Win-win partnerships in tourism

The founder of Travelmania is just 27 years old, but he has already won accolades for his inventive spirit. ANNA LEE reports

“Who would be so crazy to spend New Year’s eve waiting to be the first to register their company?” mused Chiang Zhan Xiang, founder of Travelmania. Apparently, 16 other companies beat him to it in 2010, but that did not stop this jovial entrepreneur’s success.

At the age of 27, he now operates two tourist service centres at Orchard MRT station and Dhoby Ghaut MRT station, which saw turnover of $1.3 million last year.

Mr Chiang was exposed to the industry from young. “My family is in the attractions industry, as a kid, I followed my dad around to his meetings and I sat in the corner listening to what they had to say,” he recounted.

His father, an avid entrepreneur who described him as a “typical business man”, roped him into the business upon his graduation from SMU in 2009.

His keen eye and hunger for opportunities saw him spotting a glaring gap in the changing face of tourism. The rise of free independent travellers (FITs) who are price sensitive, and the West riding on new tourism markets in China, were the hardest because you don’t have a track record, you are young, and have spiky hair... people look at you, take your business card and ask ‘who are you?’” Mr Chiang said.

Mr Chiang, ruffling his hair and fiddling with his name card,杠杆 his entire professional and personal experience with tourism to partner up with him. He constantly reminds himself to put himself in their shoes. “So I’ll think from their perspective: will I want to use the pass? What will it mean to me?”, he added. “The first domino piece toppled, it became easier to establish his tourist service centres.”

Leveraging on this comparative advantage, the “Go Singapore” pass was launched. At the tap of an ez-link card, tourists can access to attractions of their choice at preferred rates, coupled with the convenience of public transport travel. His ability to synthesize existing problems with readily available solutions did not stop there. Once the first domino piece toppled, it became easier to establish his tourist service centres.

These now provide information for tourists free of charge, as well as the added convenience of a money changer on-site and telecommunication services provided in partnership with StarHub.

While the “instant credibility” that he gained from EZ-link’s partnership helped him to establish his company, gaining the approval of tourists was another hurdle. He constantly reminds himself to put himself in their shoes. “So I’ll think from their perspective: will I be happy to receive information and buy something the same time?” he asked, a question which led to the conceptualisation of his service centre.

And for his upcoming relaunch of the “Go Singapore” pass, he likewise thought from the tourists’ perspectives. After reading tour guides, renowned tourism websites and blogs, Mr Chiang decided that the new experience-based “Go Singapore” pass that will be relaunched in June, will focus on unique experiences Singaporean tourists have to offer apart from the regular tourist attraction.

“The card is just a card, but it is when you put together the experiences the tourists are looking for – what they read about in a book or on a blog, or even what they heard by word of mouth – that’s where to start,” he said.

Tourists can look forward to experience tours that will take them to uniquely Singaporean places such as Chinatown or Arab Street, or even to try out delicacies such as chili crab.

Though both he and Travelmania are young, they have received some affirmation. He has had “zero complaints from tourists,” and was commended for his innovation by Second Minister for Trade & Industry S Iswaran at a tourism conference just three months into his venture.

Amidst that and praises from SMEs, Mr Chiang, who describes him as a “good business man (with) great business sense” in spite of his youth, he continues to surround himself with entrepreneurs who can shape the way he thinks, recognizing on his experience which he terms an “instant MBA”, he said: “When you work for other people, you really don’t know what hard-earned money is.

“You really realise business fundamentals from scratch... learning is one thing, the reality of it is another. You have to make sure your money capital is fine, and staff are getting paid... the very basics. You never experience it when you’re a small employee in the company,” he said, describing it as a humbling experience.

He remains open to criticisms and holds true to his ethos. “Direction is the most important; it means taking in advice from people, and striking win-win partnerships, and getting people to believe in you.”