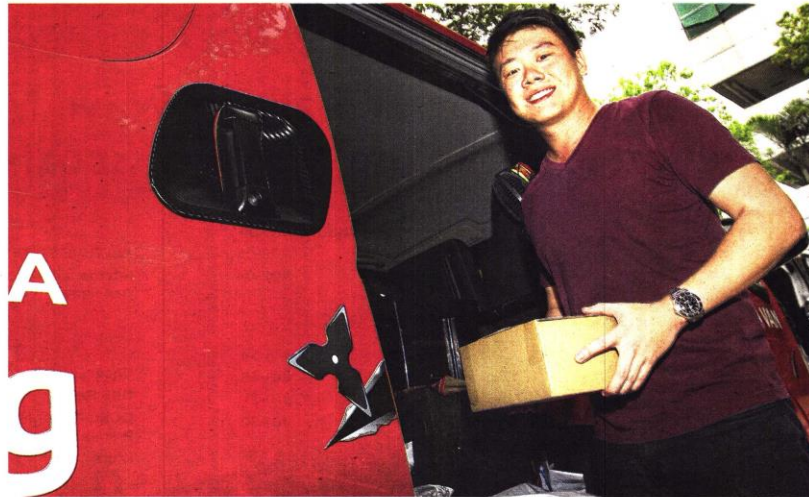




From sorting to helping to develop the website, to meeting clients, to making deliveries.

— Ninja Van CEO Lai Chang Wen (below)

Ninja Van CEO, who recently gave a talk on tech entrepreneurship, reveals his struggles when the company started out



PASSION: Ninja Van's chief executive officer Lai Chang Wen says doing what's enriching is more important than a high salary.

TNP PHOTO: AHMAD FARUQ BIN ROZALI

'I even cleaned the toilet'

Report by **DARIENNE SIM**
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At 29, entrepreneur Lai Chang Wen has started at least three business ventures, including one of the fastest growing logistics companies in the region, Ninja Van.

The company, which was launched in 2014, handles 20,000 deliveries a day in Singapore alone, with a 1,000 strong local workforce.

When it was starting out, Ninja Van's three co-founders – Mr Lai, Mr Shaun Chong and Mr Tan Bo Xian – were running 10 deliveries a day.

The start-up deals exclusively with e-commerce firms to provide next-day delivery for consumers.

Its clients include e-commerce giants like Zalora, Watsons and Toys 'R' Us.

On Tuesday, chief executive officer Lai was on a panel discussing tech-

nology trends at the Made In Singapore programme series.

The series is organised by General Assembly, a training school for in-demand skills. (See report at right.)

But it has not been an easy ride for the company's current success.

Mr Lai told The New Paper: "In the early days at Ninja (Van), we worked 22-hour days. There was no rest.

"That meant no dinners, no time to go out with friends... Eventually you start to feel left out."

With no staff initially, Mr Lai found himself doing everything and anything that was required.

"From sorting to helping develop the website, to meeting clients, to making deliveries. Right down to cleaning the (office) toilet," he said.

In creating Ninja Van, Mr Lai learnt from failures in his first two start-ups.

While still studying business and finance at Singapore Management University, he had founded customisa-

ble fast fashion brand Marcella with three others.

The brand aimed to deliver affordable custom-made, custom-fit clothing to customers with the help of technology, computerising the pattern-cutting process to bring down production costs and time.

After graduation, Mr Lai did a short stint trading derivatives for Barclays Investment Bank, but soon quit to focus on Marcella.

He said: "Even though the pay was rewarding, it wasn't about the salary any more... Doing what's more enriching is more important."

Marcella never quite took off, but running the business pointed him to another market opportunity.

While running the fashion brand, he felt the delivery services were not up to his standards, leading him to ask: "Can we do it (the handling and delivery of logistics) ourselves?"

KEY

That sparked off the idea for Ninja Van, which focuses on two key aspects – technology and people.

It uses technology to keep drivers and operations ahead of the game.

The drivers use an app which cuts time and costs by calculating the most efficient routes. There are also plans to launch an app for customers.

It was called Ninja Van as an ode to the pop-up food stores on wheels familiar to those doing national service.

Mr Lai particularly liked the name because it gave the company a more approachable front.

He also felt that the word "ninja" suggested efficiency.

The company strives to not be a

"cold, faceless organisation" by introducing innovations, like collection at a wine bar.

Then there is also Ninja Van's bright red vans.

Said Mr Lai: "Our vehicles are quite loud, so that's free marketing."

From making cold calls in the struggle to find someone to give the company a chance, Mr Lai has now taken it to other countries in the region.

It broke into the Malaysian market last year, and has a presence in Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines and Thailand.

Ninja Van was inadvertently primed to go regional because of the streamlining it could offer its clients.

"It was scary... But it was about asking the fundamental question: How different can countries be?" he said.

Mr Lai said Ninja Van has no plans for further regional expansion in the near future, but will do its best to raise itself up as the best next-day courier in each market.

He said: "Focus is very important."

Ninja Van has conducted two rounds of securing investors, raising US\$32.5 million (S\$44.2 million), which went into the expansion.

The first round was completed in February last year and raised US\$2.5 million.

Mr Lai still remembers the moment he realised Ninja Van was truly something to be proud of.

"It was (raising money in the first round) a lot faster than expected.

"We thought maybe it would be a one million dollar funded company, and try to make ends meet, and try to make a decent job.

"But it became a lot more than that."