

Sushi boss serves up recession buster

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Business community bands together to help budding entrepreneurs overcome the odds

SAKAE Sushi founder Douglas Foo knows all about the problems that bedevil budding entrepreneurs caught in the cross-hairs of a recession.

In 1997, Mr Foo, then just 26 and a novice in the food business, launched his conveyor-belt sushi restaurant chain at the height of the Asian financial crisis.

His problem then was not too little business but too much. He struggled to find the right staff to fill positions in his fast-expanding business - a rapid hit with food-lovers.

His teething mistakes cost him up to \$100,000, slowing growth and cutting profit margins just when cash flow was vital.

Mr Foo wishes someone had showed him how to build a business that took advantage of recessionary times.

Now, at the helm of a firm with more than 90 outlets in 10 cities, he is taking the lead to help other young entrepreneurs overcome their first recession.

The Apex-Pal International chief executive, 39, is rallying 18 other members of Young Business Leaders (YBL) in an initiative called Beat The Recession.

'Beat the Recession is an effort to act as a light for new business persons who are on their own without much experience or fresh out of school, not knowing what's ahead of them. I hope it will be helpful for them,' he said.

Other prominent leaders include Far East Flora.com executive director Ryan Chioh, Jian Huang Construction managing director Annie Gan, and ThaiExpress Concepts chief executive officer Ivan Lee.

The drive has two objectives. First, to equip young businesses with best recession practices via its Web portal www.itstartstoday.com.sg. These include strategies for customer service improvement and maximisation of resources.

The site boasts a treasure trove of recession lessons learnt, policies implemented and measures taken from YBL members who share details of how they survived past recessions.

The second goal is to help Singaporeans in need by persuading businesses to continue or up corporate social responsibility activities during the recession. This includes YBL members offering affordable skills training in their area of expertise to people wishing to gain new skills during the downturn.

This private sector-led initiative kicks off tomorrow and dovetails with the findings of a recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey that eight in 10 Singaporeans prefer self-reliance over government aid in bad times.

For these YBL members, this means finding ways to help other young start-ups succeed.

'Today's young companies might be the multinational companies of tomorrow. Without younger companies, our economy won't prosper, so we want to help them find opportunities to overcome obstacles,' said Mr Foo.

He said he is happy to help even as his own business, with more than 1,200 employees, comes to terms with its first loss - \$3.8 million last year - since being listed on the Singapore Exchange in 2003.

No jobs have been cut, but to reduce costs, Mr Foo and about 18 other senior management staff have taken pay cuts of up to 25 per cent.

But there are some costs he will not compromise on, especially staff welfare.

Last month, he made the decision to permanently increase the value of staff birthday vouchers from \$20 to \$100.

The company has also increased its service staff training hours from nine days last year to 12 this year.

'Our colleagues have gone through very tough times with us. It is important to appreciate them for working through it with us,' said the boss who considers his employees part of his extended family.

In fact, the father of four gets personally involved in his employees' lives.

In 2005, when Singapore was still recovering from the impact of Sars, Mr Foo offered loans to a few employees to help cover the costs of their children's university education in Singapore and Australia.

His generosity goes beyond his family and firm. The Radin Mas Community Club Management Committee chairman is a Public Service Medal recipient who serves on 16 advisory boards, including the MILK (Mainly I Love Kids) Fund and Bright Hill Evergreen Home.

In April, Apex-Pal adopted palliative care centre Metta Hospice Care as its third social support group, after the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore and Radin Mas Community Club's programmes for the elderly. Although it has cut down on cash contributions this year, totalling \$60,000 so far, it is organising special events and donating gift vouchers to all three groups this year.

He attributes his ardent support for the elderly to the grounding in Confucianism he received as a Dunman High School student where he learned to respect his elders. The eldest of three children of a mechanical and electrical consultant and housewife also recounts instances when his father would instruct the children to assist elderly persons they met on the streets.

'We would see an old man walking and if he was wobbly and couldn't walk properly, he would tell us to go and help,' he recalled.

His passion for educating the young, on the other hand, came out of a personal encounter with teenagers during a relief teaching stint at a neighbourhood school after his A levels. Having attended name-brand schools from Red Swastika Primary School to Victoria Junior College, he was surprised to find his students were more interested in folding paper planes than copying notes during classes.

'They had given up hope before they even tried,' said Mr Foo.

'I want to help the young because they are the generation of tomorrow so they should be given the right opportunities and guided on a good value system.'