



The 3 Legs Success Story

Richard Tan is a crazy angler from Malacca. Whenever he goes sea-fishing, he never forgets to bring along all kinds of fishing gears - and of course, his trustworthy 3-legged life-long companion. No, this companion is no monster. It is an innocent tap-water-like fluid inside a small bottle, with a 3-leg brand prominently imprinted on the label.

Yes, it is the 3 Legs brand of headache and fever healing fluid - one of the most popular traditional medicines available in not only Malaysia, but the whole of Southeast Asia.

Richard's family, since his grandfather's day, has been relying on this fluid to prevent fever and headache. It is a must for long distance field trips in the humid tropical climate. Today, it is a kind of 'don't leave home without it' for Richard and his family. And he would not hesitate to recommend the goodness of this 'wonder fluid' to any anglers on board.

The Tough Old Days

The story of the 3 Legs brand of Chinese medicine is a true reflection of the entrepreneurial spirit of overseas Chinese in the tough old days.

About 60 years ago, four guys in Singapore came up with this idea of resolving one of the most common ailments suffered by overseas Chinese - fever and headache.

The early Chinese who emigrated to Southeast Asia then usually take a while to acclimatise to the local weather. During this period, it was easy to develop sickness, especially fever, due to the hot weather, as compared to the varied weather back home in China.

This product made good business sense. With their knowledge in traditional Chinese medicine, they soon came up with a couple of medicines, and they were packaged in simple packing for convenient distribution and keeping at home. The famed 3 Legs fever healing fluid in a small glass bottle was one of them.

Like most success stories of the early Chinese, these four guys started their business the hard way. A good business idea is not enough; it has to be backed by meticulous execution and persistent selling.

Thus, the year 1937 saw four young, hardworking men running all over Singapore in briefcases to personally push the sales of their products. At first, they had to deliver their products by feet. Later, transport was upgraded to the use of bicycles, and then a van. In the old days, this was no simple feat.

The comradeship of the four guys was one of the crucial factor underlying their success. It is too common for business partnerships to fall apart due to differences. And in many cases, the partners even became deadly enemies.

The development

When the '3 Legs' brand was first launched, production was focused on medicine that was in high demand, such as heat-relieving fluid, headache powder and cough medicines. They were available at low prices to cater for a general market. That was a right start, in view of the poor economic situation then.

In the 40s, especially after the 2nd World War, the market experience a boom. The company took the opportunity to set up their own factory in Johor Bahru for mass production.

The 50s to 70s witnessed a period of sales promotion and consolidation steered by the members of the second generation of the respective founders. This in-family transition was vital as their team spirit was greatly needed to push their products beyond peninsular Malaysia and Singapore which is still its core market today. In due course, they spread their wings to Sarawak, Sabah and then to Indonesia.

In 1968, the company set up their second manufacturing plant in Petaling Jaya to cope with market demand. This year also marked the beginning of the adoption of modern management system in the company which employed 250 staff.

Since the 80s, the company witnessed many swift marketing changes and challenges, in line with the business development of the region.

The successful door-to-door sales in the old days was impractical, and it was necessary to engage in more aggressive advertising and marketing techniques, such as using the influence of the Chinese newspapers, radio and television. A joint-venture was also set up in Indonesia to enhance their marketing edge.

'Our packaging also needs to be changed to meet changing demand in different countries,' according to Zhang Rong Jie, the 3rd generation representative of one of the four founders.

'Amid all these changes, one thing we never change is our standard of high quality.' he added, 'We went all out to acquire the status of GMP (Good Manufacturing Practice) which is recognised as a mark of quality.'

The 3rd generation

Maintaining product image in the challenging market is one of its most important

objectives in the 90s which saw the transition and hand-over of the business to the third generation of the founders. Today, both their factories in Indonesia and Malaysia have adopted the latest production technology and quality control procedures which are fully in tandem with the requirement of GMP.

Like their farsighted grandfathers, the modern breed of managers strongly believe that the trust of the consumers on a product is critical to its survival and growth. And this trust can only come from the quality and effectiveness of their medicines.

And they make sure their products are easily available too. Today, the '3-legged' brand of medicine can be easily bought in most grocery stores, medical shops, and even in some pharmaceutical outlets which sell modern western medicines.

This aggressive marketing and sales strategy also brings the company across more geographical boundaries to Kampuchea, Philippines, Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Recently, they successfully crossed the Indian Ocean to land in India and Sri Lanka. And the next plan in the pipeline is a joint venture with a major research centre in mainland China to develop a series of new products based on oceanic resources.

This radical change in production and marketing concept represents a vital step from the traditional Chinese market in the home ground. 'We are encouraged that, like Malaysia where our products are being accepted by all races, the consumers in other countries are also receptive to our products,' Zhang added proudly.

The meaning of the 3 legs

In Hokkien, '3 legs' (pronounced as Sa Ka) is a popular proverb meaning to flatter someone. But in the world of traditional medicine in Singapore and Malaysia, the '3-legs' means a simple effective way to prevent or heal fever and headache caused by 'heatiness' in the body.

Indeed, the founders of the '3-legs' were creative enough to adopt this outstanding label. It is easy to recognise and its use has become established among the populace.

But to flatter some is the least on the agenda of the founders. They gave the 3 legs new meanings : it is in fact the 3 key foundations responsible for the success of this renowned brand.

The logo features two legs on solid ground and one additional leg to provide additional support and expedite the healing process. The symmetrical legs represent equality for all and humbleness on others' views and suggestions. And finally, the circle marks the cohesiveness of the staff and customers centred on the triple legs.

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