

Inspiring Stories



How an Entrepreneur Turns a Crisis into a Multimillion Ringgit Business



Nordinis binti Permin's business was on the brink of collapse during the pandemic lockdown. Cash reserves were almost depleted, ongoing jobs were either suspended or cancelled and all seemed hopeless. Yet, from that impending disaster has emerged a multimillion Ringgit ready-to-drink beverage business.

Anis, as she is popularly known, is the 43-year-old CEO of Adin Marketing Group. As a teenager, she used to help at her father's printing and advertising business, Adin Trading, and dreamed of being an entrepreneur to improve the quality of life for her family. Life was tough but it was through these difficult times that strength of character, a strong work ethic and a never-say-die spirit were instilled in her.

In 2007, Anis, who holds a diploma in Hotel and Catering Management as well as in Strategic Online Marketing, quit her job as a spa manager of a holiday resort in Johor, to take over Adin Trading. By sheer hard work and determination, she increased turnover four-fold, from RM12,000 in monthly sales to RM50,000 within the same year. A year later in 2008, annual turnover reached RM1 million. To take the business further, Anis then incorporated Adin Trading Sdn. Bhd. in 2009.

In that same year, she expanded the business into graphics design, printing and sales of souvenir items and later to event management along with the supply of festive souvenirs and decorative items to major shopping malls in Johor Bahru.

In 2013, the business underwent another name change, this time to Adin Media Group Sdn. Bhd., in line with the expanded scope of business. Her clientele grew to include Government agencies across Johor

such as the Road Transport Department, Customs, Immigration and Forestry Department as well as major corporations such as Johor Land Berhad, Johor Corporation, Uda Land Berhad, UEM Land Berhad, Iskandar Regional Development Agency and Medini Iskandar Malaysia.

In March 2020, however, everything came to a jarring halt when the nationwide lockdown was imposed at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The business was not allowed to operate as it was not an essential service. Anis was confronted with a survival crisis.

She said of that time, "We had 45 permanent employees, the majority of whom had been with us for more than five years. Our average monthly expenditure to maintain all the workers and premises was RM120,000. At the end of the first year of lockdown, our cash reserves were almost gone. We had to sell off some of our assets as we didn't want to terminate any of the workers or asked them to go on no-pay leave or take a pay cut".

As the lockdown dragged on, drastic action was needed to avoid a total collapse. At a brainstorming session with her management team to consider survival plans, a suggestion put forward was to go into the ready-to-drink beverage business with popular drinks such as *kopi-o*, *teh tarik* and *sirap bandung*.

The idea was, with people confined to their homes and restaurants shuttered, why not bring some cheer by delivering these iconic and much-loved beverages right to their doorsteps? That was an epiphany moment when the Haos Ek? brand of beverages was born.

The workers were informed on the crisis the company was in and the need to go into a new business for survival. Anis said, "We gave them three options. First, take no-pay leave with a guarantee of re-employment when the economy reopens. Second, work as usual or work from home but with a pay cut of up to 40%. Third, join the new business which has two possible outcomes: if the business succeeds, no pay cut but if the project fails, everyone loses their job while I lose everything". To Anis' surprise, all the workers chose to take their chances with the new business.

Anis led from proof-of-concept to product development and branding, to full-scale production to sales and marketing strategy, advertising and promotion. The Haos Ek? brand of beverages, comprising Kopi O, Kopi Peng, Teh Tarik, Bandung Pink and Chocolate, was launched on 1 June 2021.

The beverage had an extraordinarily good reception upon its launching, with coverage of the products even going viral. Within a year of its launching, two million bottles of Haos Ek? beverages were sold. Within two years, a total of 5.4 million bottles were sold. Currently, Haos Ek? is a leading brand for ready-to-drink beverages.



The product has since then received Halal and MeSTI (Ministry of Health) certification and Anis is now pushing to get her products into the modern trade market, with the hope of taking a local beverage into the global market as well. "We look forward for a great response from the market and always eager to explore new taste or idea continuously to stay relevant".

Anis said entry into modern trade, which is dominated by big companies, is difficult and MSMEs need Government help in market penetration. "The Government may hold talks with supermarkets and hypermarkets to reduce the listing cost and shorten the payment period for suppliers. The listing cost can be up to hundreds of thousands of Ringgit. The payment period to suppliers can be up to four months. Bumiputera entrepreneurs may not have the financial means to penetrate this market under such conditions".

On her challenges she faced in the early stage of her business, Anis said the most critical were access to financing and access to market. She added that she was able to survive these and other challenges back then thanks to support in the form of funding, training, marketing and promotion from Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia and TEKUN Nasional. The Johor Department of Agriculture also assisted in the form of grant besides helping in product promotion while SME Bank helped with funding during the pandemic.

Anis attributed the resilience of the company to two assets, namely the workforce and experience. "Our greatest asset is our workers who chose to stay with us to support the new business. Our second most important asset is our experience in graphic design, printing and advertising as these helped tremendously in building the Haos Ek? brand".

She added, "Our company's success was based on adopting a systematic approach in doing business from the very beginning, especially in understanding the market, financial and human resource management. Patience is surely needed as we are in business for the long-term. There is no such thing as overnight success. When we are down, get up quickly. When we are at the top, be prepared to fall down but always climb back up again. Be humble to learn from others who had been on the same road as you. Do it from the heart and spread the love because it will reach more people out there, thus make your journey easier and more meaningful".

Siti Padillah Stands Out as an Entrepreneur in a Male-dominated Industry



In a male-dominated electrical and electronics (E&E) industry, CG Global Profastex Sdn. Bhd. stands out as a company that is owned by a woman.

Managing Director of CG Global, Siti Padillah binti Abdul Wahab, 46, said her interest in the industry was sparked during her college days when she used to work part-time in E&E factories during her semester breaks. After graduating with a Degree in Bachelor of Management, her first job as a production supervisor with a LED components manufacturer, further deepened her interest in the industry. Her next job as a human resource officer with a Japanese electronics manufacturer would lead to a turning point in her life.

Siti Padillah explained, "An economic recession occurred during my employment with the company. My involvement in a layoff scheme led me to a meeting with my mentor in this industry, who is also an owner of local E&E manufacturing firm. That fateful meeting paved the way to me becoming an E&E entrepreneur".

After 13 years, she learned about Electronic Manufacturing Industries, which focus on printed circuit board assemblies, from her mentor, and she took the challenge with her lady partner to establish CG Global Profastex Manufacturing Sdn. Bhd. in 2016, located at Seberang Perai, Penang. CG Global provides contract manufacturing services for printed circuit board assemblies (PCBA) and box build assemblies to customers in telecommunication, lighting, automotive, medical, transportation, oil and gas and agriculture. Up to 95% of its products are exported, including to United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), France, Australia and China.

She said, "My capital came from the mentor who helped me start the business with refurbished and second-hand machines that he transferred from his previous business. This gives me the bullet to start the business without having to get financial support from the financial institution at the beginning stage of operation. Raw material and machinery suppliers also helped by giving long-term payment terms. She described the early and growth stage challenges as formidable due to financial constraints as E&E manufacturing requires high capital investments for machinery, buildings and raw materials.

"Because of financial constraints, I started operations with refurbished machinery that has been in used for more than 10 years. The outdated technology affects productivity but that was the best we could afford then. Another challenge was limited capacity, which affected our ability to cater to big orders".

Finding talent was another hurdle Siti Padillah had to grapple with as Penang is an E&E hub with many MNCs. "Talent naturally gravitates towards these MNCs. As an MSME, I could only attract fresh graduates and train them from scratch".

Gender stereotyping was yet another challenge as the fledgling enterprise was run by women in a male-dominated industry and gaining market confidence initially was frustrating. It was through sheer determination that Siti Padillah navigated

through the challenges of the early stage and now stands tall as an E&E entrepreneur and an inspiration for women to enter into businesses where their presence is minimal.

She said that in spite of the many challenges especially from the pandemic disruptions, over the last few years, the company has held a steady course and has always stayed profitable. Starting with revenue of a few millions in the first year, CG Global has continuously grown with double-digit million sales for the past six years. Pandemic COVID-19 has had an impact on businesses whose revenue declined in 2020 and 2022, but we are able to maintain profitability every year because, when sales drop, we make sure to cut costs in our business processes.



Siti Padillah is grateful to the assistance provided by several Government agencies in the company's early and growth stage. She attributed the ability of CG Global to make a mark in the E&E industry to assistance from the Government, especially in the form of finance, market access facilitation as well as training.



Siti Padillah is grateful to the assistance provided by several Government agencies in the company's early and growth stage. She attributed the ability of CG Global to make a mark in the E&E industry to assistance from the Government, especially in the form of finance, market access facilitation as well as training. Between 2018 and 2022, the company received grants through various programmes such as SME Corp. Malaysia's grants for productivity and automation, certification and quality management system under the Bumiputera Enterprise Enhancement Programme (BEEP).

SME Bank also provided assistance under the Business Export Programme to explore new markets and improve marketing materials. MATRADE offered a grant under its Women Exporter Development Programme while MIDA provided funding under its Intervention Fund Grant – Industry 4WRD programme to digitalise warehouse operations. MIDA and MATRADE also facilitated the company's participation in international trade fairs and business matching.

CG Global is targeting new markets in the UK, US and Germany. "Though we have already penetrated the UK and US market, there are still plenty of opportunities in various industries there. We are also exploring new markets, conducting R&D for new products, looking into business diversification and greater automation and digitalisation of business processes".

Siti Padillah is a fervent believer of a lean business model as 'it is pivotal to survival in a crisis.' She also sees new opportunities in ESG adoption considering that it is an increasingly global practice.

Her advice to those who aspire to be an E&E entrepreneur: "One must have good knowledge of surface-mount technologies, E&E manufacturing processes related to PCBA and box build assembly. Automation, digitalisation and IoT knowledge are also crucial for success in this business. Sound technical knowledge of the industries you are dealing with is essential. And do remember, be prepared for a high level of investment when you enter the E&E business".

From Squash Pro to Auto Parts Entrepreneur



Life has a way of taking one into unexpected paths. This indeed, is absolutely true of Sharon Wee Ee Lin, a graduate in business administration who started off as an auditor in a multinational accounting firm, then became a professional squash player who represented Malaysia for two decades, became a certified international squash coach and professional trainer, founded the Sharon Wee Pro Squash Academy, was a TV sports commentator and now, auto parts entrepreneur cum braking system expert trainer.

Sharon, 46, is co-founder and director of Emerald Auto Parts, the leading braking system spare parts distributor in Malaysia. She related how she ended up as an entrepreneur in a male-dominated business: "I have always had this entrepreneurial streak. My career as a professional athlete builds strength of character to push me to achieve more. I wanted to challenge myself in business and to make a good living after my sports career".

"Entrepreneurship is tough but incredibly rewarding. Personally, it's about making an impact on myself and the world around me. It's like planting a seed to grow my own dream. I get to shape it, watch it grow and enjoy the harvest. I also wanted to challenge myself in a male-dominated business, be an inspiration to other women, to tell them that we can do it too if we set our mind to it".

Emerald Auto Parts was established in 2014 by Sharon and her partners. Today, the company is the market leader in braking system products and the only distributor that carries a full range of braking parts for all types of car models in Malaysia. It is also the official distributor of 23 global premium brands, four of which are in-house brands and an exporter as well.

The 4-star rated company was one of the winners of SME Corp. Malaysia's Enterprise 50 Award 2022. It was ranked 13th and the only automotive company among the top 50 best companies in Malaysia.

What is the secret to the success of Emerald Auto Parts? Sharon said, "We know our market very well. My partners are people with industry expertise. We offer quality and yet affordable braking system products. We ensure our business is sustainable by staying agile, is open to innovation and by delivering high-quality products and services consistently. We have developed effective marketing strategies that continually expands our outreach to new geographic areas, partnering with customers on loyalty programmes as well as increasing our product range".



"We continuously reach out to all levels of customers and the community through educational and awareness sharing, including braking systems programmes, social media activations, CSR as well as paying attention to ESG considerations. To stay relevant, we make sure to keep pace with emerging trends, like next-generation vehicles, new technology and innovation. And we are also in strategic partnerships with Petronas AutoExpert and Malaysia Automotive Robotics and IoT Institute (MARii)".

The business, which now has a workforce of 52, started with six employees while the initial capital came from the partners and bank loans. Sharon described the early stage of business as 'really tough and we had to work hard to earn the trust of our suppliers and customers'.

"We applied the push and pull marketing strategy where our company and products are made known from end users up to workshop and dealers. We created excitement through special promotions and became known in the industry for being active in marketing via social media contents, physical events, collaboration with influencers as well as our own braking system expert programme to share knowledge and the latest information to the industry".

Success, she insisted, comes from persistence and hard work and being creative, especially when a business is in the early stage. Support from the Government was also crucial, which in her case, was SME Corp. Malaysia who provided guidance and financial assistance. Other Government ministries and agencies such as MITI, MECD, MoT, KPDN, SME Bank, MIDF, MATRADE and MARA also provided assistance in various forms. She added that the Government's support through the economic stimulus plan was crucial in ensuring survival for the business community during the pandemic.

Sharon said that in good or bad times, Government support is pivotal in not only sustaining MSMEs but also to spur growth. Assistance can be in the form of



financial support and incentives, facilitating greater access to funding and market & export as well as in capacity building & training. Streamlining the regulatory process as well as physical & digital infrastructure development and support for innovation & research are equally important.

Strong relationships with suppliers and customers are vital to ensure business continuity, especially during difficult times, she added. "During the lockdown period, we constantly engaged with suppliers and customers for win-win solutions while our digital strategy and strong customer communications also helped in business continuity".

As to the company's long-term plans, Sharon said, "Our key plans include product and service diversification in line with market trends, innovation and R&D in collaboration with our suppliers; digital transformation; talent development to drive innovation as well as ensuring robust financial management".

Her advice to MSMEs that are keen to venture into the auto parts business: "First of all, do an in-depth study of the industry. Identify your niche market or unique selling proposition, then draw up a business plan. Start small and upscale gradually".

"Be adaptable and innovative. Keep learning as the marketplace is changing so fast. Always engage with your customers as their feedback is vital to your business. And don't forget about having a digital presence. For business sustainability, always practise financial prudence. On a personal level, persistence and patience are absolutely essential if you want to be in business for the long term".



Seeing Business Potential in Humble Spices and Herbs



While others do not give a second thought to ubiquitous local spices and herbs like pepper, chillies, lemongrass and galangal, Sarawakian Dickens Anak Mambu saw business potential. Dickens, 41, is the founder of MDF Global Sdn. Bhd., a manufacturer of downstream products based on local spices and herbs. The company is located in Kota Samarahan, Sarawak.

A graduate in biology and a MSc in Sustainable Land and Development Planning, Dickens had worked in the palm oil industry in Sabah, Sarawak, Kuala Lumpur and Kalimantan, Indonesia, before becoming an entrepreneur. MDF Global was conceived in 2014 when Dickens saw potential in the variety of downstream products that could be made from local spices and herbs.

He explained, "Pepper, galangal, chillis and lemongrass are found everywhere in Sarawak. Overseas and locally, I saw so many downstream products made from these ingredients but I can hardly find any made in Sarawak. That was the spark that inspired me to become an entrepreneur to mine the potential, particularly in Sarawak market".

In the initial stage, Dickens just sourced pepper from longhouse residents to supply to shops and middlemen. As he obtained sufficient capital, he opened his own production facilities and as the Dmambu brand became better known in the market, he was able to put them on the shelves of several selected supermarkets. The Dmambu brand now carries 30 types of products based on lemongrass, galangal, sour eggplant (*terung asam*) and chilli. Going forward, Dickens has plans to expand his market to Peninsular Malaysia as well as overseas.

MDF Global's products have now obtained halal, MeSTI (Ministry of Health) and Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) certification. The company also won the International Pepper Community Award 2020 for Excellence in Export of Value-Added Pepper Products. Dickens himself received the Anugerah Usahawan Berjaya 2022, Sarawak Bumiputera Entrepreneur, Agro Category award as well as the Malaysia Human Resource Development Excellent Trainer Award 2023. He was also appointed an advisor to the Sarawak High Learning Institution 2022-2023 entrepreneurship programme as well as being a regular speaker on entrepreneurship and motivational programmes organised by Sarawak Skills Development Centre.



Dickens started the business with his own funds and it was only later, as the business grew, that he sought guidance from MARDI and a loan from TEKUN Nasional. He also received aid from the Malaysian Pepper Board (MPB) who also helped to introduce his products to overseas buyers.

Dickens said, "My main challenge in the early and expansion stage was lack of capital, cash flow for operating and other expenses. I also lacked equipment like dryers and grinders to process raw materials. These are expensive and I couldn't afford to purchase them. As a newcomer in the market, it was very tough to get market acceptance. I had to compete with other long-established businesses with similar product lines and also to attract customers to my brand".

Dickens started off his product promotion directly by putting up kiosks in shopping malls as well as distributing brochures. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Shopee were also used for promotional purposes together with participation in programmes or expos sponsored by MPB and the Sarawak Agriculture Department.

As to aid from the Government, Dickens said, "We participated in courses and seminars as well as expos in Peninsular Malaysia that were sponsored by MPB. MPB also provided financial aid in the form of machines to simplify the production process".

During the pandemic lockdown, Dickens said he had to be creative and adaptive to survive the disruption to business. "We were always on the look-out for ways to increase productivity and income in order to survive. One of the ways was getting our employees working from home to get involved in selling via phone or online, including social media".



Dickens hopes the Government will continue to provide assistance to boost the growth of the MSMEs, especially grants or micro loans to help MSMEs in enhancing their competitiveness as well as to facilitate greater market access, locally and internationally. The Government's help is also needed for MSMEs to comply with ESG practices in line with global requirements.

To ensure long-term business sustainability, Dickens is focusing on "enhancing our performance in the long term by reducing operating costs while at the same time improving quality to ensure continual customer confidence in our products". The company will also enhance its networking, especially towards the goal of marketing its products to Government bodies.

Dickens' advice to anyone who intends to venture into his line of business: "First of all, have a business plan as it is your roadmap to success. It makes you focus on what needs to be done in order to succeed. At the personal level, strength of character is vital. Never give up! Push on even in the face of big challenges. And in this digital era, we have to be digitally savvy. Nowadays, it's just not possible to conduct business without embracing digitalisation".