Blazing a trail for budding entrepreneurs

First-year business student Ken Koh hopes to encourage others to believe in themselves, writes GRACE CHONG

"EVERYONE has a talent — they just have to believe in themselves to see it. As Ken Koh, a first-year business management student, puts it: "We are all entrepreneurs; with the right beliefs, values and opportunity, we can all display that streak of brilliance within us."

With a passion to promote entrepreneurship in youths, the Singapore Management University undergraduate sets out to encourage young people to take the entrepreneurial path by creating a platform to synergise their talents and create a new breed of entrepreneurs.

In 2005, taking the best elements from his previous ventures and with guidance from his mentors, Ken launched Talenpreneur Hub along with business partners Joanna Tan and Lee Kan Wei.

"By creating a dynamic platform for like-minded individuals to garner support from one another in finding business opportunities and solutions, we want to empower young entrepreneurs to create something meaningful for themselves," says Ken.

From management and presentation workshops to monthly golf clinics and tea appreciation sessions, the activities offered allow budding entrepreneurs to heighten their awareness of the dynamics behind running a business, and allow them to apply and practice what they have learnt through the various business opportunities offered.

In addition, the centre acts as a middleman, linking interested investors and entrepreneurs and creating funding opportunities for new projects.

"We have a common vision, to make Talenpreneur Hub the place for young entrepreneurs," says Ken, as he describes the planned projects in store, including training sessions at schools featuring talks on how to start small businesses and trips to Red Dot museum, the focal point for creative design installations.

"We give them the exposure, help them build their confidence, and these skills are equally applicable to any other career."

Last year, the company was the organiser for the National Day Entrepreneurial Competition — an inaugural nine-day event which saw many aspiring entrepreneurs pit their marketing skills against one another. Teams were challenged to think up creative marketing strategies to maximise their profits, and the competitors ranged from secondary and polytechnic students, undergraduates to working adults.

"It was an invigorating experience for us all and we hope to organise more of such events," said Ken, as he excitedly went on to explain the array of opportunities available for entrepreneurs to try their hand at doing business. Recently in March, the company worked with Singapore Joint Social Service Centre to set up some stalls at "Rhythm of our Cultural Heritage", a quarterly event meant to showcase Singapore's youth talents.

Gaining from experience
Says Ken, "Even though there is a high failure rate for start-ups, I will still encourage youths to start their own small business to gain from the experience. If you keep waiting for the 'big idea', how can you be sure that you will know how to deal with and manage that idea when it does arrive?"

Today, the company has two offices, and a monthly turnover of around $40,000. Ken is targeting a growth rate of 30-40 per cent for this year.

Still, it was not all sunshine and smiles for the budding entrepreneur, who used to run an education agency, besides glowing experience from organising several fund-raising activities for Project Coza, the Singapore Women Everest Team, and a food donation drive for Gift of Love Home.

"When I first started out, it was difficult to establish myself and prove my credibility,"

Dynamic vision: "We are all entrepreneurs," says SMU undergrad Ken Koh

"We had to convince them that we could deliver what we promised."

Still, his perseverance, and sound advice from Talenpreneur Hub's group of volunteers, helped to give the group direction, and kept them going. "We were determined, to do something that adds value, that would benefit the lives of people."

Now, several projects are in the pipeline, with "a few training contracts lined up", a planned showcase of young entrepreneurs at the end of this year, and possible business trips abroad for its members to learn about opportunities overseas.

Ultimately, Ken hopes to venture overseas to set up 20 or 30 more offices. "The hub concept is definitely scalable, and has potential given the needs of youths in other countries," he says. "I will always remember the advice of my past canoeing teacher. You need not be the best, the person who wins is the one that completes the race."