across Singapore, including a flagship store at Orchard Cineleisure and two new suburban stores at Tampines 1 and JEM. Recently, the group clinched the prestigious OCBC Emerging

Enterprise Award, making it the first retailer to be honoured since the awards' inception in 2008.

The brand has also spread its wings beyond our shores - in 2015, Benjamin Barker made its regional foray into Australia with the opening of two stores in Melbourne and its first flagship store in late 2016.

Benjamin Barker is often mistaken for an overseas brand thanks to its Caucasian-sounding name. Mr Yap shares that the unique origins of the name came from both his faith as well as his trade. Benjamin is a character in the Bible from whom Mr Yap draws inspiration, while barker is a type of tan leather. With that,

Benjamin Barker came into being. And one has to admit, it has a nice ring to it.

But the gleaming display stores and spiffy suits belie Mr Yap's tumultuous journey as an entrepreneur. He had studied in the University of Melbourne in 2002, intending to pursue his passion in film and the creative arts in Australia. But fate stepped in, and he had to return home early due to his father's illness. He was thrust with the herculean task of running the family business – selling discount suits in Telok Ayer Street – which was mired in debt.

That period of time was one of his darkest as he fell into depression. He did not have an inkling on how to run a business, and he had to give up on his dreams. But after two years, Mr Yap managed to keep the business afloat and stem the losses. It was then that he felt that the time was ripe for him to start his own business.

He had noticed a gap in the menswear market between luxury brands and the more commercial, mass-produced brands. Despite the daunting market conditions at that time, Mr Yap decided to take a leap of faith. The rest, they say, is history.

From its first 60 sq m store in Marina Square with two employees and funded only by a small initial investment, the group has since achieved remarkable year-on-year growth and achieved about S\$10 million in turnover last year, with 70 employees altogether.

But despite their impressive achievements, Mr Yap and his team continue to keep an eye out on business sentiment and its impact on their business. He says: "The softening of the global economy has definitely affected the performance of the retail industry in Singapore. Uncertain economic conditions

saw local consumers being more prudent in their spending and on the lookout for value-for-money products. I believe times like this is a true test of how sustainable a business really is and I also believe there is always an opportunity in the midst of turbulent times."

For example, Mr Yap says, it is a good time to re-negotiate rentals with landlords and also enter markets that might have been tough to go in when times are good.

Acknowledging that the fashion retail market is fickle, he adds that the company is constantly seeking new ways to stay relevant. "New trends, new technologies and new marketing platforms are constantly disrupting the market. Be disruptive in the market or we will be disrupted."

One innovation that Benjamin Barker has come up with is a new line under a Green Label series, which is of a lower price point than the core line. Mr Yap says that this aims to reach out to a new group of consumers who like the brand but are more "price sensitive". He adds that the company intends to stand out and compete with its rivals by being extremely sensitive to the needs of their customers.

Mr Yap and his team are focusing on three main areas for the near future: building Benjamin Barker's base in Australia; working on the South-east Asian market through the franchise model; and expanding its F&B business in Singapore.

Reflects Mr Yap: "I think we are very blessed with fiercely loyal customers, and we are working harder than ever to make our products even more accessible while maintaining the quality that our customers appreciate about us." ■

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### **DRESSING SMART**

*Mr Yap (here at the Benjamin Barker store at VivoCity) acknowledges that the fashion retail market is fickle, which is why the company is constantly seeking new ways to stay relevant*