

STAR SMEBIZ

For Smart Malaysian Entrepreneurs



Right move: Liang focuses on getting the company culture and core values down pat right from the start.

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CHRISTOPHER Liang, 33, wasn't one of those who fancied looking young. Once, he tried growing out a beard to look older but decided to do away with the facial hair when it made him look messy.

But looking older seemed a necessity, particularly so when he has to deal with an established network of property developers.

At 28, he had co-founded property marketing firm Googolplex Holdings Bhd.

"Back then, I was always asked two questions when people meet me. The first one is, where is your boss? The second, is this your family business?" he reveals.

Liang did not have any experience in the property sector then and he was broke from a prior failed telemarketing venture. That made him all the more eager to prove himself and looking older, he opines, would instil more confidence in his clients.

But a friend of a friend offered him some comfort.

"He told me, 'when I first knew you, you looked very young to me. After talking to you, I know that you are not young, not in terms of age, but in experience'. That made me think differently," he says.

Young and ambitious

Property marketing firm co-founder shows that hard work and grit can trump experience in building a company

He began to focus more on building his company and less on trying to live up to others' expectations.

Liang, who started the company with his brother and a friend from secondary school in 2013, entered the market at what he thinks is an opportune time although the property market was already slowing down in the second half of the year following another increase in the real property gains tax.

All there was to do was to work harder and apply their own strategy to outperform other real estate agencies, he adds.

No one on his team came from the property industry, not even his sales director, which gave them a different kind of edge.

"Maybe that made us different. From day one, we built the company our own way. When we were very small, we were focused on

“When we started, our whole team did not have a background in the property industry, not even our sales director. Maybe that made us different.”

Christopher Liang

training and on the core values of the company.

"A lot of small companies don't care about values, they only care about getting business. Our core values are integrity, professionalism and innovation. We stick to that," says Liang.

He promises no hanky-panky in the company.

When Googolplex pitched for projects, they focused more on

their philosophy of doing business than on their sales commitment. They took time to build rapport with property developers and proved their worth through results.

Building a foundation

Although Googolplex's core business is in marketing property projects, Liang himself admits that he has never actually sold a property

on his own or as part of the company.

"A lot of people thought I was a top salesperson," he laughs.

Liang spends more of his time putting together training modules, conducting sales training and building the company culture and a supportive training ecosystem. He prides himself in the company's comprehensive training system.

Much of what he is doing in Googolplex are based on his experiences of not doing them at his previous company.

"Last time, I was still very young. I earned money from the business and spent it. I never thought of long-term plans. I wasn't hands-on and didn't manage my financials well," he says of his previous venture.

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A big focus on getting the right talent

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Prior to Googolplex, Liang ran a telemarketing firm. At its height, the company had three offices and employed 60 people. But the company had raked in debts of some RM200,000-RM300,000 by the time it folded and Liang spent the next nine to 12 months clearing off overdue staff salary and benefits and paying back loans.

But the experience taught him his most valuable lessons in running a business. While he may not have learned how to sell properties, he has learned to do business better. He is more hands-on in this venture and is making longer-term plans for the company.

His sustainability plan includes building and training a solid team. "Googolplex grew because I had a few good partners who trusted me when we were not so big yet. We grew the company together. I believe in teamwork. By myself, we can't grow fast. The secret to growth is your talent pool. Our top management is the biggest asset of the company," he says.

Liang has no qualms sharing his training system with other people. But it's not about the methods, he stresses. It is the people who make the system work. And he ensures that his team is well rewarded for their effort.

One of his challenges in working with capable staff is to get them to work together as a team. Capable people, he notes, tend to prefer working on their own.

"So this is what I have been doing, making them work in harmony toward the vision of the company," he says.

A new structure

Liang has big plans for Googolplex. He hopes to have the company listed in Hong Kong by 2021.

He has been looking into efforts to prepare the company for IPO including implementing a consolidation exercise and diversifying into new business segments to grow the company's size.

Apart from its core business of real estate agency, Liang is developing three other business pillars in the company: property development, hospitality management and development of co-working spaces. The success of its new pillars, he says, lies in the capability of its talents.

In late 2016, he initiated a plan

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to restructure the Googolplex group to bring his top commanders back to its headquarters.

"Previously, we had a lot of directors. They are highly skilled and efficient people. But they were running their own branch, each in charge of their own region. Everyone was just doing sales. So they were just competing with each other.

"Now that I want to do other segments, I see that I have so many capable partners but they are all doing the same thing. It's a waste of talent. So I put all of them in the HQ to fill different positions," he explains.

They took up spots like the chief financial officer, chief operating officer and sales director. This gave the company a stronger management team.

But getting all of them to work together took a while, especially after they've been working independently for a long time.

"The biggest challenge was to make them work together, to believe in our ultimate goal – the listing plan. I had to make sure they believed in me and that they got a clear idea of our future," he says.

All those times of solving conflicts and playing middle-man have worked out well for Liang, though. His team of 40 staff is a well-oiled machine now.

Currently, Googolplex has nine offices in Malaysia.

On a better footing, the company has moved into developing its own property projects. It currently has two projects under its belt.

One advantage Googolplex will have in the market, says Liang, is that it already has a strong sales force. Selling its own development will be easy, he adds.

This will also help the company's sales in the future. Last year, the company achieved property sales transaction of RM1.2bil.



Human resource: The Googolplex team at a teambuilding retreat. Liang emphasises that its talents are the company's biggest asset.



Expansion mode: The company currently employs 40 people and is looking to hire more as it expands into new areas.

Googolplex is in talks with landowners to carry out more development projects on a joint venture-basis. Liang is also keen to get started on developing co-working spaces soon as he sees potential for the business to grow.

He notes that Googolplex is currently working on a property-based app for the local market. He is coy about the function of the app but believes it will be a

game changer for the market when it is launched early next year.

The next two years are crucial for the company as it embarks on new projects and moves to the regional market. He hopes to establish offices in Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia or Thailand by the end of the year. The company is already in talks with partners in these countries to start a real estate agency business.

If all go according to plan, Liang hopes his overseas business will go in the way of the local one; moving from real estate agency to development, hospitality management and co-working spaces.

"But we've got to find the right partners, people who really understand these markets. They are very different, in terms of culture, education background, policy, laws. It's impossible for me to know everything. That's why we always need the right person to do business," he says.

Maintaining Googolplex's steady growth in the coming years will be a challenge. But Liang is optimistic – it's just about working harder.

His advice to other young entrepreneurs is similar: work hard. And cultivate the right network of people whom you can share business opportunities with.

"People always ask me where are the opportunities. I say opportunity is always around us. It's whether we are ready for the opportunity or not. If we are ready, that opportunity is yours. If you are not ready, you won't even see the opportunity," he says.

Liang is the recipient of the Young Entrepreneur of the Year award at The Star Outstanding Business Awards 2017.