

A shade to call his own

SMEBIZ

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By Joy Lee



Making more room: InHome is doubling its production space as orders are expected to increase.

TERRY Chong's sense of responsibility probably got the better of him when he allowed his father to talk him into taking over a hopeless case of a business.

An acquaintance had abandoned a small contractor venture, leaving its two workers in limbo.

Chong, 33, was then a salesperson for a kitchen appliances brand. But after an earful from the old man, he decided to take the two workers under his wing and continue the works required at the makeshift workshop under a tree.

But Chong knew nothing about contracting works.

“I had no experience and no one to teach me. It was very difficult. So every day, I will go and see how people install gates and learn from there,” he says.

Sometimes he gets them right, and sometimes, his gates just will not close.



In the pipeline: Chong (left), posing with Mazlan (centre) and Chan, hopes to expand its market and list the company over the next five years.

“We had to take them out and do it all over again.”

Most times, he ends up compensating his customers for work that has to be redone. At one point, he even had to sell his house to pay off the growing debt incurred from having to compensate for so many projects.

The unexpected venture became InHome Engineering Works Sdn Bhd in 2013.

Chong picked up other tricks of the trade and over the next three years, fixed fences, installed grills and autogates, fabricated bits of building materials and carried out minor sub-contractor works.

But he eventually decided that rather than be a jack of all trades, he prefers becoming a master of one. So in 2016, he focused only on one product – awnings.

“At that time, there was not much demand for awnings, and there weren’t a lot of players in the market as well. This was a chance for us to focus and become professionals.

“We don’t have to fabricate or try to sell so many things. We only make and install awnings,” shares the managing director.

Chong’s team carried out research and development (R&D) efforts to improve on their product and processes. Chong was particularly fussy about his product’s quality and finishing.

His determination and focus yielded results – sales and profits started doubling every year after that. As for the two workers that followed Chong in the beginning, one had passed away while the other is still working for the company.

InHome grew steadily and operations were relocated to its current 10,700 sq ft factory in Cheras.

Up till last year, InHome had installed about 1,000 awning projects.



Full-control: The company does everything in-house, including installation works, to ensure control over the quality of its products and services.

Innovating the ultimate product

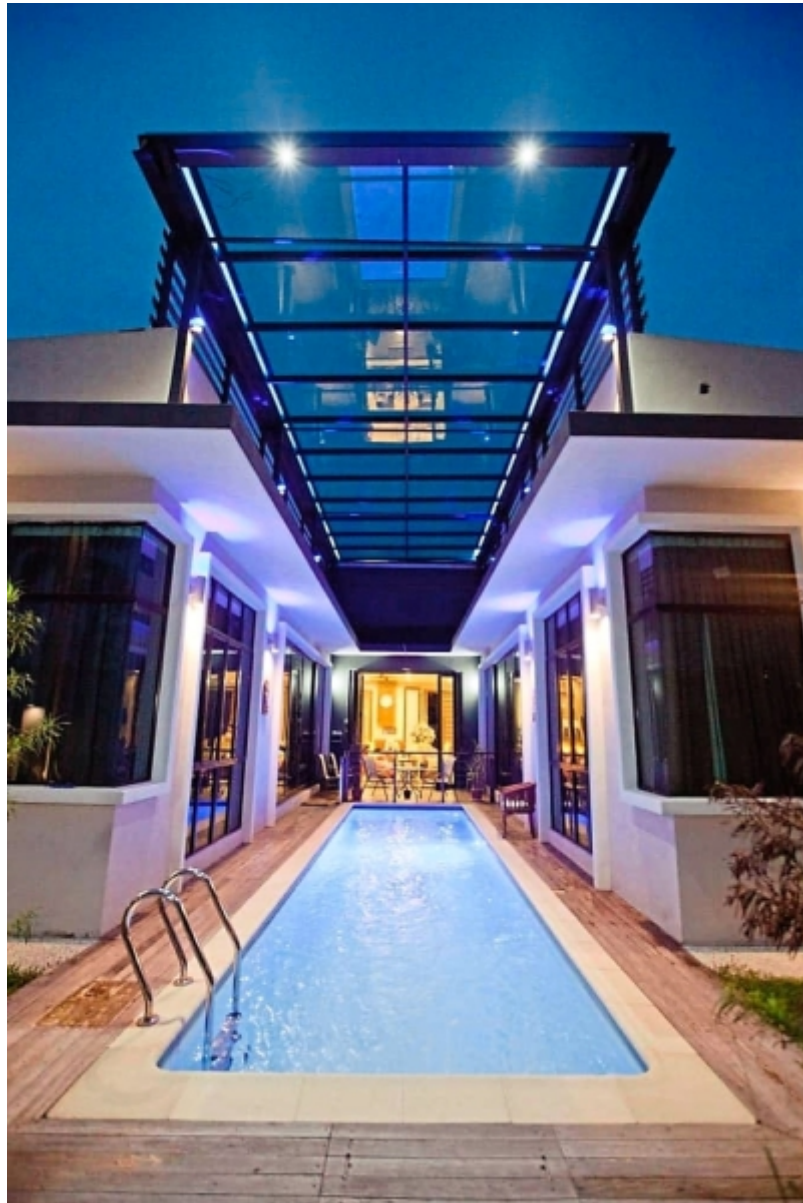
About one and a half years ago, the company embarked on more R&D to manufacture what Chong considers the “ultimate” product.

“We innovated so that we can make a retractable awning,” he says. Joseph Chan, who heads the R&D department, says it took a lot of time to develop a retractable mechanism that is easily manufactured and can be scaled.

“Making awnings is still our core business. But we wanted to give our customers the option to upgrade to a retractable awning,” says Chan.

He explains that a retractable awning is cost-effective, making an extra shade usable as and when needed. This could be a useful feature for homes given Malaysia’s sunny and rainy weather.

Last month, InHome launched its Retractable Glass Roof with much fanfare, claiming the Malaysia Book of Records for the largest retractable glass roof system. The glass roof comes with customisable features such as rain sensors, LED mood lighting, sound options and wireless controls.



A new glass ceiling: Its retractable glass roof comes with customisable features such as rain sensors, LED mood lighting and sound options.

“We have put in some smart features into the glass roof. The sensors have memory, so they’ll be able to give you the same kind of lights, for example, the next time you walk close to the space under the

awning. And these features can be customised according to each customer's request. So no two awnings are the same.

"We are also now looking at developing more aesthetic facades," adds chairman Datuk Mazlan Sabli.

Mazlan hopes the company will be able to set a new trend in the market: that a home will not be complete without a retractable awning.

The company will be releasing more features for its retractable glass roof system later in the year. Continued from original text flow.

Chong notes that enquiries have been coming in for its new product and he expects sales to grow much faster this year. Additionally, the increasing number of new homeowners and upgraders could mean a growing market for InHome to tap into.

He observes that consumers today are more discerning and knowledgeable about the kinds of accessories they want in their homes. And something a little more sophisticated like a retractable glass roof might just meet their fancy.

There has also been more interest from the commercial property segment. Currently, InHome mainly serves end-users in the residential market.

"But with this new retractable glass roof, we are looking at working with more developers (for new buildings) and also in the commercial buildings market. It is a more lucrative market," shares Mazlan.

With orders set to ramp up, the company has added another 10,700sq ft to its production space, which will be operational next month, to boost capacity. This will also give the company more room to develop new products.



Sole focus: The company's decision to only fabricate awnings since 2016 has resulted in sales growth.

Big dreams

Chong's ambition does not merely stop at developing better products. He is also looking at expanding its market and growing the company's size.

"I hope to export," he says, with eyes particularly on the Chinese and Indonesian markets.

"I was in China and noticed that no one was doing this (retractable glass roof). So there is potential to export there," he adds.

There is also keen interest from Indonesia and the company has already applied for a patent there.

InHome also recently set up a branch office in Johor, no doubt, to target the Singapore market.

He reckons that export to new markets will be done through joint ventures, whereby fabrication works will be handled by their local partners.

"It is not easy to set up a whole operation on your own. You need a lot of skilled manpower for fabrication and installation works. You need to make sure you can provide the warranty and have enough core spare parts to service the market," he says.

InHome currently has about 60 employees, including the team that does installation works. Chong insists that everything is done in-house to ensure control over the quality of its service.

"We don't subcontract any of the work out," he says.

“We need to ensure we uphold the consistency and quality of our brand. We don’t want InHome to become ‘no-home,’” adds Mazlan.

In the near term, they are looking to acquire all the necessary certifications needed for a manufacturing outfit to make it easier for them to export.

Chong is also looking at an initial public offering in five years. He says the company is already putting plans in motion and putting its systems in order to make sure that InHome operates like a listed company in preparation of the real thing.

“We are a small company, but a lot of our practices are that of a big company,” he says.

Given his past experiences, Chong is prudent in managing the company. They maintain a positive cash flow and make cash purchases. Gearing is close to zero.

Chong believes the company has what it takes to get to where he wants it to be.

“We can do this through great teamwork and because we have a clear direction. We have a close communication with our team. And we have the right product, which will bring the sales in,” he says.

Any challenges he foresees in achieving his plans? Well, Chong does not dwell on them. He thinks there are always more solutions than problems. And it is about finding the right solution. Competitors and price wars are not his biggest concerns.

At the end of the day, you either do something about the problem or sit and only think about it.

“Action brings changes,” he says.

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