

# Crossing the \$1 million mark

Find out how these four SMEs, which won in the Emerging Category of the SME One Asia Awards 2012, performed beyond expectations within their first year of operation

By Wong Sher Maine

A BUSINESS making a million within its first year of operation is an undertaking which requires all the stars to be aligned.

But underneath the sheen of success is sweat, blood and tears as the small business owners push themselves to thrive.

All the four SMEs that are among the Top Five in the Emerging Awards category of the SME One Asia Awards this year — a real estate firm, a property coaching company, a roofing company and an architectural products supplier — say that one of the biggest challenges of a small start-up is getting the word out about the fledgling company.

Ms Tan Yang Po, chief executive officer of Azea Personal Coaching, says: “When you are new, no one knows you and the company has no track record, so it is difficult to gain people’s trust to part with their money, especially for big ticket items like property.”

She started the company in 2009 when she saw the opportunity to acquire distressed properties in the wake of the economic crisis. Because more people investing would mean greater volume, she decided to start training them to invest wisely.

She and her team increased the number of seminars it organised not only in Singapore, but in Malaysia. “A lot of nights and weekends were sacrificed,” says Ms Tan.

Today, the company owns buildings in Malaysia, Germany and India.

In the case of AAMOR, which supplies architectural products like tiles and bathroom accessories, it worked with established world-renowned manufacturers, and brought in products by brand-name designers like Phillipe Starck, Norman Foster and Andrea Pinin Farina which were immediately recognisable.

## Size matters

A start-up also needs an iconic project, says Soleil contract director Kenny Eng, to catapult it into the big league. “Small projects like condominiums and factories are important, but people do not remember these,” he says.

The breakthrough project for Soleil, a roofing company which was started in 2008, was when it was awarded the contract for roof cladding works on Hotel Michael at Resorts World Sentosa. It beat



*Ms Tan says starting up was difficult when the company was still unknown.* Photo: Azea



*Mr Chew’s company completed the multi-scope of aluminium roofing, lowres, ceiling and skylight for the Sentosa Boardwalk.* Photo: Soleil

established competitors because of its price point, and by assuring the client on the quality of its product.

Soleil’s managing director Roy Chew says: “We took three months to finish a job that would typically take six to eight months. I remember I was up on the roof of that ho-

tel for 12 to 16 hours a day every day and I didn’t see my family for three months. I lost 7kg in the process. But after that, it was easier to get jobs.”

The company has since worked on parts of Gardens by the Bay, the roof of the Sentosa Boardwalk which leads from the Vivocity



*Mr Yong says providing consultancy services for tender pricing in the water colours project spelled a new chapter for the company.* Photo: GPS Alliance



*Ms Soh says an SME must not only sustain its business but grow locally, regionally and internationally.* Photo: AAMOR

shopping mall to the Sentosa island and the Brunei Prime Minister’s office.

In the case of real estate company GPS Alliance Holdings Private Limited, which was started in September 2010, its breakthrough was when it successfully provided consultancy services for tender pricing, in the Wa-

tercolours executive condominium project in Pasir Ris.

The company was also the sole marketing agency for Watercolours, while its subsidiary company, Muse Living, secured the contract to supply kitchen and wardrobe cabinets to the same condominium.

Says its group chief executive officer and executive director Dennis Yong: “This spelled an all-new chapter for the GPS Alliance and we went on to look into development in other parts of Singapore as well as venturing further into Malaysia developments as well.”

## Standing out from the competition

Another strategy that worked for the winning SMEs was to stand out from the competition. Mr Yong says: “From the very beginning, we had dreamt of providing one-stop integrated real estate services and consultancy to our industry, including consultancy, marketing, supplying building materials for construction and development projects.”

At Soleil, instead of just doing roofing, the company went into working with steel structures, glass and cladding and hired people with the technical expertise. “These are the things which a conventional roofer would not do, but we saw it as an opportunity to take on the challenge,” says Mr Eng.

Hiring and retaining the right people from the start was also crucial. At AAMOR, its staff came from all walks of life. Its founder, Ms Jean Soh, says the focus was on making sure that its workers were duly rewarded regardless of background, so they would stay motivated.

Hence, performance reviews were conducted every six months. Company gatherings were regularly organised so people would learn to get along. “A ‘can-do’ and ‘never-say-die’ approach was practised by the management in every single task, thus instilling the same attitude in employees over the long term,” says Ms Soh.

Then there is the thirst to grow. All four SMEs have big plans to grow their overseas footprint and some even plan to get listed. Ms Soh says: “Singapore is well connected in the real world as well as the virtual world. With these advantages, the management of a SME should have the continued passion not only to sustain its business, but to grow locally, regionally and then internationally.”