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PanPages' journey into online search

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KUALA LUMPUR: The days when you scramble to look for a phone directory to search for industrial and commercial products or services are long gone. Now, technology is so advanced that a world of information is available at our fingertips.

This is something that PanPages has had to grapple with as it evolved from its early days in 1989, publishing industrial directories to become a listed company in the business search and online directory sector.

Transitioning from a traditional business to one that revolves around virtual space can be daunting as many small companies can attest to. *FocusM* speaks with PanPages Bhd group CEO Fong Wai Leong to gain insights and advice on how SMEs can learn from its successful foray into the online world.

For PanPages, the digital journey was an interesting one. Its transformation did not just encompass embracing technological advances, it also leveraged on its business partners' experiences and strengths to further grow as a sustainable business with expertise.

With the advent of the Internet age, PanPages changed its medium to remain relevant in the Southeast Asian market, but what has remained constant is its focus to be a platform that connects buyers with sellers. It has been serving more than 20,000 SMEs in this way for the past 25 years.

The company began shifting its focus to virtual space five years ago, as it became increasingly evident that the future lies with the Internet.

The biggest challenge PanPages faced was changing the mindset of its employees. Fong says: "We had to acknowledge we needed to change to survive. The moment the mindset to go online was there, we booked all the domain names for Southeast Asia to get the branding correct.

"We changed the branding from SuperPages.com.my to PanPages.com because PanPages was new and it was easy to register the name immediately."

However, the change did not stop there. The next step was changing the culture of employees and customers from inside out. At that time, the staff were predominantly from the print side who have been working with the company for more than a decade. On the other hand, there were younger staff who adapted easily to the online strategy.

To align and merge these two separate staff profiles was a challenge, and it took two years of adjustment to find the right balance.

"The first year we had people selling print, online, third-party pages; basically teams for every different aspect of our business. After years of trial and error, we found the solution. We realised we didn't change in that we've always been helping SMEs to connect with buyers and we're still doing that.

"And how we did it was by accumulating their marketing materials, creating content and distributing it. So we got the content marketing right, and the moment we did that, the understanding between the different teams were aligned," Fong shares.

The change in culture also necessitated a physical change, and PanPages renovated the office to reflect its conviction that the Internet is the future by incorporating aspects of Silicon Valley with Korean work ethics.

Fong stresses that all these changes were part of the mindset change. To get people to think creatively and innovatively, he says, the workplace has to be flexible and not stick rigidly to old practices.

The online shift was a difficult decision for PanPages as it went through what Fong calls the “cannibalisation of business” in print and online.

He explains: “It was hard but we allowed nature to take its course. If the online business cannibalised our print [business], so be it. We just had to make sure that we grow our online business a lot faster than our print.

“We have to keep thinking of what we want to become in five years to stay ahead of the curve, to see how we further work with our partners and how we can fit into their ecosystem. That became quite complicated and was quite scary at the same time.”

What PanPages did was to complement the big players instead of competing with them head-on. “When customers come to our platform, depending on which location they want to target, the company will suggest the right ‘train’ to let them reach their customers.”

This business model, Fong says, has proven to be very successful for the company and customers are becoming more receptive to online marketing.

“The first two years we talked to them, they adopted a wait-and-see approach, but now they’re adopting it because they’re scared they’ll lose out. You have to have a presence in the virtual world as soon as you can because people will be searching for you. The Internet should be the tool that SMEs use to the maximum because it gives them a level playing field.”

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