

# Sunday Times Life! 12 June 2016

## Next generation family businesses

What does it take to run a family business? The Straits Times speaks to four companies whose business practices are being transformed by the next generation

By Bryna Singh



Pop of new flavours

When her father died suddenly in March last year, Ms Elaine Chan, 42, found the weight of the family business thrust upon her shoulders. Her father, Mr William Chin, founded Straits Union Holdings in 1971. The company is one of the largest importers of popcorn-making machines and ingredients, as well as nacho chips and cheese, and candy floss sugar. It supplies to 17 cinema outlets here, including Shaw, Cathay, Eng Wah and Filmgarde; hotels; and event organisers.

Mr Chin was 74 when he died from complications arising from pneumonia. He is survived by two children, Elaine, who had been living abroad for more than 10 years and was then based in China as the director of public relations in a hotel, and Kenneth, 39, who is self-employed and has no interest in joining the family business.

His death left his daughter in shock and grief. But she knew she had to "be strong" for her mother, Helen, 68.

So the bachelorette moved home. Her father's trusty secretary, Ms Katherine Chok, 64, held the fort while she deliberated over what to do about Straits Union.

After visiting customers who shared stories about her "lovable, silly" father and their disappointment that the company had no successor, Ms Chan's path became clear by July last year.

Relying on her mother to take care of the company's finances, she came up with a business plan. She started a website and Facebook page for the company, which has eight staff, and continued talking to her father's customers and suppliers. South Africa-based corn producer Biggi Brands and United States-based manufacturer Gold Medal Products.

Since coming on board, she has introduced more than 10 popcorn flavours not readily available here, including garlic parmesan, pina colada and jalapeno.

She is also working with event organisers and individuals who want to develop unique popcorn flavours and their own gourmet labels.

Also in the pipeline is microwaveable popcorn in flavours such as sour cream and chives and salt and vinegar, which she hopes to introduce in supermarkets here, which typically carry sweet or salty flavours.

Since she joined, she says the company has grown in terms of its client base and has seen a 65 per cent increase in the import volume of popcorn, caramel and nachos ingredients.

"One step at a time, things are happening," she says.

"This is my father's legacy. By making sure that the company continues to grow healthily, I know I'm making him proud."

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