

INSPIRING STORIES

The background of the entire page is a cityscape, likely Jakarta, with a network of white lines overlaid on it. In the foreground, there are several white silhouettes of people, including a large one in the center and smaller ones on the sides, all set against a warm orange and yellow gradient.

ARBA Travel, Specialist
in Halal Tourism

From Selling Shoes in *Pasar Malam*
to Shoe Designer and Exporter

A Professor Leverages on Her Expertise
to Build a Successful Business

The LokaLocal Road
to Authentic Travel Experience

Dayang Sophia's
Sweet Taste of Success

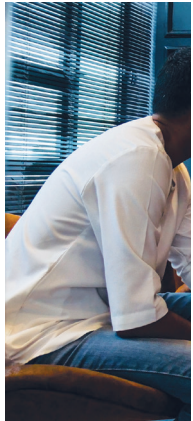
A 'Clean' Business
from an Innovative Mind

ARBA Travel, Specialist in Halal Tourism

A young man, who saw opportunity and had the courage to pursue it, has turned a home-grown travel business into a major player in the travel industry.

When 25-year-old Ammar Roslizar returned home in 2014 after having spent seven years abroad, he discovered a lack of Muslim-friendly tourism packages locally. The demand was there but the supply was lacking, thus inspiring Ammar to grab the opportunity to fill the gap. He envisioned a halal tour operator that would connect all the dots for a great experience for Muslim travellers by providing specially curated travel itineraries that include prayer times, halal restaurants together with Muslim tour guides and more. He would build a halal tourism business underpinned by technology and customisation of travel packages that would differentiate his business from conventional travel operators. In 2014, ARBA Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd, halal tourism specialist, made its debut in the travel industry.

ARBA Travel quickly gained ground via its strong digital presence and grasp of consumer tastes. The company, which is headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, has since become a global halal travel operator with subsidiaries in Seoul, Turkey and Paris. The company has been doubling its growth every year since then its establishment, surpassing the average growth rate of Malaysia's Top 100 SMEs.



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Looking back to the early stage of the company, Ammar, who is the managing director of ARBA Travel, said, "We were on a steep learning curve. Little capital to start with and no networking support to lean on. Lots of mistakes were made, yet somehow, we managed to sail through by trial and error. A very satisfying achievement was when we managed to obtain a 4-star rating under SME Corp. Malaysia's SCORE (SME Competitiveness Rating for Enhancement) diagnostic tool when the company was only two or three years old."



He added, “We built the company from scratch without any financial support from the Government, without taking business loans or equity funding. We are proud of the fact that we did it on our own, driven by our own vision and determination.”

Barely three years after its establishment, ARBA Travel won a Top 50 Enterprise Award in 2017, making the company the fastest one ever to be a recipient. Ammar and his partner were also mentioned in the 2018 Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia list. In the same year, at the age of 29, he was one of the youngest nominees in the emerging entrepreneur category in the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year Malaysia programme.

On 31 March 2020, ARBA Travel launched a new company, Yezza Tech Sdn Bhd, which provides a simple and automated technology platform to help entrepreneurs conduct their business via WhatsApp. The Yezza Tech platform is now used by almost 16,000 SME entrepreneurs in Malaysia.

As for future plans, Ammar said, “We see great prospects for halal tourism. The growth rate for halal tourism is higher than that of the industry at large. We also want to ensure we remain competitive by continuing to leverage on technologies like artificial intelligence, augmented reality and virtual

reality to enhance the experience of Muslim travellers.”

As to the impact on the COVID-19 pandemic on business, Ammar said, “In 2019, our sales reached RM52 million. For 2020, we had projected sales to reach RM140 million in the first quarter alone. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has upended the travel and tourism industry which has practically come to a standstill. Our sales so far in 2020 is almost zero.”

He is grateful to the Government for introducing the Wage Subsidy Programme which has helped to avert staff lay-off while the company has also obtained SME loans to sustain operations. He added, “The Government has introduced a lot of good initiatives during the pandemic. For post-pandemic period, the Government should prioritise local companies when it comes to contracts, tenders and projects to be implemented. This will ensure that the cash flow circulates within the country and accelerate economic recovery.”

To what does Ammar attribute to the progress of the company so far?

“We are driven by our determination to build a business that has a global presence. As founders of the company, we were driven by this vision to continually improve ourselves, build a work culture that is underpinned by good governance, quality and on par with international standards. This is crucial for sustainability. The use of data and technology is critical to maintain competitiveness.”

Ammar advised SMEs to make use of data and technology as these are two vital components for the new economy. “The COVID-19 outbreak has accelerated the transition to digitalisation among businesses and individuals. SMEs must invest in technology and ensure good cash flow if we want to survive in turbulent times. Cash flow is the oxygen of any business.”

From Selling Shoes in *Pasar Malam* to Shoe Designer and Exporter

Shoe designer, Christy Ng is a rising star in the local women's footwear landscape. Her entrepreneurial journey from selling shoes in *pasar malam* (night market) to shoe designer and exporter of her products to as far as the United States and Europe is a story of a never-say-die attitude to succeed.

Ng's entrepreneurial spirit was nurtured from a very young age. When she was nine years old, she sold straw flowers made by her mother at LRT stations. As a teenager, she learned about earning a living working as a waitress to help pay for her college education. While still in college, she went to Thailand to buy shoes from factories there and sold them at night and flea markets back home. She continued to sell shoes at night markets even when she was working with a pharmaceutical company after graduation.

It was tough selling shoes in *pasar malam*, she finally quit it when it became too burdensome. Friends encouraged her to set up a website to sell the shoes online. In 2010, within a month of setting up her website, sales shot up with hundreds of page views recorded. She was making money but it was not enough for Ng as she wanted to sell shoes of her own design. With the help of some friends from Thailand, she visited a several shoe factories there to learn about making shoes. "My first design was a five-inch shoe. At that time, there was a void in the market for shoes of this height," Ng recalled.



Her design received overwhelming response, prompting Ng to resign from her job to set up her eponymous brand Christy Ng in 2012. Today, Christy Ng shoes are sold in the United States (US), United Kingdom, Canada, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Australia and Brunei. She said of her vision, "I wanted to design shoes that are comfortable and affordable. When I was working as a waitress, I wore cheap shoes and because of the inferior materials used, I had huge calluses at the sole of one foot. When I designed my first shoes, my goal was to ensure women would not have to suffer from calluses, bunions or corns in wearing them. Asian women have wider feet. My shoes are designed especially for Asian women."

In addition to selling ready-made shoes including wedges, sliders, sandals, heels, ballerina flats, slip-ins, pumps and stilettos, Ng also produces custom-made shoes. Her venture in custom-made shoes started with an email from a bride-to-be from North Carolina, United States, who enquired if Ng could make nine pairs of shoes in similar designs but in different colours and of different heights.

Ng explained, "The shoes were for her and eight bridesmaids. She wanted everyone to look the same height, therefore the reason

for the different heights. She told me no shoe brand in the US was willing to meet her request. That was a huge break for me because it was my first step towards making custom-made shoes.”

In 2013, Ng won the Alliance Bank’s Bizsmart SME Innovation Challenge and used the RM250,000 prize money to build a 3D customisation design engine for custom-made shoes on her website. Her online business scaled another level when she received a RM500,000 grant from Cradle Fund which she used to market and advertise the online business.

However, despite her success, hers was solely an online business. As her brand gained recognition, she was approached by the management of 1Utama Shopping Centre to open a store there. Though initially hesitant over concern on the big capital required, Ng finally took up the offer and the first Christy Ng brick-and-mortar outlet was open in September 2016. Today, the company has seven stores in shopping malls across the country, a factory each in Johor and the Klang Valley and 50 employees.

Looking back at the early stage of her business, Ng named lack of finance and business direction as two key challenges she struggled with. “I started the business using my personal savings and struggled trying to find my niche in a very crowded marketplace. I am where I am now because of the help I received from a lot of people. They gave me the platform to grow. We managed to grow with minimal capital by adopting ICT and e-commerce strategies. SME Corp. Malaysia played a huge role in financing our machinery costs as we were expanding. We also received assistance from Cradle Fund, Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) and MyCreative Ventures.” As for future plans, she hopes to expand across Southeast Asia as well as having physical stores overseas. “Our online business

has brought us customers from other parts of the world but having physical stores would make the brand a global one,” she explained.

On how the COVID-19 outbreak has impacted business, she said, “Shopping malls are suffering a huge drop in footfall. We still have high overheads like rental and salary to take care whatever the circumstances. Our brick-and-mortar business is running at a loss in 2020. Fortunately, we have benefitted from Government initiatives to soften the impact of COVID-19. We received assistance for automation through the BAP 2.0 under SME Corp. Malaysia which has been very useful and timely for us to acquire machinery to speed up the production process, making us less dependent on human labour. Automation has reduced our time cost significantly.”

As to how the Government can help support SMEs especially during the pandemic and after, Ng suggested, “Offer high-potential SMEs more tax abatements. This will help to create more jobs and accelerate economic recovery. Automation and digitalisation grants are also great incentives for SMEs to undertake digitalisation. Lend a helping hand to retailers nationwide who are suffering from the burden of high rental at shopping malls. Shopping mall operators should also be given incentives like tax abatements in exchange for reducing rent for their tenants. This will help avert an impending crisis in the retail sector in 2021.”

What is the driver of the Christy Ng success story?

“Automation, adoption of ICT and operational excellence led by good leadership are crucial. Digital skill sets are vital for survival in business these days. To anyone who aspires to venture into our kind of business, my advice would be: stay strong, never give up. Tough times don’t last but tough people do.”

A Professor Leverages on Her Expertise to Build a Successful Business



In 2006, Prof. Dr. Norayati Abd Majid, a former dean of Universiti Malaya's Health Science Faculty, leveraged on her expertise in infection control to set up a trading company to distribute medical products for hospitals and clinics as well as to supply disinfectants and cleaning tools for maintenance contractors of health facilities. Today, her company, Syarikat Hana Medic Sdn Bhd not only manufactures their own products but export them as well.

Prof. Norayati took a fateful turn in 2010 when she enrolled in an incubator scheme under SIRIM to develop and manufacture medical products such as hand sanitisers, hand and body lotions and disinfectants. In 2012, she collaborated with SIRIM to build a factory to manufacture her own products. From that small beginning, Hana Medic, has evolved into a manufacturer of a wide range of products that include sanitisers, disinfectants, anti-bacterial hand wash, body lotions, shampoos and soaps. It is also the only halal hand sanitiser manufacturer in Malaysia. The products are also sold in Oman, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Myanmar and Macau. Locally, the products are sold across the country through leading retailers like Tesco, Giant and Malakat Grocer and online on Shopee and Lazada.

She attributed the company's success to the encouragement and advice she received from the Health Ministry. She explained, "It

was tough in the beginning as new products, especially locally-made ones, finds it hard to gain market acceptance. We were fortunate that the Health Ministry believes in the quality of our products. They even recommended that we not only increase production to expand our domestic market but also to export them."

Inspired by that encouragement, Prof. Norayati enrolled in MATRADE's three-year Women Exporters Development Programme (WEDP) which provides women with business coaching, skills enhancement, international business exposure, market immersion, networking and mentoring as well as leadership and entrepreneurial development training. She credited the WEDP for the company's successful entry into overseas markets as "The programme not only taught us how to export but also gave us confidence to explore new markets." She added, "The WEDP boosted our export business. Since graduating from the programme in 2016, we have expanded our export coverage to the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Kingdom and China. Our main product, the no-rinse moisturising hand sanitiser, is now used in hospitals in Oman, Macao, Brunei, Myanmar and China."

The company has received global standards certifications such as Good Manufacturing Practice; ISO 9001: 2008



(Quality Management); ISO 13485:2003 (Medical Devices - Quality Management); Manufacturing Establishment License from the Medical Device Authority: (Section 15(1) of the Act 737); and halal certification for its products from JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia).

Hana Medic's export business currently contributes 30% to the company's total revenue and it is targeting to increase that to 60%. Domestically, the retail and hospital segments contribute 30% and 70%, respectively, to total local revenue.

Hana Medic has also diversified into health food with JustGreat, a mixed fruit juice drink made up of a cocktail of soursop, mango, calamansi and natural honey. The product, which was jointly developed with the Malaysia Agriculture Research and Development Institute (MARDI), cost RM2.5 million and nine years of R&D to produce and has won numerous prestigious invention awards in Malaysia and abroad.

Prof. Norayati started the business with her own funds though she later received funding in the form of grants and soft loans

from SME Corp. Malaysia, Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), MATRADE and TERAJU. The funding received was employed to enhance production and quality as well as for market expansion.

She added, "We conduct regular testing on the efficacy of our products. Our Safercare Plus hand sanitiser was tested in Germany and clinically proven to be effective in removing COVID-19 surface contamination. Conducting these tests is very costly. We are most grateful for the grants and soft loans received to help us in such activities."

As to how the pandemic has impacted the business, she said, "As ours are medical and personal care products, sales have actually increased because of the COVID-19 outbreak."

Asked on how the Government could help SMEs, she suggested, "Agencies like MARA, MATRADE and SME Corp. Malaysia continuously to support in addressing challenges faced by SMEs. Some SMEs have good products but lack marketing knowledge or skills. Others have quality issues."

Moving forward, Prof Norayati said Hana Medic will continue its efforts to expand its market by continuing to improve product quality and through strong branding of the products as the top halal disinfectants locally and abroad. She is also looking into introducing a wider range of product variants to cater to the changing tastes of the market.

Her advice to aspiring entrepreneurs, "Don't focus solely on profit but also on how we can bring benefit to the community through our business. Our products, for example, must be of top quality and beneficial to all segments of society. The Government offers a lot of support for SMEs. We should return the favour by producing quality products that benefit society and the economy at large."

The LokaLocal Road to Authentic Travel Experience

Seeking authentic travel experience with trips designed by locals and taken with locals? Take the LokaLocal road for that off-the-beaten-track experience.

Travel start-up LokaLocal's founder and CEO, Chin Yoon Khen said the business - based in Petaling Jaya - was inspired by his experiences while documenting traditional trades in Penang for his book, *Traditional Trades in Penang*. That was when he saw a need for a platform to help preserve these traditions as well as to offer an alternative travel experience over the conventional tours offered by most travel agents.

He explained, "Interest is growing in off-the-beaten-track experiences over mass tourism. Authentic local travel is largely untapped in Malaysia. With conventional tours, travellers just flit through an area but with LokaLocal, they get an immersive experience of the local scene. We match travellers with locals as guides who walk with them and provide them a genuine feel of an area. The local hosts come from various segments of society, from artisans such as a batik maker to a working mother with a passion for Indian cuisine, a former television journalist to a heritage proponent."

LokaLocal was established in 2016 with the initial investment coming from angel investors. In 2017, the company won the Best Social Impact award at the Mekong Tourism Forum in Laos and the Top 25 award at the K-Startup Grand Challenge in South Korea. Those achievements caught the attention of



BonAngels Venture Partner of South Korea, who subsequently became a seed investor in the company. The company is now the largest experienced-based platform in Malaysia and connects travellers to a wide range of unique tours and workshops and other activities, with focus on community-based tourism that enables local residents to get involved and at the same time creates social and economic benefits for a community.

Chin attributed LokaLocal's success to 'speed and quality of execution'. "Our team is flexible enough to pivot our business when needed. For instance, we deliver our high-quality virtual tours with agility and efficiently, in as fast as one week for each project." However, as with most businesses, the company has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Chin said, "Bookings have declined by around 90%. We had to keep our team lean and cut down on costs. More significantly, we had to pivot our business by venturing into virtual reality."

The company started creating virtual tours from May 2020 to help its travel partners as well as to offer these services to a variety

of businesses such as hotels, attractions, real estate, e-commerce and restaurants. It now has the largest platform for virtual reality experiences in Malaysia, with over 140 virtual tours for travel attractions and more for sectors in different vertical markets. “We leverage on our strengths in technology and storytelling while focusing on our speed and execution. We incorporate storytelling through our photography, video, articles and virtual reality tours, not only to empower locals to share their hometowns, heritage and skills but also for businesses to share their vision and brand stories.”

LokaLocal now has the largest marketplace for local experiences in Malaysia, with activities in seven other countries comprising Singapore, Viet Nam, Indonesia, Laos, Japan, South Korea and Myanmar. Expatriates living in Malaysia and foreign travellers account for 80% of its clientele. It also has 129,000 subscribers from 32 countries. Touching on the struggles of the company’s early days, Chin has received little support as Malaysia, traditionally, is not as receptive to tech start-ups as other countries are. He suggested for the Government to help SMEs, especially in times of crisis, by leveraging on local tech players who have feasible solutions to support the growth of the country. He added, “Some tech SMEs are struggling yet have not been able to obtain any assistance due to some grey areas and lack of understanding of the importance of tech players.”

As for the company’s future direction, Chin said, “We will be focusing on virtual reality for the foreseeable future. We will create nationwide virtual tour projects that can be used by local guides and local businesses. We will also expand our services to re-apply and localise in other countries. We envision helping people to plan their journey before and during travel by connecting them to local experiences and through 360-degree virtual experiences.”



He added, “Across the world, virtual reality is a growing trend. This has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the adoption of 5G. Neighbouring countries like Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam have already embraced it while Malaysian businesses are gradually beginning to see value in it. This is an opportunity to bring greater technological advancement to Malaysia and Southeast Asia.”

What does it take to succeed in a business like LokaLocal’s?

“If you have the right mindset and attitude, hunger, grit and willingness to learn, you have the potential to grow in this field. There is no one way to achieving success but so long as you can think globally and find solutions locally, you will find ways to achieve your vision.”

What is Chin’s word of advice for aspiring entrepreneurs?

“Always improve and adapt to stay relevant. It is a challenging journey, so stay true to your ‘why’ and keep going.”

Dayang Sophia's Sweet Taste of Success



Sophia Taha Holdings Sdn Bhd (STHSB) is a highly diversified entity engaged in an array of activities that include manufacturing, contract manufacturing, halal testing, food & beverages (F&B), construction and many others. Previously known as Siti Hajar Enterprise, the Kuching-based STHSB was incorporated under its current name in 2009.

In 2014, the firm took a 'sweet' turn into the production of stingless bee honey to add to its wide range of activities. Owner of STHSB, Dayang Sophia Abang Taha, explained how the honey business came about. "We saw the potential in stingless bee honey as a super food product and decided to venture into the agro-based business with the opening of a stingless bee farm. From there, we went into cosmetics and skincare products with stingless bee honey ingredients."

The cosmetics and skincare range was followed by the launch of stingless bee honey, propolis and stingless bee honey-based beverages in 2015. STHSB launched another skincare product formulated in Switzerland in 2019. In 2020, the company launched its hand sanitiser, the only one manufactured locally in Sarawak. STHSB currently operates a halal and MeSTI-certified factory for the production of its stingless bee honey products. The stingless bee honey products were first showcased at the 2015 National Breeders, Farmers and Fishermen's Day Expo. The response to the products was overwhelming and RM30,000 was recorded in sales, earning STHSB the highest sales award in the agro-based industries category at the expo. Since then, the company has

"We saw the potential in stingless bee honey as a super food product and decided to venture into the agro-based business with the opening of a stingless bee farm. From there, we went into cosmetics and skincare products with stingless bee honey ingredients."

won an array of awards, including the Chief Minister's Industry Excellence Award 2019; Most Promising Sarawak Bumiputera Entrepreneur Award 2019; and winner of the national level 2016 Rural Business Challenge organised by the Ministry of Rural Development.

In 2017, STHSB continued to make progress with its move to bigger facilities to accommodate expanding production. It currently operates two fully automated factories - the first of its kind in Sarawak - for its F&B and cosmetics production. In 2018, the company achieved a breakthrough with the fabrication of its own dehumidifier for stingless bee honey along with obtaining halal certification for its products. Dayang Sophia



said her company is the first in the world to produce stingless bee propolis coffee in drip packaging, water-soluble propolis liquid and honey-based cosmetics products.

In 2019, the firm obtained GMP certification for its factory and made a quantum leap into becoming an exporter with their first shipment of stingless bee honey products to Japan, a market that is extremely difficult to enter due to its stringent quality requirements.

Dayang Sophia said the business has been very much blessed when it comes to obtaining funding and other support from the Government. She explained, “We financed the stingless bee honey venture with internal funds. However, when we needed additional capital for our operations, we were fortunate to have won the 2016 Rural Business Challenge. The prize money enabled us to upgrade our honey processing plant as well as to open the first cosmetics factory in Sarawak. This is a significant development as, previously, all cosmetics manufacturers in Sarawak had to use cosmetics factories in Peninsular Malaysia that have been accredited by the Health Ministry. That had caused much inconvenience in terms of the logistics involved. We have also received grants from MARA and SME Corp. Malaysia in the form of equipment for our factories.”

The company used social media and e-commerce marketplace platforms such as Facebook, Googleland, StreamYard and Shopee to promote its products. Dayang Sophia said that having an online presence has been of tremendous help in selling their products during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

As to the impact of COVID-19 on her business, she said, “The pandemic has disrupted business as well as increasing costs for shipping and logistics services. The price of raw materials is increasing while demand is falling.”

“Besides sales of stingless bee honey, our only other main income during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period came from the sales of our hand sanitisers. Fortunately, we have received assistance from the PRIHATIN and PENJANA initiatives such as the Wage Subsidy Programme. This has helped to sustain our operations.”

Looking forward to the future, Dayang Sophia said she envisions STHSB as one of Malaysia’s preferred manufacturers of high quality, premium and innovative natural products by 2025. She added, “Our strength is product quality and affordable pricing. We plan to apply for HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point), ISO 22000 & ISO 22716:2017 certifications; set up Borneo’s first ISO 17025 accredited Halal Lab, which is actually about 40% in progress currently; and expand existing facilities. We are also looking to venture into pharmaceuticals.”

To those who aspire to be manufacturing entrepreneurs, she advised, “Know your business and products thoroughly. Do remember that manufacturing requires a lot of capital. Anyone wanting to go into manufacturing must fully understand what it entails and also be knowledgeable about trade practices. And don’t forget that costs are increasing and productivity is the key to maintaining a healthy bottom line.”

A 'Clean' Business from an Innovative Mind

At the tender age of sixteen, Aaron Patel had to forego further studies to support the family and to take over the running of his father's thermal-related trading business after the latter fell ill. Coincidentally, it was during his final year in high school that he became fascinated with thermodynamics and heat transfer.

During the course of his research, he discovered that heating costs can account for as high as 20% of the total output cost in energy-intensive sectors like heavy manufacturing and there were limited thermal efficiency solutions available in Malaysia. The discovery sparked his passion to find and offer energy efficiency solutions. Patel, engineer inventor turned entrepreneur, is the founder and CEO of iHandal Energy Solutions Sdn Bhd, a turnkey engineering and contracting firm that offers solutions for energy efficiency. He set up iHandal in 2009 as an outlet to pursue his passion for energy efficiency solutions.

Patel in relating his initial entry into the energy solutions business said, "I connected with an OEM (original equipment manufacturer) supplier of energy solutions to market their equipment. I then started pitching energy savings benefits from these thermal solutions and finally secured the Tune Hotels group as my first client. Our current business was born out of that deal."

Patel explained his business model, "We offer customised solutions to help clients maximise their energy and operational savings in areas such as water heating, process cooling, air conditioning and waste heat to power applications. In laymen's terms, we use our



technology to recover wasted energy from clients, for example, from car parks and air-conditioning devices, compress and then channel the recycled energy towards heating or cooling their facilities."

Focused primarily on the Malaysian hospitality and healthcare sectors, iHandal has completed more than sixty major projects over the last six years and has a market share of more than 60% for hot water generation from thermal waste energy in the hospitality industry. It is delivering, annually, a carbon footprint reduction of almost 100,000 tons of carbon dioxide, which is equivalent to the CO₂ (carbon dioxide) emissions of more than 21,700 cars.

Since 2017, iHandal has further developed and licensed technologies to enable a broader application of their solutions to industries such as glove, pharmaceutical and food manufacturing. Patel said the company's proprietary energy solutions have enabled clients to save up to 75% on their energy costs and delivered savings of as much as 5% of total revenue.

Today, iHandal has clients in eight countries across Southeast Asia and Australia and is expanding to the United States by invitation of the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. Patel attributed,

“The company’s exponential growth regionally owes to our ability to deliver on all our promises.” He added that 90% of the business was generated through referrals from clients.

iHandal initially sold its technology as a product but has now packaged it as a long-term leasing service. “This,” Patel explained, “ensures long-term business for us and also less headaches for our clients as we are now committed to the aftersales of our products.” Looking back at the early days, he said, “It was tough to secure jobs from large organisations. Before even looking at our proposal, they wanted to see our track record, whether our solutions have been tried and tested. After we landed the first deal with Tune Hotels, it took almost another two years to secure the next client. We used such challenges as motivation to build a track-record. We started with smaller companies, worked our way up slowly, from one project to another until we acquire majority market share in a matter of years.”

The business was seeded by family and friends in its first year and has grown organically through its earnings since then. It has recently tapped into equity crowdfunding (ECF). After several years of operations, the company was given an Investment Tax Allowance by Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) for energy efficient projects, which helped it to reinvest additional capital to grow the business further.

As to the challenges arising from COVID-19, Patel said, “A positive development from the crisis is that businesses facing economic uncertainties have turned their attention to the sustainability impact of our solutions. Previously they were only focused on the immediate financial relief we can provide. The global focus on sustainability has also helped put energy efficiency and green technology at the forefront of most companies’ corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals.”

As to the support received from the Government in the COVID-19 crisis, Patel added, “We are grateful for the Government support. The Wage Subsidy Programme, for example, has helped us sustain our workforce and even do hiring. COVID-19 has accelerated the need for SMEs to modernise and be more agile. The Government offers many programmes and incentives for upskilling and transformation, but many SMEs are not aware of them. The Government should create greater awareness of the assistance available among SMEs.”

On iHandal’s future plans, he said, “We want to contribute to a cleaner environment by being the most innovative thermal efficiency solutions provider across Southeast Asia. We are focused on growing tailored solutions for more customer verticals and also to continue our global expansion. By continual investment in research and development (R&D), we have been able to commercialise new technologies that are in synergy with our current solution offerings. This has enabled us to work with more clients across new sectors and applications. We have delivered 200,000 tons equivalent of carbon dioxide reduction annually over the last few years and our goal is to deliver 200 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions annually by 2030.”

What is Patel’s advice to those who aspire to venture into his field of business?

“Be genuine in your reasons for venturing in the field and let it guide you in your endeavour. Don’t take this on as a new fad as you’ll never have the persistence to succeed if you are not entirely invested in it. Do remember that engineering is a common and broad field that many people enter into. Our business is a specialised subset of that field. Exposure and time are needed to build up the specialised skill-set, it can’t be easily taught.”