

Weaving in a winning philosophy

Homegrown line Benjamin Barker aims to flesh out the sartorial aspirations of South-east Asia after establishing itself in the local retail scene

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AN IMPECCABLE suit for a special occasion? Check (thanks to Benjamin Barker menswear). A cosy hangout for the weekend? Check. Homegrown lifestyle brand, Benjamin Barker, has over the last nine years helped to flesh out the sartorial aspirations of stylish Singaporean men. The success of this unique combination has earned the brand its first Enterprise 50 (E50) award in 2017.

The brand is the result of founder Nelson Yap's entrepreneurial and survival spirit. Nine years ago, his father was diagnosed with cancer and Mr Yap found himself assuming the role of man of the house. His father eventually succumbed to the disease and Mr Yap inherited the family's debt-ridden tailoring business.

Mr Yap rose to the occasion and decided to create his own brand. Guided by the mission to inspire everyone to dress well, live well and do well, the Benjamin Barker brand was born.

In its early days, Mr Yap had an ambitious vision of developing Benjamin Barker into a lifestyle brand that incorporates food and beverage (F&B) into its core retail business. He collaborated with Damien Tan, his former college roommate, to take this vision forward during the 2009 global financial crisis.

Despite the economic downturn, the crisis also presented opportunities in the form of cheap rents in prime retail locations. Since opening at Marina Square that year, Benjamin Barker consistently added two stores each year.

Today, Benjamin Barker boasts twelve retail outlets in Singapore and Australia, as well as two F&B outlets in Singapore. Having established itself as an international brand, it aspires to strengthen its presence in South-east Asia.

Benjamin Barker sees itself as a

design company rather than a retail company. Positioned as a curator of products and experiences, the company aims to add value into people's lives through affordable products that help customers express their personality. Although the label stocks mainly menswear, it has a small selection of women's shirts/jackets at Benjamin Barker Orchard Cineleisure and B Store at The Cathay (2 Handy Road #01-21/22/23).

Its philosophy of complementing timeless products has undoubtedly become the trademark of the brand. Its products focus on classic suits tailored to fit the Asian physique. In addition, affordability is key and Benjamin Barker has kept prices of its core series unchanged since its inception.

Holistic retail

Offering a holistic retail experience for customers is crucial in staying relevant as a lifestyle brand. Noticing an immense potential in the F&B industry, Benjamin Barker also began to diversify its business.

With its strategic move to group Benjamin Barker Cafe with two retail outlets (B Store and Benjamin Barker store) at Orchard Cineleisure, customers have more reasons to visit them throughout the week.

Chief operating officer Damien Tan explains: "The Benjamin Barker store suits customers on weekdays, while The Benjamin Barker Lifestyle store provides casual apparel for the weekend. The Benjamin Barker Cafe would then fit in on a Saturday date night."

A visit to these stores is unique and multifaceted, where customers can indulge in a holistic shopping experience. "We challenge ourselves to be different every day. This is how we improve," added Mr Tan.

Both founders also regularly participate in events and dialogues involving small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to understand how




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Founder Nelson Yap (far left) with COO Damien Tan, who started off as college roommates to become entrepreneurs behind award-winning homegrown label Benjamin Barker. PHOTO: BENJAMIN BARKER

different SMEs operate and find ways to improve.

When asked about the secret of Benjamin Barker's success, Mr Tan said without hesitation: "Our people are the foundation of our business. We would not be here today without them."

Behind its beaming storefronts lies a flat corporate structure to facilitate interaction among employees and foster a people-centric culture.

Acknowledging that its employees know their customers best, Benjamin Barker is receptive to feedback from its frontline staff. Realising that only a satisfied sales force can provide exceptional service, Benjamin Barker constantly prioritises the needs of its employees, most of whom are millennials and young parents. Flexible working hours and career progression plans are provided to meet their

desire for work-life balance. A firm believer in finding the right people rather than good people, Benjamin Barker focuses on recruiting employees whose values are aligned with those of the organisation's, rather than looking solely at qualifications.

Behavioural coach

The organisation equips employees with relevant expertise in product knowledge and customer service. To maximise employees' growth, they engage a behavioural coach to evaluate the suitability of their roles. By taking such steps, Benjamin Barker is able to form a cohesive team that outperforms industry peers by maintaining a single-digit turnover rate since 2009.

As a local brand, Mr Tan cites Singapore's small market as a key

challenge in the retail space. The insufficient demand and low sales volume restricts its business growth. It also has to contend with rising rental costs and higher levies on foreign labour. However, by striking a balance between developing its own local workforce and utilising foreign labour, the brand is able to remain competitive.

In order to grow its market share, Benjamin Barker is looking to expand into South-east Asia. It has already set its sights on the tremendous market potential Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Cambodia have to offer.

To reduce the operational costs of managing the day-to-day operations in unfamiliar environments, Benjamin Barker is working on a franchising model to realise its expansion plans. This will allow the company to focus on its core strength of product

design, which will in turn create a brand alignment and a sustainable business model that are the cornerstones of building solid long-term business relationships.

Today, it has a franchisee in Cambodia and a partnership with Robinsons in Malaysia.

Undeniably, much is expected from the brainchild of these tenacious entrepreneurs. One can definitely envision men sporting Benjamin Barker's stylish apparel across South-east Asia as it sprouts outlets beyond Singapore shores.

The dream does not end there. According to Mr Tan: "Our dream is to open a boutique hotel, where we can combine retail, F&B and hospitality."

The writers are students from NUS Business School.