Make IT new

Innovation is key when a second-generation SME

IT entrepreneur Nadira Mohd Yusoff continuously innovates to be on top of her game

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owner successfully transforms its core business for the digital age, writes Rozana Sani

THINKING out of the box and finding a solution to a problem that works, and works well, is second nature to ICT entrepreneur Nadira Mohd Yusoff.

From a very young age, she had learnt that thinking creatively, studying trends, having the right strategy and having the guts and will to pull it off are what’s needed to achieve one’s target in business. She is, after all, the daughter of a seasoned businessman.

The eloquent and energetic CEO of Nadi-Ayu Technologies Sdn Bhd says: “My father had always been doing business and as a family, we went through the ups and downs with him. He wasn’t easy on us and he expected us to appreciate what it means to earn a living.

“When I wanted something, I had to work hard for it. This meant either doing well in school — which would take time but I was too impatient — or having to go and make money,” says the spirited 35-year-old with a sparkle in her eyes.

Nadira fondly recalls her first business venture in Standard 1 where she bought sweets in bulk from the neighbours and channelled the profit to the family business. She also had small business ventures with friends.

The effort resulted in her being able to buy her first Barbie.

“When my father asked me to take over the family business at the age of 25, I welcomed it with open arms,” she says with a smile.

CHANGING FOCUS

Nadi-Ayu was set up in 1991 in Kuala Lumpur as a publisher of textbooks for the Education Ministry as well as reference books. In 1997, it went into computer equipment trading, offering advertising and ICT solutions.

When Nadira took over the reins from her father in 2002, she decided that the company would produce its own computers.

“My father was anxious, being the seasoned businessman that he was. But I was a trained engineer — at that time developing products for another company — and all I could think of then was to build computers. Spurred on by the government’s vision of bridging the digital divide, I wanted to build a national brand. There were already other such initiatives then but they weren’t doing that well and it was frustrating. Somebody had to step things up and build it.

“And I wanted it to be us,” Nadira says with conviction.

Nadi-Ayu went ahead and produced its own brand of computers called Natsys, which was launched in 2003.

“It was a family affair. We had no financing. I was building the computers and we had to buy components and everything else cash. We literally went door-to-door to sell computers. We quickly realised to sustain, we had to have a service centre, customers had to be comfortable with us and we had to have good after-sales service.”

After a couple of months, Natsys caught the eyes of Bank Simpanan Nasional and Nadi-Ayu became the bank’s vendor for the Computer Ownership Scheme.

“We were able to sell computer installment-plan packages to public sector workers. In a year, we grew from a four-person company to 15-men strong. We also established centres nationwide to service customers — we did on site services, onsite delivery, training for users. And we had the attention of Intel and Microsoft who appointed us as their Tier 1 partners and channel.”

In 2006, Nadi-Ayu had its breakthrough when appointed to supply Natsys to schools under the PPSMI project (The Teaching and Learning of Math and science in English).

“That break enabled us to venture into the education sector. Being the brand that we are, we were already thinking about what other additional services we could offer. Hardware is a medium and from the training and interaction we had with our users — mainly teachers, we knew that the computers were under-utilised. Under the PPSMI project, teachers were encouraged to develop their own teaching materials. We came in to fill the gap by distributing global brand software for that purpose.”

DEVELOPING SOFTWARE

The gameplan changed when at a presentation of the software tools to a government agency, Nadia-Ayu got some feedback that the solutions for education they had to offer was good but overwhelming. The potential client wanted something simpler and suitable for the local market.

“At that time we were developing our own software to help children learn English, something small and simple. Even before that, we already had a team doing content development to enhance our hardware products, create better user experience, help teachers with other software. Nadi-Ayu started building Morrie — the predecessor to Morrieland, Nadi-Ayu’s recently released web-based children edutainment network.

Oppportunity came knocking when the Multimedia Development Corporation told Nadira of a grant she could apply for development purposes. She submitted an application for the grant and got it.

“Morrie became Morrieland — something bigger than we wanted it to be.”

Subscription-based, Morrieland is loaded with animation and interactive activities to promote the joy for learning and reading. It is designed to help children who are non-native speakers of English to learn the language and at the same time, provide a platform for practice. This “play to learn” concept innovates learning.

Launched last October, Morrieland has 4,000 subscribers to date. Efforts are now being made to take Morrieland to a global scale with countries like Turkey, Italy, Iran, Korea and Japan registering interest.

Apart from that, Nadi-Ayu has recently added digital publishing to its repertoire to produce e-books and e-books applications.

“You can say that as a company, we have come full circle as far as our origins is concerned — from traditional book publishing to the digital form now,” Nadira says.
MOVING FORWARD

Nadira says the team at Nadi-Ayu — now nearly 60 — is very focused on building products and their own innovations.

“We follow the progress in technology, market trends and demand and how we perceive the economy grows. Then, from there, we try to derive more opportunities from the business that we currently have,” Nadira explains.

For example, the Natsys line of products is being expanded from netbooks and all-in-ones personal computers, to include tablets before the end of the second quarter and ultrabooks in June. Already from its inception, there are close to 250,000 units of Natsys devices sold including those supplied to the Komputer IMalaysia programme.

To add more value to the hardware, Natsys computers come pre-installed with Apaka, a suite of interactive desktop applications which promote social networking and communication among mobile device users unique to the brand.

“It is basically a set of custom applications packaged on Natsys PCs. We’re not opening it to other brands. Applications under Apaka, for example, allow students to access to groups who have the same interest.

It is a channel for our users to develop their own contents and reach other users,” she says.

When asked how she perceives her achievements for the past 10 years, in the driver’s seat of Nadi-Ayu, the mother of four young children says that work-wise, she counts her successes as still small.

“There were moments when I felt that I would have to throw in the towel but we persevered. But those moments gave me space to see things in a different light and I’m happy to keep on moving. I hope Natsys will become a brand that is acknowledged and received as one that is tailored for education and lifestyle. I want to merge our expertise in content and hardware in products that are more relevant to Malaysians and the region. I want the business to be sustainable — not just monetarily — but grow with the times, adapt to trends, economy, technology of the times,” she adds.

Nadira says the toughest challenge is to brush off the notion that locally made products are sub-standard and should be cheap. Natsys is competitively priced and comparable to global brands in terms of quality, she says Nadira.

“Because the market perceives it that way and wants it that way, products keep getting bad and will not improve. Cheaper means compromising on quality, etc. To provide quality and innovation, producers and innovators have to deliver what we have to deliver. If the product is meant to do this, let it do it and more — not less. If it costs higher, it’s OK because of the amount of work that you put in. But you have to put in the work — not scrimp.”

After all these years, is her father happy with the company’s performance?

“Oh, I hope so,” says the inimitable Nadira. No doubt he is and proud of her too.

Most recently Nadi-Ayu Technologies was named as the most innovative company at the NEF-Awani ICT Awards 2011.
“There are germs in the mud," says Felix.
“There are germs in all dirty things!"
“Germs make you sick," he says.
Nadira with the trophy for the NEF-Awani 2011 Most Innovative Company award.
## Children checking out the content in Morrieland

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*Children's edutainment network, Morrieland*