

STARTING YOUNG

Service on the Dott

Founder of The Dott Solutions believes in the personal touch and being there for the client in times of crisis, reports **TIMOTHY LOH**

ELVIN Ong was first inspired to start his own business when he read the autobiography of Virgin Group founder Richard Branson, *Losing My Virginity*. Then, he was an IT officer in national service and it took a few more years of understanding the mechanics of finance, sales and marketing, before he actually took the plunge into business.

"Throughout the process, I've always had this mindset that I want to start a business. It wasn't like, 'Oh, today I want to start a business,'" says the 27-year-old.

And so in 2008, while still a second-year student of Business and Information Technology at the Singapore Management University, Mr Ong started The Dott Solutions.

As an undergraduate with no steady income, he decided that if he wanted to start a business, it would have to be low-risk and low-capital.

With almost eight years of IT knowledge and experience under his belt – Mr Ong studied IT in Nanyang Polytechnic before serving as an IT officer in NS – it was only natural that he decided to build an IT business.

The Dott Solutions now provides firms with content management and e-commerce systems, customised web and mobile development, among other IT solutions.

"The only thing I could rely on was the skills I had accumulated throughout the years," he explains. He also put in a few hundred dollars from his own savings to pay for business registration and other administrative expenses to get things going.

In the four years since, The Dott Solutions has grown into a five-man team whose clients include Shiseido and Alexandra Hospital. For the latter, the firm created an approval system, improving the hospital's efficiency and cutting down its manpower requirements.

Mr Ong counts working with these larger clients as some of the "greatest milestones" of his start-up. The way large organisations work is very different from the way smaller ones work, and the experience a start-up like his own gains from working with them is valuable, he says.

The prospect of building a company while working towards a degree may seem daunting, but Mr Ong believes that was the perfect time to get started.

"I would advise people, if they want to start a business, to do it in their university days or in school days, because you gain many things from the institutional support," he says.



ARTHUR LEE

Mr Ong: *'We work closely with our clients to advise and ensure that what we are doing fits into their business process. We have guidelines for our turnaround time for communication with clients.'*

He cites his entrepreneurship professor Pamela Lim as an example of one who has helped him and his peers kick-start their own businesses.

Being surrounded by enterprising peers helped too, Mr Ong says. "Peers play a strong role in our personal development. They also help to shape my thinking, in terms of motivation and business ideas or strategies."

"You see people being successful, creating new products that change and impact society. That is something I always wanted to do," he says.

Starting as he did though, building up brand awareness and gaining credibility was challenging. "When you first start, no big companies will come to you or give you an opportunity," he says.

But through business referrals and networking, he managed to land big clients such as Vantage Automobile, the exclusive distributor of continental car brands Peugeot and Ford in Singapore.

Building up a client portfolio of respectable

brands helped with marketing the business. "Of course, along the way, you have to really perform and meet the expectations (of your clients)," he adds.

To build up that portfolio, however, The Dott Solutions had to take on projects that "paid next to nothing", Mr Ong says. So another major challenge was sustaining the motivation to stay the course.

"I believe any entrepreneur would feel that way too. Even very motivated entrepreneurs, at a certain point, will feel very down and lost. Character and determination will pull you through that time," he says.

In such times, knowing that he is doing something he has always longed to do helps. "I believe in working for myself rather than working for others," he adds.

There is competition to fend off too, and Mr Ong believes his company does so through the personal touch.

"We work closely with our clients to advise and ensure that what we are doing fits into their business process. We have guidelines

for our turnaround time for communication with clients. We also ensure that we follow up after implementing a certain project to gather feedback from our clients to help improve the relationship and processes," he says.

This means "we'll definitely be there to help the client tide through" any major crises like system failures, he adds.

Currently, The Dott Solutions is still testing out new product ideas to offer its clients. It is also looking to expand both locally and overseas. While the firm already has clients in China, Mr Ong's main focus will be on expansion within the Singapore market.

To other potential entrepreneurs, Mr Ong has this to say: "Running a business is like a marathon, so you have to manage your pace. Every day, make sure you take a step towards your goal, no matter how tiny that step."

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