

# Hello Stranger, want to have a crazy picture taken?

**O**N the hunt for a photo booth service for his junior college class's 10th-year reunion party last year, professional photographer Yam Fusheng found none in the market up to scratch.

So he picked up his camera and decided to do it himself.

"I felt like coming up with a crazy backdrop, good lighting, flattering, like a modern-day portrait setting," the ex-Saint Andrew's Junior College student said.

"I thought it would be quite fun to create a very social photo booth where people can (take photos) and, in the future, it'll be something to remember themselves by," he added, as he pointed to photographs on his office wall of friends donning colourful spectacles and performing crazy antics.

Just days after, the glossy magazine-like photographs taken at his photo booth began appearing on his friends' Facebook accounts and some in prime spots as friends' account display pictures. The "likes" and "shares" quickly followed, as more friends were "tagged" in the photographs.

The party itself was a success, but little did Mr Yam suspect that this first event would lead to him founding his own photo booth service company, Hello Stranger. Nor could he have guessed how the social media element would give his start-up that edge in a competitive business.

Word spread and, in August, barely a month after his maiden event, design and fashion accessories retailer A Curious Teepee asked if he would set up his photo booth at an event of theirs.

It was only after this first "commercial gig" that the potential to turn passion for photography into a business really struck him, said Mr Yam.

Fast forward six months, and Hello Stranger today counts among its clients companies like Heineken, Fei Yue, Reebok and the Lo & Behold Group, which owns Tanjong Beach Club among various lifestyle and entertainment establishments.

Mr Yam thinks it was Hello Stranger's social spin on photo booth picture-taking that got major and international brands to sit up and take notice of the amount of social media attention that the small company was generating with its work.

On average, about 60 people are "tagged" in an event's photo album and about 10-15 per cent of those tagged use those photographs as their account's profile picture, says business co-owner Gay Zheng Cai.

"We've got 10 events lined up in the next 11 days and it's right in the middle of my exam week," he said, adding that the line-up includes brands such as Swedish retail clothing brand H&M, cosmetics giant Maybelline and whisky maker Chivas.



YEN MENG JIN

**Different and daring:** Mr Yam (far left, with Mr Gay) said 'I felt like coming up with a crazy backdrop, good lighting, flattering, like a modern-day portrait setting'

However, things have not always been this rosy. While Mr Yam's first foray into commercialising his work was a success, he found the going difficult. Not unlike other start-up owners, Mr Yam found his time and energies spread thinly across business liaison work and the artistic and logistic demands of his fledgling business.

"I needed someone to come in and take over the (day-to-day) running of the business, while I wanted to focus on the big picture of how we can develop the product and business," he said.

A chance encounter with his university schoolmate Mr Gay led to a catch-up session that would eventually land Mr Yam his business partner.

"While we didn't set it there and then, he (Mr Gay) wanted, in his capacity, to (get) into this business," Mr Yam said.

Business was brisk even early on, no doubt helped by the amount of chatter about their product on social media sites. Hence, even with Mr Gay joining the business ven-

ture, work was still taxing the duo and their logistics to the limit.

While Mr Yam held the fort in the office, Mr Gay - currently an undergraduate at the Singapore Management University (SMU) - had to shuttle between work and school.

Furthermore, the duo found it tough creating unique, funky backdrops required for each event.

"We do not come from the design or creative industries, so it made us . . . work twice as hard as others," said Mr Yam.

Their efforts drew the attention of start-up champion George Han of SMU's Institute of Innovation & Entrepreneurship, whose mentorship the pair cites as pivotal to their progress.

"He believed that we had a good product but needed a good strategy and he helped us a lot in that area," said Mr Yam.

With professional guidance and an increasingly steady stream of orders for their product, Mr Yam and Mr Gay are confident that they are on the right track to success.

Large-ticket purchases of a van and photo-

graphic equipment - which took up most of the \$35,000 self-raised start-up fund early on - are also slowly being justified.

But because the company has not yet broken even on its investment - though profits from completed events have been ploughed back into the business - the duo admit that they cannot afford to rest on their laurels. More work is needed to establish a strong brand name, they said.

While hesitant to discuss competitors and the industry's barriers to entry, Hello Stranger's owners are keen to grow its significant market share captured by being an early entrant, and secure its position in a nascent but increasingly crowded industry.

"We want to improve our product and grow the Hello Stranger brand into a recognisable local brand," said Mr Yam.

Growth plans are already being considered, with the owners looking into product improvement and diversification.

"We've just touched the surface and there's plenty more potential to grow," Mr Yam said.