

Modern innovations help traditional medicine go down well



Wen Ken Group directors Fu Siang Jeen (left), 37, and Fu Shou Jeen, 36, with bottles of their Pi Pa Gao medicated syrup. To make it easier to take the medicine on the go, the bottles have non-spill, flip-top caps (below, left). ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

■ BY GOH CHIN LIAN

A SIMPLE idea to fix a non-spill, flip-top cap on bottles of a Chinese medicated syrup known as Pi Pa Gao could well give a fillip to the thriving traditional medicine business.

The latest innovation by Singapore manufacturer Wen Ken Group allows people to pour out the viscous honey-based throat soother without leaving sticky stains on the mouth of the bottle, and even drink it on the go.

Traditional Chinese medicine producers like Wen Ken are responding to the modern consumer's preference for convenience and hygiene.

Tong Jum Chew, for instance, packages medicinal powder for children in sachets instead of the usual glass bottle, so that parents can dispense a precise dose with ease.

Some manufacturers, such as Science Arts, are also gearing up for new markets, by obtaining halal certification to reach Muslim customers.

The company has a new line of products which replaces its Mei Hua brand with a prominently labelled English name, IngreLife, to appeal to customers who cannot read Chinese.

There is much money to be made in this sector, noted Minister of State (Trade and Industry, and Manpower) Lee Yi Shyan when he opened a traditional Chinese medicine expo yesterday at the Suntec Convention Centre.

Consumers worldwide are expected to spend US\$107 billion (S\$138 billion) on traditional Chinese medicine next year. Singaporeans' penchant for traditional medicine, including health supplements, has also increased. Imports have grown by 45 per

cent in the last two years, from \$1.1 billion in 2007 to \$1.6 billion last year.

Fighting for a share of this pie are 40 Singapore-based manufacturers, which together make 35 per cent of more than 8,000 types of Chinese proprietary medicines approved for sale here.

Mr Lee called on them to go beyond upgrading the quality of their manufacturing practices, and to take advantage of statutory board Spring Singapore's schemes to help small and medium-sized enterprises innovate.

"Traditional medicine is both a science and an art. It is a science because we need research of its active ingredients, processing methods and manufacturability. It is also an art because the way it is prepared, consumed and applied has to be integrated into modern lifestyles," he said, citing Wen Ken's flip-top cap as an example.

The family-owned company, founded in 1937, is not new to innovation. Two years ago, it repackaged its better-known Three Legs brand of cooling water. The more hip version of the traditional white bottle - labelled in English, Chinese and Malay with the Three Legs logo - is a blue-tinged, silver-capped bottle with the name Cool Rhino, which looks like a trendy drink.

This change boosted its sales by about 10 per cent, said group product manager Isaiah Cheong.

Wen Ken will be producing medicated syrup for the first time, facing off against Hong Kong-based incumbent Nin Jiom Medicine Manufactory.

The syrup should be available on supermarket shelves in one to two weeks' time, said Mr Cheong.