Embarking on brand rejuvenation

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SITTING in an office surrounded by rows of products bearing the Fei Fah insignia, Lawrence Lau, the group managing director, bemoaned an emotion of nostalgia as he recalls the milestones and hurdles his family business, founded over half a century ago, went through.

"I am glad to be where we are today, but I envision even greater things ahead for Fei Fah in the next couple of years," he says confidently.

Since 1950, when the Fei Fah Group was established, it went through various growth phases to get to where it is today.

Once a simple medical balm, it pled its trade by selling traditional medicinal remedies and herbs to the local community and visitors from around the region.

The group began its climb to success when it launched the Electric Medibalm, a product that Fei Fah introduced in 1970 by its founder, Loh Yung Chai, who is Mr Lau’s grandfather.

The ingredients of the Electric Medibalm, the only product that Fei Fah produced back then, was a well-kept secret and it proved to be an effective remedy for many aches and ailments.

Despite its initial triumph, it was still a long way before success took root.

The management of Fei Fah understood that, to stay ahead of the competition and be successful in those changing times, a strong brand awareness was key.

In 1998, the group entered a new phase with diversification and started expanding its line of home-brewed products, driven by its own in-house R&D.

By doing so, Fei Fah gained full control over the quality and timeline of its production line.

Coupled with the fact that the middleman was now out of the equation, Fei Fah was able to provide greater value to its customers in various ways.

Today, equipped with the advantage of being a homgrown brand, the Fei Fah name brings to mind an image of long-standing reliability and trustworthiness, especially among Singapore’s mature consumers.

However, the employees and managers, helmed by Mr Lau, are never ones to rest on their laurels. They keep competitors on their toes with consistent re-vamps of their sales and marketing strategies.

Years ago, Fei Fah had the foresight to recreate the group’s image by shedding its traditional mantle for a fresh, new look.

It aimed to reach out to the largely untapped potential of the younger and English-speaking markets and what better way than to introduce an entirely different line.

It has been close to a decade since Fei Fah was repackaged, fresh for the masses, giving rise to the Ripple trademark.

Ripple is a breed of its own, targeted at the health-conscious individuals who focus more on the science behind the products. This bold move toward a distinct brand platform was a well-calculated one.

By diversifying in such a manner, the group was able to fine-tune its offerings and marketing efforts toward its new target audience while retaining the strong consumer loyalty of the original brand.

The Ripple product line currently consists of a comprehensive portfolio of health supplements, ranging from herbal tea to milk powders.

As Fei Fah’s general manager Wilson Koh puts it, “It is a highly competitive market out there, and we can no longer build a brand based on the strategies of yesteryears.”

The company is breaking new ground this year, having embarked on an extensive marketing campaign aimed at increasing its market awareness, particularly among the younger consuming.

Extensive amounts have been pumped into various media platforms, including celebrity endorsements and other mediums—a clear and strong sign of how vested the management is in this campaign.

Different products take centre stage during the various legs of this marketing campaign.

During the months of May through July, Ripple focused its efforts on Mate Tea. Traditionally an Argentinian drink, Mate Tea is said to have numerous health benefits such as alleviation of stress, cholesterol control, and manage-ment of blood sugars.

Another product in the campaign’s line-up includes Goat’s Milk Powder. With a chemical structure that is similar to that of human milk, it is touted as one of nature’s perfect foods.

Thanks to the innovation behind so many of its other products, Ripple’s goat’s milk boasts one significant advantage over those offered by its competitors—it is free of the usual unsavoury “goaty” flavour that puts many people off. All these efforts work toward a common goal, that is to push Ripple above the pack.

The management believes that intensified marketing to promote the benefits of the various products is critical.

“We want to have a strong differentiating factor for each and every one of our products,” the brand custodian explains.

Mr Lau hopes to conduct the company’s initial public offering within the next two years and how the company is faring at that time will be pivotal to Fei Fah’s continued success.

With a vigour to stay relevant—and backed by a wealth of experience gained from its rich history and strong R&D focus—Fei Fah Medical truly deserves its spot among the 2010 Enterprise 50 award winners.

The writers are students of NUS Business School.