



Far from sluggish

By Eng Chee Koon - Jan 24, 2007
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WHILE their peers were busy making strides up the corporate ladder, they left the rat race to pursue a common dream.

Taking the bold step to venture into business, long-time buddies Sharon Foong, 27, and Sophia Leong, 32, gave up stable jobs with regular income to find their footing in the food and beverage industry.



Together with another friend Joseph Lim, 31, the trio opened a diner that they whimsically named the Garden Slug. Tucked away in a cosy residential neighbourhood in Telok Kurau, the diner has been up and running since last December.

Going by the business thus far, they should have no regrets striking out on their own. Business has been steadily picking up and they are gradually building a following among residents in the surrounding neighborhood.

In the beginning

"We did not want to get stuck in a desk-bound job and remain in a comfort zone," Sophia told AsiaOne when asked what prompted the two friends to start the diner.

Agreeing, Sharon added that being young had its advantages as they still had the drive and energy to see through the conception and development of their brainchild.

Nonetheless, there was resistance from their working-class families, who were dismayed that they would abandon stable, paying employment to brave the rough waters of the food and beverage business.

Recounting the time when she first broached the matter with her father, Sharon said: "I faced some resistance from my Dad initially. He was puzzled why I would want to leave my job, which was like an iron rice bowl, to do this."

Eventually though, their determination and resolve convinced their parents that they had a good business model in mind and were not merely acting on a whim. Their families relented and gave their blessing.

Ingenuity amid challenges

With their own savings and \$30,000 in seed funding from an investor, who the two would not name, the Garden Slug was on its way to becoming a reality.

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In conceptualising their "perfect" diner, the two friends and their partner deliberately sought to find a location away from prime areas like the Central Business District and downtown Orchard Road.

"We wanted to offer a different experience to our customers. The diner had to be a place where they could just come and chill out," explained Sophia.



With optimism matched by their tenacity, they found their existing location in a sleepy residential neighbourhood in Telok Kurau. This proved to be a smart move as the diner began attracting not only residents from the nearby residential estates, but also tertiary students who find the free wireless broadband access a value-add service, which enables them to surf the Net or do their assignments.

To get more mileage out of word-of-mouth marketing and bent on building a community, the enterprising pair also set up a website (www.thegardenslug.com) where they showcase their menu and blog about happenings in the diner.

While seemingly innocuous, these moves are actually savvy tactics to establish a rapport with the community and capitalise on word-of-mouth publicity that is infinitely more credible and effective than any mega-bucks publicity blitz could ever achieve.

"We were actually quite surprised when new patrons come through our door saying they have heard about Garden Slug from neighbours," remarked Sharon.



Indeed, patrons who come to the diner are known on a first-name basis and chummy banter goes on between the owners and customers.

To keep costs low, the partners also take on multiple roles in the business, from covering kitchen duties to serving patrons. This way, they not only keep a tight rein on overheads but the multi-tasking helps expose them to all facets of running the diner.

Being lean and mean also brings nimbleness when it comes to decision-making. Changes to the menu can be made quickly or customised to meet diners' requests at short notice.

Although the Garden Slug has taken off to a good start, the partners are not resting on their laurels.

"A high point for us was having a company book out our entire diner to hold a company function for 50 staff recently. We see this as a stamp of approval," said Sophia.

For this year, the partners have set their sights higher and are targetting the corporate clients to diversify their customer base.

Words of advice

Despite putting in 12-hour days, seven days a week, Sharon and Sophia say the adrenaline rush of running their own business keeps them going.

However, they caution anyone harbouring dreams of being an entrepreneur to temper their idealism with a healthy dose of pragmatism.

Highlighting the importance of preparing the groundwork well, Sophia said: "You have to do your homework before venturing out."

Also, given that the path of entrepreneurship is not always smooth sailing - and setbacks do occur - the need to be mentally tough is a key ingredient in the entrepreneur's psychological make-up.

Summing this up, Sharon declared: "You just have to be resilient."

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