Moving with the times

Woodlands Transport has come a long way since its inception in 1974, report THERESIA CUDORI, DANIEL LING and CHRIS WENG

ITH only $600 of its own money and $2,000 borrowed from friends and relatives, Voo Soon Sang co-founded with a few partners to start Woodlands Transport in 1974. He covered all areas of the business, including being a driver himself. He has not looked back since. Today, Woodlands Transport is the largest private bus operator in Singapore and has a fleet of 1,200 vehicles, including buses, tour coaches, ferry cranes, jetrin movers, trailers, concrete mixer trucks, cement tickers, tipper trucks, and more. Mr Voo is now the founder and managing director of Woodlands Transport Services (WTS).

Initially occupying a small area at the road junction between Woodlands Road and Mandai Road, WTS has since moved a few times due to expansion and currently occupies a sizable place in Gul Circle, off Tua Toa. Pointing to the old bus seats accumulated over the years lined at the back of the company’s meeting room, Mr Voo’s daughter and financial controller of the company, says of her father: “He still holds Woodlands Transport’s humble beginnings close to his heart.”

As Voo beams with pride as she talks about the Enterprise 50 award, “Winning the Enterprise 50 award has a very special meaning to us, to the founder, management, and staff. It is an affirmation of our hard work and our sense of pride and winning.” Indeed, WTS has much to be proud of. It is the first time WTS has participated in the Enterprise 50 awards, the company had chosen to keep a low profile in the past. It emerged as a pleasant surprise, then, that they not only won the award, but were placed among the top three of 50 companies.

Woodlands Transport’s construction transportation arm received a big boost with the 2009 construction boom, fuelling the company’s expansion into the construction sector. WTS has been bidding on this wave and was also involved in integrated resort and MRT projects. The business boost gave the company an opportunity to expand, WTS recently moved its current premises at Gul Circle to a new site in 2013, which is three times larger than the previous premises.

Secrets to success

Woodlands Transport has established many loyal, long-term clients, the result of its ability to deliver on its promises. Mr Voo believes that the level of reliability, on-time service, WTS provides is valued greatly by customers, “We may not be the cheapest, but we guarantee quality. As a transport solutions provider, quality is defined by reliability and timeliness.”

When Mr Voo was asked what other factors have gone into making Woodlands Transport so successful, she answered that people were the most important factor. “WTS has a passionate and visionary founder, as well as a team of committed employees.”

Employing only people with the passion to work and grow with the company, WTS boasts deeply loyal employees, evident in the extremely low staff turnover rate at the company. This has ensured continuity in the business operations.

As WTS continues to grow, it needs to train its front-line staff, especially its drivers. This is even more challenging as drivers have to be licensed by the authorities. Through training, drivers drive more carefully and efficiently. They are also better prepared to handle custom- ers’ needs and wants.

In return for their hard work, WTS takes care of the drivers by making sure they get enough transport jobs. This, coupled with the company’s effort to pay its drivers on time, gives the drivers peace of mind knowing that they will have enough money to support themselves and their families.

While WTS enjoys close relationships with its drivers, this relationship is not just about remuneration. Communication is also key. Not only does it boost staff loyalty and foster a sense of belonging, good communication with its drivers adds value to WTS’ service. Drivers are often the first and only point of contact with customers and WTS aims to learn much about their customers from their drivers. Good communication also allows WTS to channel customer feedback to the drivers, allowing them to improve their service standards and increase customer satisfaction.

Current challenges

Ironically, for a company so invested in the well-being of its staff, one of the main challenges faced by WTS is the lack of new drivers joining the industry. The better educated Singaporeans today are not keen to work as drivers. In our economy demands more knowledge workers and our education prepares our youth for jobs in a knowledge economy. The supply of drivers is becoming a key challenge for the transport industry.

This labour crunch is not helped by the fact that not all foreigners can fill jobs in the transport industry due to the extensive training and licensing required, a process which can take more than a quarter of the duration of their work permits. The increased cost of hiring such workers in the wake of the recent foreign worker levy hikes, makes this alternative even less viable. In the face of this human resource shortage, retaining current employees becomes much more crucial. This further underlines the importance of WTS’ close relationships with its employees.

Falling oil prices is another major challenge. Being a transport company, fuel makes up a big portion of WTS’ operating costs. The unprofitability of oil prices threatens the profitability of any transport company. Unlike other companies in land, air, and sea transport, WTS mitigates the impact of volatile fuel prices by securing fuel for long-term contracts.

The company also reduces its fuel consumption by encouraging the help of drivers in taking the most fuel-efficient routes and turning off the vehicle engine instead of idling it when not in use. This alignment of interests is made possible by the close relationship between WTS and its drivers.

Woodlands Transport has also diversified its businesses, even though it is still focusing on what it can do best. Besides its transportation arm, WTS also runs a travel agency and a provision wholesale business.

What the future holds

As the biggest private transportation company in Singapore, WTS has not ruled out the possibility of one day going public in order to obtain more funding and raise its profile to support further growth, though it does not think that the time is right just yet. In the meantime, Mr Voo reminds herself and the rest of the employees, that they need to “always strive for the highest standards in all business aspects and be ready and prepared when the time is right.”

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