



# Going electronic

Mr Ng Eng Seng builds green restrooms and makes a big business out of it

by **teo kuan yee**

BORN into a family that owned an oil palm estate in rural Muar, Johor, Mr Ng Eng Seng realised early that agriculture was not his cup of tea.

He recalls: "At a young age, I started toiling on the plantation to support the family. I asked myself if I wanted to do that for the rest of my life – to be a slave to the plantation and let my future generations do the same?"

Determined to escape from the "tried and trodden path in life" and "the trap of mediocrity", he dreamed about starting his own company one day.

A business opportunity to go into LED electronic display boards for restrooms came knocking.

As it turned out, the dealers showed greater interest in electronic sensors for restroom equipment. Unlike today, energy efficiency was not the in-thing in Singapore then, but that did not hinder Mr Ng's plans.

Contributing something back to society is integral to his business agenda. Unlike others, his hunger for success was not driven by materialistic gains to flaunt one's status and stoke the ego.

"I wanted to chalk up achievements and do something useful for society at the same time," he says.

Rigel Technology was born in 1992 with three business partners in a 200 sq ft Marine Parade office with about five employees.

Today, the green restroom specialist is a well-established regional enterprise with 300 staff members.

To be a successful entrepreneur, Mr Ng says it is important to have qualities like "a clear vision, market-oriented strategies and savvy people-management skills to transform ideals into reality".

He explains: "It calls for the ability to communicate your vision and mission and interact smoothly with people at different levels, from clients, vendors to staff.

"Effective planning also plays a vital role as it can help you over-

come obstacles and even open up new markets."

He owes Rigel's success to "leveraging individual markets' competitive advantage to achieve optimum corporate efficiency".

For instance, the company shifted its production base to China as it has a well-developed manufacturing industry.

It then shaped its Singapore HQ into a research and development hub as Singapore is well known for its cutting-edge technological capabilities.

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– Mr Ng Eng Seng (above), managing director, Rigel Technology

Technological breakthroughs play an important part in Rigel's success story.

He explains: "As a green restroom specialist, we pride ourselves on pioneering state-of-the-art eco-friendly technology, which enhances sustainable restroom operations for some of our clients who manage intelligent buildings.

"This forms part of our Lohas (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) philosophy."

For Mr Ng, being a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) has its advantages, and at the end of the day, it is the customers who benefit.

"SMEs are able to provide variety to the business landscape and prevent unhealthy monopolisation by the big boys. Such competition drives every company to improve

on its product quality continuously and offer better value for money," he says.

A people-oriented management style is his way of motivating staff.

"My management model is all about grooming a credible team, delegating important duties to the key leaders and empowering them with decision-making authority so that they can have a sense of ownership in the company," he explains.

To reward them for their dedicated efforts, he ensures that everyone enjoys the fruits of the company's success.

On the challenges he faced, he says: "There were challenges during every phase of the journey – from the high staff turnover in 1996, when we did not have a comprehensive human resource system in place, to the multitude of problems arising from our China investment in 2005 that called for an entire paradigm shift."

A recent major setback was during the 2009 economic crisis that dealt a blow to revenue from the local commercial sector.

He recalls: "The declining sales volume did not dampen our spirit. Instead, we made use of the lull period to revamp our brand image and enhance our brand exposure so as to turn the tide in our favour."

Things improved in the first two quarters of 2010, where Rigel achieved stellar revenue growth of 45 per cent and 250 per cent in the commercial and residential sectors respectively.

Asked if the journey was worthwhile despite the struggles, he replies: "Every setback encountered is an opportunity for us to hone our mental tenacity and emerge stronger and better prepared to face new markets and embark on greater breakthroughs.

"Ultimately, we are driven by the fact that our business will benefit the environment. We are creating a legacy that will sustain mankind's relationship with Mother Nature for generations to come."