

# Self-made man makes good

Serial Systems' Derek Goh tells **MINDY TAN** persistence and hard work are the secrets to his success

WHILE having a spanner thrown into the works of well-laid plans may have derailed a lesser man, the economic crisis has not shortened the stride in Serial System's juggernaut-like rampage.

Derek Goh, the man behind Serial Systems is candid enough to admit that the group is unlikely to meet the S\$1 billion-revenue-in-two-years target he set in 2009; but he is quick to qualify that it is due to the weak US currency.

However, far from being daunted, he has since revised his target to US\$1 billion, by the end of next year.

"We will definitely hit S\$1 billion by 2012 but the new target is US\$1 billion," he says confidently, saying that the group will rely on organic growth and acquisitions to speed up growth.

The origins of his ambitious zeal, dogged determination and tenacity can be traced to a childhood schooled in poverty.

Rigorously trained by the school of hard knocks, Mr Goh was selling porridge beside his father at their hawker stall at the age of 11, juggling school and work, before joining the workforce at the age of 16.

Drawn by the slogan, "Join the navy to see the world", Mr Goh signed up as a private in the navy for an eight-year stint shortly after.

If you think he got carried away by the romantic notion of seeing the world, think again. A hard-nosed practicality ruled his decision, which involved calculating the salary progression, weighing the free education provided (under the National Technical Certification scheme), and of course, the opportunity to see the world, for free.

That's not all. Mr Goh also signed up for a part-time diploma course and received a diploma in electrical engineering by distance learning. Even on the weekends, he would hawk a variety of bric-a-brac in the mornings, before heading down to East Coast Park to sell syrup drinks.

And, he found time to date, and settle down; in fact, it was with his wife that he set up both the florist business, and his trading business, then known as Serial System Marketing.

While most entrepreneurs would have concentrated on setting up one business before (possibly) moving on to the next, Mr Goh ploughed 85 per cent of his attention into the flower arrangement business, maintaining Serial Systems on the side.

"Florist is something my wife liked, and I calculated – not a lot of money and with my connections, should be okay. So I went in to do it," he explains. "Trading business, first of all, I didn't fully concentrate. I had maybe two or three customers, ad hoc."



YEN MENG JIN

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He adds: "Some of my friends, after they came out (from the navy), worked in the electronics industry and they told me that their bosses make a lot of money. So I thought it's not bad because this business is never ending."

Given the speed with which technology moves, he reasoned that as long as he kept up-to-date with the latest developments, he would always have a product to sell.

In the meantime, Mr Goh took to the flow-

er business like a charm, taking on the multiple roles of marketing representative and deliveryman.

"I was the sales and deliveryman," he reminisces. "I prepared single stalks of roses, cold-called secretaries, gave them roses to introduce them to our company . . . We didn't have catalogues at the time because it required money. So we used to tell them, whatever you can see from other flower shops, tell us, and we can do the same thing!"

Even though business was good, Mr Goh was soon comparing the returns between his two businesses.

"I look at the trading, sometimes one order I would make a few thousand dollars. Florist, during Valentine's day, I might make over S\$10,000, but the preparation and the work, hell a lot of manpower!" he says. "In trading, I deliver everything, can make between S\$3,000 and S\$10,000."

It was an easy decision for him to hand

over the reins of the florist business to his wife, and concentrate on Serial System.

Starting from scratch, he flew to Taiwan and Korea where he courted suppliers, with well-grounded research, and an earnest attitude.

"First, you must know the market – in Singapore, how many people, what is the consumption rate? There are magazines and stat boards where you can get the information you need," he says.

"I say you appoint me, you don't need to come up with money. Just one person to communicate with me, someone with low turnaround response time. And if I have technical issues, I need your guys to e-mail or conference call to solve the problem."

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Ask Mr Goh what he is most proud of in his long and illustrious career and he tells you, not surprisingly, that the awards bestowed and the corresponding recognition of his hard work rank high. That, and the fact that Serial System was included as one of the 55 stocks in the Singapore Straits Times Index in 1999. Second and third, are his family and the contributions he's made to society.

Yesterday, Mr Goh added one more feather to his cap, after he clinched the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur Of The Year award, under the electronic components distribution category.

As to his secrets to success? He says, without hesitation, that "persistence and hard work are a must", alongside teamwork and intrapreneurs, defined as people with entrepreneurial skill sets, but who work within an organisation. And above all else, family.

It might surprise you, but underneath his gruff exterior, there is a soft core to the man behind Serial Systems, which combined with his dogged determination and sheer tenacity, truly makes him the archetype of a self-made man.

Advocating that all entrepreneurs should get the support of those nearest and dearest, be it a girlfriend, wife, or family, he says: "Just in case things are not right, they can't blame you 100 per cent. (In addition) no point you succeed in your business and your girlfriend becomes other people's wife!"

In the meantime, Mr Goh continues to push boundaries with Serial Systems.

His long term plan? He responds, cheekily: "Once I hit 1B (billion), I will set the next higher target. That one, when the time comes, I'll let you know."