

STARTING YOUNG

A passionate entrepreneur with lofty aims

Entrepreneurship is best way for S'pore to survive in next 50 years, Gushcloud CEO tells **TEH SHI NING**

If Singapore were to disappear today what would the world miss? The answer, Vincent Ha hopes, will be a company of his. The 28-year-old is convinced that what the local entrepreneurship community now needs is an entrepreneur from his generation to set a precedent of success on the world stage.

"If it's not us, some other Singapore start-up must do this," says the CEO of social media marketing start-up Gushcloud, who believes entrepreneurship to be "the best way for Singapore to survive in the next 50 years".

"My deeper goal is to use entrepreneurship to put Singapore on the world map. I believe that if Singapore doesn't create products and services that people around the world will miss, there's no real point," he says.

And Gushcloud is his step towards that lofty target. "The goal here is to disrupt the entire digital advertising industry," he says.

For users, Gushcloud is an online "mood-sharing" board for sharing interesting finds – not unlike Pinterest, with the added draw of potential rewards.

These come from brands, which can use Gushcloud to reach select groups of users based on their likes or dislikes. Users are then offered rewards for actions such as sharing, tweeting, blogging or downloading applications – actions meant to build brand awareness more effectively than banner ads. Gushcloud then charges a transaction fee for each reward given out.

"It's a platform to connect brands to consumers, by identifying them through what they feel about things and delivering campaigns to individuals to participate in," says Mr Ha.

The idea was first hatched within digital marketing agency The Barnett Group, an earlier start-up he founded with Althea Lim, who is also his co-founder of Gushcloud, after graduating from Singapore Management University in 2009. That venture alerted them to the fact that many needs in digital advertising could not be solved with current tools, and prompted them to create their own.

Unlike most local entrepreneurs, Mr Ha and his co-founder decided that if global impact was what they aimed for, Gushcloud had to go global quickly. Specifically, they had to be in San Francisco within six months – a goal they achieved.

"If you're a tech company trying to create an innovative service, there's no better place in the world to be for the sheer volume of connections there," says Mr Ha. He is now based in San Francisco, where Gushcloud's subsidiary employs three other people.

The entire online advertising market in Singapore is worth US\$80 million, versus the US\$80 billion market in the United States. And the "spirit of experimentation and innovation there in the Valley", plus the people there from all over the world, "hungry to make something happen" are enough to make him stick with this "crazy" idea of running a start-up across two vastly different time zones.

The rest of Gushcloud's 19-strong full-time team is based in Singapore, supported by "a lot of passionate interns".

The start-up has also made moves into markets closer to home, with a reseller partner in Malaysia and a joint venture in Indonesia. Mr Ha is matter-of-fact about competition. Gushcloud faces at least two competitors who are fairly strong in Malaysia and trying to break into the Singapore market.

"But if this idea is good enough that other people are willing to execute it to the same extent, there is something there right?" he quips.

Although Mr Ha, back in town to speak to potential investors, comes across as one who has mastered his elevator-pitch, he readily admits Gushcloud has not "got the formula right" yet.

"What we have right now is a reaction to the problem, a temporary solution, a band-aid. I think the right answer is up for grabs. If we can implement or execute the right answer faster than them (competitors) in the next six months, we'd be in a better position," he says.

He thinks the team's grand, global vision and passionate tenacity have helped to attract investors, which include F&H Fund Management, a private equity group in Singapore founded by John Wu, formerly the chief technology officer of Alibaba Group.

Mr Ha says he runs on passion – "I'm not making a lot of money from this, I'm barely surviving, ploughing all my money back into the business" – but has to balance that with his responsibilities as a married entrepreneur who intends to have children.



"What they say about how behind every successful man is a loving woman – that's true in my case," he says. His wife has a job, but Mr Ha has promised to find a way to provide for the family by a certain point next year.

That will not mean giving up entrepreneurship though. Instead, he may structure the company to enable himself to draw a regular salary, or enter into a lower-risk venture.

"If you look at my life experience, what has always driven me forward is the entrepreneurial spirit. I enjoy creating things or creating solutions out of nothing," he says.

An early inkling of that came way back in primary school, when he discovered a knack for making money. He ran a book-rental operation – renting entire series of books from local bookstores and charging classmates lower rates to borrow them for shorter periods – and then moved on to selling marbles and gaming cards.

Things turned serious when he got to junior college. "That's when I started becoming a bit more legit, started trying to develop a skill set," he says.

His skill of choice was video production, and what began as a freelance business was later formalised as a video production compa-

ny in his university days. Big 3 Productions is still expanding today, though Mr Ha is now a silent partner.

He also found time to run a cafe on campus for two years and started a new university club, University YMCA, focusing on social enterprises and helping the intellectually disabled, while working towards a business degree.

So, after graduating top of his class at SMU entrepreneurship was still his chosen path. "I would rather take a non-paying job building my own thing, creating a solution, creating something people would use, as opposed to taking a five, six-figure sum from a company," he says.

Which is why, for now, his focus is on Gushcloud and the big dream of "owning social sentiment" by finding a way to catalogue and assign an emotional tag to every sentiment being expressed online and make sense of the phenomenal amount of social media data out there.

"We feel that if Google owns search, if Facebook owns the social graph and Pinterest owns the interest graph and Twitter owns the instant broadcast, we can own social sentiment," says Mr Ha. "It's a space that's big enough for us to be a billion-dollar company."

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– Mr Ha