

Menswear label gets suited for international stage

Benjamin Barker aims to become a lifestyle brand competing beyond Singapore. **By Branson Lee Jun Xian, Chiam Yeng Heeng, Teo Jie Sheng Dylan and Tiffany Leow Kar Min**

WHEN founder and chief executive officer Nelson Yap started Benjamin Barker Pte Ltd at the tail end of the sub-prime crisis in 2009, the stakes were very high.

To start the menswear brand, he turned to his mother for financing; she mortgaged the family home to get a loan.

Today, 12 years on, Benjamin Barker has 12 stores located island-wide. The brand has also expanded beyond Singapore, with franchises in countries including Australia, Cambodia and Malaysia.

Yap had not planned to enter the fashion industry after graduating from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Creative Arts, majoring in film making.

Rather, the opportunity fell into his lap by a cruel twist of fate.

His father had been diagnosed with cancer and needed help to run his discounted-suit business, which was bleeding.

The younger Yap stepped up and managed to turn the business around, but it was making barely enough to pay off the company's outstanding debt.

Determined to rise from the ashes, Yap made a bold move to start Benjamin Barker. "It wasn't much of a choice. At that point, I just thought I couldn't imagine spending the rest of my life that way."

He believes that customers' feedback helped to engineer Benjamin Barker's success.

"Every day in the first year, it was just pivoting every single touch-point," he said.

"Being at the cashier every day, folding clothes, getting direct feedback from customers – these were the important things that helped us to pivot from the first day."

After five years, he cleared the debt. From his dad's failed business, he learned that being self-reliant was not always the way to go.

He said: "I am aware of the limits of my abilities, and that I don't always know best."

It is why he believes in the saying "If you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go with others".

Collaboration has enabled him to identify gaps and solve problems with the Benjamin Barker team.

The founding team, many of whom are still working in the business, have internalised the core values of hard work, taking ownership, humility and teachability; these values underpin the foundation upon which Benjamin Barker were built.

"This is why I put much importance in protecting the culture of our company now," said Yap.

Forging a growing culture

In the start-up phase, instilling a company culture was the last thing on Yap's mind.

"Every day, we were finding ways to keep the business alive. The only mission that we had at the start was to try and make ends meet and survive another month."

It was only after many years in the business that he realised he needed to proactively build and maintain a work culture to unite the company in times of adversity and rapid changes.

He believes that the transparent culture has helped him to build a strong rapport with his employees. Being involved in almost all aspects of the business, he is able to understand his employees' problems.

The secret formula

When designing Benjamin Barker stores, Yap put himself in the shoes of the customer to create what they want to see and feel in a store.



CEO Nelson Yap believes in collaboration and says it is important to protect the company's culture. PHOTO: BENJAMIN BARKER

This has become one of the brand's core beliefs – to create a unique experience for everyone stepping into its stores.

Yap said the journey has not been easy. Along the way, he had to do a lot of pivoting and beta test multiple ideas to find the right solution.

There was a time when Benjamin Barker sold womenswear in Singapore, in response to its finding out that women were also buying its shirts.

But sales did not take off and the idea ground to a halt after two seasons. So it was back to refocusing on menswear.

Space is very important in the retail industry. Yap has to decide on the trade-off between having a wide

variety of products or a deep assortment of any one product.

Having both simultaneously will require a lot of retail space, which may not be cost-efficient in Singapore. Benjamin Barker went with having a wide variety and shallow assortment, stocking a variety of different products but with limited variations.

Integrating technology

Many fashion brands have embraced technology to gain a competitive advantage. Benjamin Barker has sought to integrate technology advancements with fabric as the cornerstone of its innovation – what Yap termed as "fabric transformation".

Besides sourcing quality fabric from Europe and Japan, he and his design team also hand-pick sustainable fabrics made with advanced technology.

Benjamin Barker has designed a new casual shirt range that uses biodegradable Tencel fabric. The use of nanotechnology in the creation of this plant-derived fabric gives the fabric an extremely soft texture and makes it resistant to wrinkle, odour and stain.

The fabric is also naturally bacteria-resistant and hypoallergenic, which makes it suitable for consumers with sensitive skin.

In addition, Benjamin Barker has designed the "Perfect White Shirt" using Organic Pima Cotton and Egyptian Cotton. Both of these fabrics also have nanotechnology infused in them.

Being consumer-centric

In this increasingly eco-conscious world, sustainability has become a popular buzzword in retail brands.. Yap believes that sustainable products need not be more costly or be of poorer quality.

Having attended various courses on sustainability, he now believes

that sustainability manifests itself in various forms – ranging from packaging to fabric use or even the life span of the product itself.

Early this year, Benjamin Barker launched its "Soft" collection, featuring dressed-down pieces fashioned from organic and sustainable fabrics such as organic long-staple cotton and long-staple Supima cotton, which are free from genetically-modified organisms and chemical pesticides.

In fact, not only are these materials sourced sustainably, they are also screened to ensure that they can last. Eventually, this will contribute to more sustainable consumption.

The greatest challenge is now

Yap said the fashion retail industry has been one of the hardest-hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, given that consumers are largely working from home and going out less – making it tough for Benjamin Barker, which retails mainly office wear.

All employees took a pay cut in 2020 so that the company need not retrench anyone.

"At Benjamin Barker, we will always put our staff first and we will do as much as we can for their survival, especially during this period of time," he said.

Some of his friends have urged him to move his sales online and utilise e-commerce platforms. Although doing so has grown its online sales by 500 per cent, it still constitutes only a minute percentage of total sales, because customers still want to actually put on the suits before buying them.

Yap has plans to build Benjamin Barker into a global lifestyle and hospitality brand and branch out into home decor products. He aims to expand throughout South-east Asia with up to 30 international stores in five years.

Then the pandemic came along, but Benjamin Barker has gone ahead and ventured into the lifestyle market with a range of home ware under Benjamin Barker Homes; it has opened two new stores in Suntec City and Ngee Ann City.

Its range of products include sustainable items like kitchenware, bathroom accessories, home decor and sportswear designed for performance.

"Despite the current situation, we have to make changes and be agile, and the plans we make have to be made with long-term sustainability in mind," said Yap.

Although the past two years have been rough, he is optimistic that business will soon recover.

He has only one piece of advice for young aspiring entrepreneurs: Get your hands dirty, get involved.

"It is perfectly fine to keep making changes until you find the right formula. Many people try to spend a lot of time trying to plan everything perfectly and end up starting much later."

