Hello Stranger, want to have a crazy picture taken?

On the hunt for a photo booth service for his junior college class’s 10th-year reunion party last year, professional photographer Yam Fuchang found none in the market up to scratch. So he picked up his camera and decided to do it himself.

“I felt like coming up with a crazy backdrop, good lighting, flattering, like a modern-day portrait setting,” the ex-Saint Andrews’ Junior College student said.

He thought it would be quite fun to create a very social photo booth where people can (take photos) and, in the future, ‘it will be something to remember themselves by,” he added, as he pointed to photographs of his office walls of friends donning colourful spectacles and performing crazy antics.

Just days after, the glossy magazine-like photographs taken at his photo booth began appearing on his friends Facebook accounts and some in prime spots as friends’ account display pictures.

The “likes” and “shares” quickly followed, as more friends were tagged in the photographs.

The party itself was a success, but little did Mr Yam suspect that this first event would lead to him founding his own photo booth service company, Hello Stranger. Nor could he have guessed how the social media element would give his start-up that edge in a competitive business.

Word spread and, in August, barely a month after his maiden event, design and fashion accessories retailer A Curious Teeppee asked if he would set up his photo booth at an event of theirs.

It was only after this first “commercial gig” that the potential to turn passion for photography into a business really struck him, said Mr Yam.

Fast forward six months, and Hello Stranger today counts among its clients companies like Heiniken, Foh Ye, Resotel and the Le & Bahlou Group, which owns Tanjong Beach Club among various lifestyle and entertainment establishments.

Mr Yam thinks it was Hello Stranger’s social spin on photo booth picture-taking that got major and international brands to set up and take twice as much of social media attention that the small company was generating with its work.

On average, about 60 people are tagged in an event’s photo album and about 15-15 per cent of those tagged use those photographs as their account’s profile picture, says business co-owner Gay Zhang Gu.

“We’ve got 10 events lined up in the next 11 days and it’s right in the middle of my exam week,” he said, adding that the line-up includes brands such as Swedish retail clothing brand H&M, cosmetics giant Marybell and whisky maker Chevas.

However, things have not always been this rosy. While Mr Yam’s first foray into commerce, running his photo booth service company, Hello Stranger, was not going too well and even missed out on some early events, Mr Yam found his time and energy spread thinly across business liaison work and the artistic and logistic demands of his fledgling business.

“I needed someone to come in and take over the day-to-day running of the business while I wanted to focus on the big picture of how we can develop the product and business,” he said.

A chance encounter with his university schoolmate Mr Gay led to a catch-up session that would eventually land Mr Yam, his business partner.

“When we didn’t set it there and then, he (Mr Gay) wanted, in his capacity, to jump into this business,” Mr Yam said.

Business was brisk even early on, no doubt helped by the amount of chatter about their product on social media sites. Hence, even with Mr Gay joining the business venture, work was still taxing the duo and their logistics to the limit.

While Mr Yam held the fort in the office, Mr Gay – currently an undergraduate at the Singapore Management University (SMU) – had to shuttle between work and school.

Furthermore, the duo found it tough creating unique, funky backdrops required for each event.

“We do not come from the design or creative industry, so it made us . . . work twice as hard as others,” said Mr Yam.

Their efforts drew the attention of start-up champion George Hau of SMU’s Institute of Innovation & Entrepreneurship, whose mentorship the pair credits as pivotal to their progress.

“He believed that we had a good product and needed a good strategy and he helped us a lot in that area,” said Mr Yam.

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With professional guidance and an increasingly steady stream of orders for their product, Mr Yam and Mr Gay are confident that they are on the right track to success.

Our clients are keen to grow in significant market share captured by being an early entrant, and secure their position in a market that is increasingly crowded industry.

“We want to improve our product and grow the Hello Stranger brand into a recognisable local brand,” said Mr Yam.

Growth plans are already being considered, with the owners looking into product improvement and diversification.

“We’ve just touched the surface and there’s plenty more potential to grow,” Mr Yam said.