CELEBRATING SERVICE EXCELLENCE

The Singapore Zoo’s holistic approach to service excellence has won it this year’s Singapore Service Excellence Medallion.

ROLLING AHEAD WITH PRODUCTIVITY
Technology and automation helped two SMEs simplify processes, enhance efficiency and reap significant productivity gains.

A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITIES
Sakae Holdings is building a pipeline of talent and giving them the opportunity to grow quickly together with the company.
SPRING Singapore is an agency under the Ministry of Trade and Industry responsible for helping Singapore enterprises grow and building trust in Singapore products and services. As the enterprise development agency, SPRING works with partners to help enterprises in financing, capability and management development, technology and innovation, and access to markets. As the national standards and accreditation body, SPRING develops and promotes an internationally-recognised standards and quality assurance infrastructure. SPRING also oversees the safety of general consumer goods in Singapore.
Launch of Supply Chain Challenge 2013

Five polytechnics and five logistics SME partners are participating in the second run of the Supply Chain Challenge this year. The official launch at SIM University on 2 May attracted a good turnout of over 150 tertiary students and 15 logistics SMEs for a lively exchange and networking session. Initiated by the Singapore Logistics Association and SPRING Singapore, the Supply Chain Challenge aims to elevate the professionalism of the industry and attract young talents to the dynamic field of supply chain management. The finale will be held in July.

Visit to CEI Contract Manufacturing

CEI Contract Manufacturing Limited, a Singapore-based company that specialises in equipment and module assembly, has benefited from its collaboration with a large enterprise, Ultratech. Through the partnership, CEI was able to gain in-depth knowledge of optical equipment assembly, alignment, calibration and testing. This collaboration is a good example of how a local enterprise can gain from a large enterprise’s expertise to enhance its capabilities, said Minister of State for Trade and Industry, Mr Teo Ser Luck, who visited the company on 6 May.

10th Annual Conference of APEC Financial Institutions Dealing with SMEs

Mr Tan Kai Hoe (above), Chief Executive of SPRING Singapore, was the Guest-of-Honour for the 10th Annual Conference of APEC Financial Institutions Dealing with SMEs, organised by the Association of Banks Singapore on 10 May. In his keynote address to SME leaders and senior financial executives, Mr Tan highlighted the importance of SMEs to Singapore’s economy and how the partnership between the government and banks has helped underserved SMEs gain wider access to financing.

CASE-SPRING Educational Seminar

Some 70 consumers turned up at an educational seminar jointly organised by the Consumers Association of Singapore and SPRING Singapore on 18 May. Besides gaining a better understanding of the various remedies that can be sought for defective goods under the Lemon Law, consumers picked up some useful safety tips that will come in handy when they buy products for themselves and their loved ones.

GET-Up 10th Anniversary

The Growing Enterprises through Technology Upgrade (GET-Up) programme celebrated its 10th anniversary on 14 May. Some 500 companies have benefited from the programme since it was jointly launched in 2003 by the Agency for Science, Technology & Research, Economic Development Board, International Enterprise Singapore and SPRING Singapore. The Guest-of-Honour, Mr S Iswaran, Second Minister for Trade and Industry, announced that more than $50 million has been set aside under the Technology Adoption Programme to help 1,000 companies gain access to new technology and raise productivity by an average of 20 per cent over the next three years.
Ace 10th Anniversary
On 23 May, the Action Community for Entrepreneurship (ACE) celebrated its 10th anniversary. At the event, Minister of State for Trade and Industry and ACE Chairman Mr Teo Ser Luck revealed that a new Entrepreneurship Review Committee will be set up to chart a new direction for entrepreneurship in Singapore. The committee will release a set of practical and implementable recommendations by January 2014.

LEAD Forum 2013
The annual Local Enterprise and Association Development (LEAD) Forum was graced by Minister for Trade and Industry Mr Lim Hng Kiang on 15 May. Jointly managed by SPRING Singapore and International Enterprise Singapore, the LEAD programme has funded over 40 projects worth $140 million, and benefited about 38,000 local enterprises since its launch. At the event, Mr Lim presented letters of award for five new LEAD-funded projects. Mr. Lim also announced that the Restaurant Association of Singapore, in partnership with the Singapore Food Manufacturers’ Association and Singapore Manufacturing Federation, is issuing a Call for Collaboration to encourage food services companies to work with food manufacturers or suppliers to outsource preparation and production of food items which are not core offering in the menu.

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NPCEC-BT Business Productivity Seminar
Mr Lee Yi Shyan, Senior Minister of State for Trade & Industry and National Development, was the Guest-of-Honour at the Business Productivity Seminar organised by the National Productivity and Continuing Education Council (NPCEC) and The SME Magazine on 22 May. Mr Lee, together with business owners and consultants, discussed the importance of productivity and its potential to transform the economy. Two companies – Feinmetall Singapore and Techwah Industrial Corporation – also shared the initiatives they each undertook to raise productivity.

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SPRING inks partnership with JBIC and MHCB to promote Japan, Singapore SMEs business tie-ups
The Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), Mizuho Corporate Bank (MHCB) and SPRING Singapore signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 27 May to jointly promote and catalyse business collaboration between Japanese and Singaporean SMEs. This strategic partnership was sealed as an extension to the Mizuho ASEAN Private Equity Fund set up by MHCB and JBIC to support business deployment of Japanese companies, including SMEs, into ASEAN countries.

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Celebrating Service Excellence

The Singapore Service Excellence Medallion recognises the best in customer service.

Introduction

Introduced in 2011, the Singapore Service Excellence Medallion is Singapore’s most prestigious award under the Go the Extra Mile for Service (GEMS Up) national movement aimed at cultivating a customer-centric culture among establishments and individuals. Organised by the five GEMS Up agencies – namely SPRING Singapore, the Singapore Tourism Board, the Singapore Workforce Development Agency, the Institute of Service Excellence at the Singapore Management University, and the National Trades Union Congress – the Medallion awards are presented to organisations and individuals that have demonstrated the highest levels of service excellence.

Organisations shortlisted for the Medallion are assessed based on customer satisfaction measurement scores, service systems, processes, key business results and how they constantly look for ways to enhance the overall customer experience.

Individual awards are also given out to recognise staff for their commitment to quality service and how they have exemplified the organisation’s vision, mission and values. The Service Professional category is dedicated to outstanding customer-facing staff, while the Service Champion category commends someone at the management level who has led service improvement initiatives and elevated service standards in the organisation.

In the following pages, SPRINGnews speaks to the winners of this year’s Singapore Service Excellence Medallion.

Winners of the Singapore Service Excellence Medallion Awards 2012/2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Award</th>
<th>Winner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medallion Winner</td>
<td></td>
<td>SINGAPORE ZOO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commendation Award (Service Innovation)</td>
<td></td>
<td>BROTHER INTERNATIONAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commendation Award (People Practices)</td>
<td></td>
<td>DFS GALLERIA SINGAPORE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commendation Award (Customer Experience)</td>
<td></td>
<td>MOUNT ELIZABETH HOSPITAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commendation Award (Service Leadership)</td>
<td></td>
<td>WING TAI RETAIL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Champion</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mr MILTON TOH, BROTHER INTERNATIONAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Professional</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ms AGNES DASS, MOUNT ALVERNA HOSPITAL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service Professional</td>
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<td>Ms HERDAWATI BTE MANSOR, WING TAI RETAIL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE is a blessing,” says Ms Agnes Dass, who won the Service Professional Award at this year’s Singapore Service Excellence Medallion Awards. The nursing officer from Mount Alvernia Hospital gets great satisfaction and joy knowing that she is able to make a difference to someone’s life.

When children are admitted to the Day Surgery Centre, Ms Dass provides stickers, lollipops or ice-cream to cheer them up. If a patient is admitted on their birthday, Ms Dass makes it a point to arrange for a birthday cake. All this is made possible because the hospital empowers its staff to delight patients at their discretion.

On what helped her win the award, Ms Dass said, “Good service comes from the heart. While we have our share of difficult patients and unreasonable demands, with experience we learn how to empathise with what patients are going through and handle things professionally. Having the right attitude is also important.”

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Dr Agnes Dass
Nursing Officer
Mount Alvernia Hospital
While many businesses have identified customer service as a source of differentiation, delivering good service can be an uphill struggle without the right approach. Besides understanding the needs of their customers, organisations must adopt a holistic strategy – having clear and consistent leadership from the top, the right service culture and customer-focused systems and processes.

One organisation that has shown service leadership and implemented customer-centric policies to deliver an outstanding customer experience is the Singapore Zoo, the 2013 recipient of the Singapore Service Excellence Medallion. The award is a top honour that marks Singapore Zoo’s superior guest satisfaction and organisational service excellence.

“...Our staff are trained to respond to guests’ requests with ‘let me see what I can do’, instead of ‘let me check with my manager or supervisor’. The team is empowered with a certain degree of decision-making to delight guests.”

Mr Lee Meng Tat
Chief Executive Officer
Wildlife Reserves Singapore, the holding company of the Singapore Zoo

The Singapore Zoo’s holistic approach to service excellence has won it this year’s Singapore Service Excellence Medallion.
programmes,” says Mr Lee Meng Tat, Chief Executive Officer of Wildlife Reserves Singapore, the holding company of the Singapore Zoo.

**Creating a service culture**
Delivering customer satisfaction requires an organisation-wide approach to service excellence. The Singapore Zoo develops its service culture by equipping its staff with the knowledge and skills to provide better service. For instance, a service rally is held annually to inculcate a service-driven mindset among staff. This is attended by everyone from the CEO to the front-line staff.

“We share our service focus for the year, recognise outstanding performers and motivate our staff to go the extra mile when connecting with our guests. It is also a platform to reiterate our ‘FiEA’ service DNA, which stands for Fun, Inspiring, Engaging and Attentive,” says Mr Lee.

All new staff are also required to undergo a service orientation programme to gain a better understanding about the Singapore Zoo, their job and the concept of the guest experience.

**Service innovation**
Besides driving business strategies with a strong service culture, organisations need to constantly innovate in order to exceed customer expectations. The Singapore Zoo, for instance, harnessed technology to extend its reach and better engage its visitors.

To offer a seamless ticketing experience, the zoo developed an online ticketing portal and introduced mobile ticketing services. Digital and social media channels also help it to receive feedback and communicate with its customers.

“We observed that online ticketing is popular with park visitors and are happy to note that this has delivered several benefits, including hassle-free access for visitors and increased staff productivity,” explains Mr Lee.

**Delighting customers**
The ability to deliver a differentiated customer experience is another key component of the Medallion assessment. Organisations are assessed according to the Customer Satisfaction index of Singapore (CSISG), which gathers the opinions of consumers and ranks them accordingly.

At the Singapore Zoo, staff are given the discretion to offer priority trams or boat boarding as a birthday surprise for customers, or provide buggy services for families with children or the elderly. They can also provide apparel replacement for soiled or wet clothes or revalidate tickets.

“Our staff are trained to respond to guests’ requests with ‘let me see what I can do’, instead of ‘let me check with my manager or supervisor’. The team is empowered with a certain degree of decision-making to delight guests,” adds Mr Lee.

While winning the Medallion has been a huge encouragement for the Singapore Zoo, Mr Lee says the organisation will continue to build on its success and strive to deliver better customer experiences.

He says, “The Singapore Zoo has come a very long way since we first opened our gates in 1973. The Medallion is akin to a great pat on the back, and we are very honoured. Our team is greatly inspired and encouraged to do even better in future.”
Excelling in customer service and engagement is at the centre of Brother International’s business strategy.

SUCCESS BUILT ON SERVICE

SINCE IT WAS FOUNDED
105 years ago, electrical equipment company Brother International has put customer satisfaction at the heart of its business. Its ‘customer first’ mantra permeates every level of the company, from its front-line staff to managers and senior leaders.

“We believe that the success of a business does not lie solely on providing quality and innovative products. It must be coupled with exceptional service,” says Mr Milton Toh, Brother’s Regional Deputy General Manager.

Meeting customer needs
Technology plays a key role in helping the company improve its service standards. For example, Brother invested in a Customer Relationship Management platform to implement a customer outreach programme called the 10 Q Service.

Through this programme, Brother will maintain contact with its corporate customers after 10 days, 10 weeks and 10 months after the purchase of their Brother machines to ensure that they are satisfied with the installation, setup and operation of their machines. The company will also provide assistance if needed.

“Our proactive service means we contact our customers before they call us, and provide ‘at your side’ service and assistance whenever they need us. This allows us to continue engaging our customers by contacting them throughout the product life cycle,” adds Mr Toh.

Another important customer service initiative is Brother’s Remote Online Real Time system, which allows the company to remotely control computers and printers installed in customers’ homes, and fix problems without service personnel having to leave the office. This reduces waiting time and allows customers to receive help at their convenience.

Mr Toh was named the Service Champion at the Singapore Service Excellence Medallion Awards for helping to develop the system. “While great service comes from the heart, we need to innovate using the latest technology to enhance productivity, and at the same time provide exceptional service,” he says.

Service excellence culture
Recognising that excellent service is delivered by competent, motivated staff, Brother places a strong emphasis on training and development. Just last year, Brother sent its service staff and managers to the Certified Service Professional (CSP) programme developed by the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA).

“All our staff are now CSP-certified. This year, we will be sending our staff to more WDA programmes so that they are able to provide excellent service,” says Mr Toh.

Apart from investing in staff development, Mr Toh also believes that an organisation must nurture a culture of service excellence, from its senior management to front-line staff.

Customer-focused approach
Brother recently clinched the Singapore Service Excellence Medallion Commendation Award for Service Innovation, and Mr Toh attributes Brother’s success to its customer-focused approach. The company prides itself on meeting customers’ needs and exceeding their expectations, notes Mr Toh.

“All our staff have a conviction to serve genuinely from their hearts. They understand the benefits of our service excellence journey and are motivated to incorporate these service values in our daily operations,” he adds.

“Since customers are at the very core of Brother, our success has always been built by listening to them. By understanding their true needs, Brother can design and tailor a unique service offering that will provide customer satisfaction.”

“Mr Milton Toh, Regional Deputy General Manager, Brother International”

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Mr Milton Toh, Regional Deputy General Manager, Brother International
DFS Galleria Singapore’s personalised approach to customer service sets the business apart.

REDEFINING LUXURY SHOPPING

NEED HELP PICKING THE right combination of cosmetics for your skin type? Simply make an appointment with DFS Galleria Singapore’s Beauty Concierge for a personalised skin analysis, or get a makeover using the products that you are interested in without having to purchase them.

And if that is not enough, you can also get complimentary hand massages, facials and skin treatments while you are there. These services are just part of the global luxury retailer’s efforts to provide a personalised shopping experience for customers at its more than 200 outlets in 15 countries.

“Our customers are international travellers who face choices across the globe, so it is critical to deliver an experience which goes beyond their expectations,” says Mr Craig McKenna, Managing Director of DFS in Singapore.

Comprehensive staff development

To equip staff with the skills necessary to deliver luxury retail experiences, DFS has developed company-wide talent management courses, including its Shared Learning Experiences, Apprentice to Master Luxury Service training, and Management Trainee Programme.

“These courses provide a platform for DFS staff to develop leadership skills and competencies, and to better understand the many facets of operations and merchandising in an international retail company,” notes Mr McKenna.

For example, staff are able to hone their skills in relationship building and luxury brand knowledge. Emotional and cultural intelligence courses also help them to learn more about themselves, their customers and the diversity of the business.

DFS also started the PRISM Rewards programme, which recognises top-performing staff in stores, merchandising, IT and shared services departments. Besides rewarding staff who have achieved high levels of sales performance, those who have suggested creative ideas to improve workflow processes are also recognised.

“The combination of training and rewards empowers and encourages our staff to deliver the best customer service possible,” says Mr McKenna.

Best people practices

DFS’ people-centric strategy and vision of creating a luxury experience at its outlets has paid off, with the company earning the top spot in Singapore’s annual ranking for customer satisfaction last year.

Despite winning the Singapore Service Excellence Medallion Commendation Award for People Practices this year, Mr McKenna says that the company’s service excellence journey is not over.

“We are delighted that both customers and staff are responding well to our efforts, and we will continue to innovate to improve our service standards. Customer engagement is our single most important objective and must be reinforced continually.”

Our talent management programmes ensure that our staff have the skills and confidence to deliver an exceptional shopping experience to every single customer, every single time.”

Mr Craig McKenna
Managing Director, DFS Galleria Singapore
Mount Elizabeth Hospital’s patient-centric culture drives the delivery of quality clinical care and customer service.

PUTTING PATIENTS FIRST

NOBODY LIKES BEING ILL or spending hours waiting to be seen by a doctor, and Mount Elizabeth Hospital understands that. The 345-bed tertiary care hospital aims to make hospital stays more pleasant for its patients by putting their needs first.

“Good customer service means that customers can get what they need quickly and accurately. In the case of a hospital, the most important thing is that patients can get an accurate diagnosis and best-in-class treatment. At Mount Elizabeth Hospital, we take pride in providing an accurate diagnosis and treatment within 48 hours,” says the hospital’s Chief Executive Officer Dr Kelvin Loh.

Harnessing technology

The hospital, which has more than 400 qualified specialists, utilises state-of-the-art equipment to provide high quality clinical care for its patients. For example, it recently acquired a 320-slice CT scanner, which can diagnose and outline heart vessel blockages within one heartbeat.

“This is part of our efforts to provide better and faster service to our patients. Besides having the right expertise, it is also important to back them up with advanced diagnostic tools,” explains Dr Loh.

A patient-centric culture

Enhancing the customer experience, however, requires more than just investments in technology. To Dr Loh, a patient-centric culture is key to inspiring and sustaining excellent customer service. Hiring the right people is the first step, he says.

“Whether they are in front-line or back-end roles, all our staff must enjoy engaging with people and have a service ethos. It’s important to choose the right people – those with the desire to provide care and good service.”

Besides regularly communicating their mission of creating a customer-centric organisation to staff, the senior management of Mount Elizabeth Hospital also lead by example.

“Building a service-oriented culture starts with the leadership. We encourage all our leaders to interact with our patients to get new insights and hear what they feel about us. When the staff see their leaders doing that, delivering good customer service becomes the norm,” he adds.

Commitment to excellence

The hospital’s patient-centric culture has encouraged many staff to go out of their way to delight customers.

“Staff are empowered to go the extra mile for patients without having to seek approval from their managers. For example, we had an American patient who lost his mobile phone and could not contact his loved ones. This prompted one of our staff to buy a phone for him, without having to get management approval, and he really appreciated the gesture,” says Dr Loh.

Mount Elizabeth’s commitment to service excellence has paid off. Besides seeing an improvement in its customer satisfaction scores, the hospital also clinched the Singapore Service Excellence Medallion Commendation Award for Customer Experience this year.

“More than 90 per cent of our patients are very satisfied with our service. It is a validation of the work that has been done and I believe it will motivate staff to achieve greater heights,” notes Dr Loh.

Whether they are in front-line or back-end roles, all our staff must enjoy engaging with people and have a service ethos.”

Dr Kelvin Loh
Chief Executive Officer
Mount Elizabeth Hospital
Wing Tai Retail delivers quality service by understanding its customers and investing in staff development.

COMMITTED TO SERVICE EXCELLENCE

TO MS HERDAWATI MANSOR, the key to exceptional service lies in building lasting customer relationships. The Shop Manager at Wing Tai Clothing carefully logs details of her customers’ fashion preferences in a “little black book” and emails photos of new clothing arrivals to them regularly.

The 34-year-old, who won the Service Professional Award at this year’s Singapore Service Excellence Medallion Awards, says, “It is important to add the personal touch when it comes to delivering good service. This is where the training at Wing Tai Retail has helped me to serve customers better.”

Well-trained staff
Staff training is a big part of Wing Tai Retail’s DNA. The company, which manages a portfolio of 15 brands, including Topshop and G2000, believes in equipping its frontline staff to go beyond their traditional functions, which are mainly transactional in nature. Their role has been transformed into an advisory one, in which they give shoppers seasonal fashion tips and coordination advice. As such, career pathways for different tracks such as operations, styling and visual merchandising have been developed. The company also offers opportunities for staff to go overseas to learn the best practices of other retailers.

“Well, with changing customer expectations, it is no longer enough to compete on price alone. We have trained our staff to help our customers make decisions. For example, they are able to suggest clothes that match the customer’s personality, build, and their needs for the occasion,” notes Ms Helen Khoo, Executive Director of Wing Tai Retail.

Understanding customers better
Getting a better understanding of its varied customers was a key step that Wing Tai Retail took to transform its service standards. Besides providing personalised styling services through its on-demand stylist and personal shopping services, Wing Tai Retail also invested in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform to identify the shopping behaviour of its customers.

“We are able to identify different tiers of customers and provide more personalised service. This includes inviting our premier customers to private shows or complimentary fashion workshops,” says Ms Khoo.

Enhanced shopping experience
The company also redesigned its stores to enhance the shopping experience for its customers. For example, the fitting rooms at selected stores were revamped to give a more luxurious feel. They are also fitted with call buzzers and browsing racks of the latest collections.

“We’ve arranged the clothes to make it easier for customers to identify the season’s trends. We also ensure that our shop staff represent the essence of the brand by being dressed not only according to the personality and image of the brand, but also to showcase the brand’s latest seasonal colours and styling trends to reassure customers of our convictions of our products as well. Many retailers overlook this but it is part and parcel of providing good service,” adds Ms Khoo.

Leading the way in service
Despite winning the Singapore Service Excellence Medallion Commendation Award for Service Leadership this year, Wing Tai Retail – which has more than 100 stores in Singapore – plans to strengthen its online presence.

“With more customers doing pre-shopping research, it is important that we make shopping easy by giving customers more information online. This can be done by providing an online chat function, blogs or Facebook,” she says.

“With changing customer expectations, it is no longer enough to compete on price alone. We have trained our staff to help our customers make decisions. For example, they are able to suggest clothes that match the customer’s personality, build, and their needs for the occasion,” notes Ms Helen Khoo, Executive Director of Wing Tai Retail.

It is important to add the personal touch when it comes to delivering good service. This is where the training at Wing Tai Retail has helped me to serve customers better.”
Companies who move beyond best practices find new ways to delight customers.

How do you build a long-term, sustainable relationship with your customers? The key is to deliver services that make their lives easier, says Mr Lluis Martinez-Ribes, Associate Professor at the ESADE Business School of Barcelona’s Ramon Llull University, Spain. He suggests that while “best practices” have a place in a service business – often for back-end operations such as logistics and finance – it is “next practices” applied to the front-end of the business that will set it apart.

“To adopt a best practice is to jump on the bandwagon and be market-driven,” explains Mr Martinez-Ribes. “Next practices, on the other hand, involve creating a trend and driving the market, while staying focused on the customer.”

Such service innovation carries a risk, of course, but there is often an even greater risk associated with carrying on with business as usual. “Customers are always changing. This process is very gradual, but it adds up to significant changes in a surprisingly short period of time. Because the change is gradual, it can be difficult for businesses to notice it and adapt – and this is a danger,” notes Mr Martinez-Ribes.

Understanding your customer
To stay one step ahead, it is critical to have a strong understanding of your customers. Mr Martinez-Ribes notes that this is different from simply meeting their demands.

“The source of innovation is not to obey customers, but to understand them. Ask them questions so you know their needs,” he explains. “You need to put on the customers’ shoes to understand what they are experiencing and what can improve their lives.”

This can be achieved through in-depth interviews, focus groups and other research methods that use projective techniques – indirect research methods that allow you to infer what a participant wants, rather than asking them directly and getting a potentially biased or unrealistic answer.

The next step is to take this new understanding and look for opportunities to meet customer needs that have not been exploited yet. “Be open to the unexpected and think out of the box.”
Getting started

He suggests looking for opportunities to collaborate with partners and suppliers as a starting point. By working with others, it is possible to come up with new ideas and services that you could not create on your own. It is also important to carefully consider your targeted market segment, instead of trying to cater to everyone. “The pre-requisite for service innovation is learning to say no to certain customer segments and targeting other segments by finding new ways to service them,” he says.

While customer-centric innovation may seem challenging, it is an avenue open to all companies, regardless of size. “Trends are there to be broken, not just to be followed – and the good news is that this is possible even for SMEs,” notes Mr. Martinez-Ribes. “Customers are the source of innovation. As long as you have access to your customers, you can get started with customer-centric innovation.”

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Associate Professor Lluís Martínez-Ribes, ESADE Business School, Barcelona’s Ramon Llull University, Spain

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“We found the toolkit very useful in training our staff. It retains their attention better as compared to text-heavy toolkits.”

– Mr. Gan Yee Chin, General Manager, Han’s (F&B) Pte Ltd

“KEY TAKEAWAY

• By truly understanding your customers and innovating to improve their lives, you can deliver services that will keep them coming back for more.”
Technology and automation can help companies simplify processes, enhance efficiency and reap significant productivity gains. Two SMEs share their success stories.

Ha Li Fa

Realising the constraints posed by a tight labour market and rising operating costs, BoBo brand fishball and fishcake maker Ha Li Fa knew that it could not continue to rely on manpower alone to drive sustainable growth.

"Productivity improvements were necessary if we wanted to stay in the business," says Ms Florence Toh (right), Ha Li Fa’s Assistant General Manager.

Harnessing technology

Hoping to streamline its processes and boost operational efficiency, Ha Li Fa took advantage of SPRiNG’s funding to strengthen its technology capabilities last year.

The company purchased a multihead-weigher that accurately sorts and weighs finished products before packaging them. This allowed the company to reduce food wastage and contamination, and ensure that the weight of its packaged food products remains consistent.

Today, only five staff are required to pack the company’s products, as compared to six in the past. Ha Li Fa’s production output has also increased by 64 per cent, as staff are no longer required to weigh the products manually before packing them.

"The machine has enabled us to control the quality of our products better. As a result, customer complaints have decreased significantly," adds Ms Toh.

Despite this success, Ha Li Fa’s staff were initially sceptical about the changes, as the machine was not customised to their needs.

"We made a few modifications to the machine after getting feedback from our staff, such as adjusting the angle of the conveyor belt to prevent the products from falling off. Our staff came to realise how the machine could boost their productivity, and today they can’t live without it,” says Ms Toh.

Ha Li Fa has also implemented an electronic ordering system for its customers, which include supermarkets, hawkers and wet market stall holders. Mobile devices are now used by its staff to capture new orders at the point of delivery, thus reducing the need to enter the information into a computer manually. This has led Ha Li Fa to increase its delivery volumes by 30 per cent per day.

A continuous journey

Despite making significant gains in efficiency, Ms Toh believes that more can be done. The company aims to introduce an enterprise resource planning system to track its inventory.

"Productivity is about cutting waste and streamlining processes to make the job easier for our staff. These improvements may incur an initial cost but are definitely worthwhile.”
The idea of using technology to simplify the three-dimensional (3D) sign-making process came to Mr Steven Teo (right) four years ago, after he realised how much manual work is involved in creating one.

“When it comes to making a 3D product display, a craftsman must first create a mould, before sculpting and painting the fibreglass model by hand. This is very labour-intensive and proved to be a challenge to our company given the tight labour market,” explains Mr Teo, Creative Director of Digimax Sign Engineering, a 3D signage and product display company.

Mr Teo notes that automation has not only helped Digimax to cope with manpower shortage, but has also improved the quality of its products. “Automation is key to boosting quality and productivity.”

Improving processes

With SPRiNG Singapore’s support, Digimax invested in a vacuum forming machine.

The machine helps to form plastic sheets into 3D shapes through the application of heat and pressure. Apart from eliminating the need for manual sculpting, the machine has enabled the company to produce precise complex shapes at a faster rate. For example, it now takes about two days for Digimax to produce multiple, identical pieces of a 3D sign – a task that would have taken a craftsman about one week.

Reaping productivity gains

Digimax also took advantage of the Inclusive Growth Programme offered by the Employment and Employability Institute (e2i) to invest in a computer numeric control (CNC) machine. This machine automatically cuts the timber moulds used to create a 3D product from concept drawings.

Complicated products that would otherwise be difficult to carve by hand can now be produced easily. More importantly, the machine only requires one staff to do the programming, and can be left to run unattended. This allows staff to focus on other tasks.

Despite the high costs of technology adoption, Mr Teo says that the benefits are evident. Digimax’s turnover has more than doubled in the past six years, and the company has increased its production capacity.

Digimax will also be looking to expand its facility in Tannery Lane this year. “Without this technology, we would not be able to expand our business so quickly. We are now able to fabricate 3D display products and models of virtually anything that a customer may request for,” says Mr Teo.

Productivity Tools

Companies looking to mechanise and automate processes to reduce reliance on manual labour and improve productivity can tap the following government assistance schemes.

**Capability Development Grant**
Companies can apply for SPRiNG’s Capability Development Grant (CDG) to defray the costs of improving processes and optimising resource allocation for productivity gains. SMEs can also make use of CDG to kick-start projects aimed at increasing the efficiency of their business operations.

**Innovation & Capability Voucher**
The Innovation & Capability Voucher (ICV) is worth $5,000 and allows SMEs to pay for services in areas of productivity, human resources, financial management and technology innovation.

For more information on the schemes, please contact EnterpriseOne at 6898 1800 or visit any of the SME Centres located at the Chinese, Indian and Malay Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises, the Singapore Manufacturing Federation, and the satellite centre at the North East Community Development Council.

In addition, if you would like to find out how to enhance your company’s productivity, you can use the self-help IMPACT (Integrated Management of Productivity Activities) assessment tool available at [www.waytogo.sg](http://www.waytogo.sg).
In the final instalment of a four-part series on working in an SME, we find out how Sakae Holdings is building a pipeline of talent to support its growth.

**A WORLD of OPPORTUNITIES**

Sakae Holdings gives young talent the opportunity to grow quickly together with the company.

These are exciting times for home-grown enterprise Sakae Holdings. With a stable of brands that includes Sakae Sushi, Hei Sushi, Sachi, Senjyu and Crepes & Cream, the company now manages more than 200 outlets worldwide, spanning countries like Malaysia, Thailand, China, Japan and the United States.

Recognising that it will need new talent to support this expansion, Sakae is making a concerted effort to attract fresh graduates.

Mr Gwee Jin Hai, a 25-year-old graduate of the National University of Singapore, joined Sakae just last year, but has already gained significant exposure to the different functions in the company – from human resources to business development, training, marketing, operations and projects.

Mr Gwee is also heartened by the amount of control he has over his projects – from planning to execution. Indeed, Mr Douglas Foo (above), Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Sakae Holdings, feels that the SME environment is an ideal choice for young graduates as it gives them the opportunity to implement their ideas and see through entire projects.

“This gives them the satisfaction of making real contributions to the business. At the same time, they will have better promotion prospects as the company expands,” notes Mr Foo. Mr Gwee has also had the chance to travel overseas and work on a project in India. “It was indeed an eye-opener, especially since such opportunities to go on business trips do not come easily for inexperienced staff like me,” he adds.

Harnessing Raw Talent

Sakae has partnered with SPRING on the SME-SPRING Executive Development Scholarship programme, which grooms future leadership talent. The first batch of scholars will be graduating early next year.

“Through this initiative, we have an opportunity to source for top talents equipped with not only excellent academic qualifications, but also an entrepreneurial mindset and a passion to contribute and make a difference in local SMEs,” he says.

Mr Gwee Jin Hai joined Sakae just last year but has already gained significant exposure to the different functions in the company and has control over his projects – from planning to execution.

Mr Foo firmly believes in the importance of reaching out to talent as early as possible and developing a strong pipeline for the future. He is also comfortable with letting young talents work at the strategic level to grow the company.

"The SME environment is an ideal choice for young graduates as it gives them opportunity to implement their ideas and see through entire projects.”

Mr Foo firmly believes in the importance of reaching out to talent as early as possible and developing a strong pipeline for the future. He is also comfortable with letting young talents work at the strategic level to grow the company.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Young talent can play an important role in fast-growing SMEs, where they are given the opportunity to test their limits and develop new skills.
- To find out how SPRING can help you develop a pipeline of fresh talent, visit www.spring.gov.sg/CDG.
Useful Contacts

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