Building on 40 years of experience – and for the future

The boss of Sekko Architectural Wall Systems sees professional reputation as the key to long-term success.

BY FAUZI BAJURI, CHIANG RAN SHENG, ESTEE GUAN XIANG TING AND JOY WONG PUI YIN

You can say, but do you do it? That’s the question Rodney Cheong, 49, asks of himself every day. It’s a question that he’s been asking himself for more than two decades, and it’s a question that he’s been asking himself for more than two decades, and it’s a question that he’s been asking himself for more than two decades, and it’s a question that he’s been asking himself for more than two decades.

Cheong joined the company, founded by his family in 1996, after graduating from an honours degree in electrical engineering, becoming MD in 2001. He says he is very much a project man and takes a hands-on role in all aspects.

It’s as if the company’s culture means that he works every day of the week, barely finding time for his family which he usually sees only on Saturday nights and Sundays when he drives to them. Nonetheless, he says, his family is unaware of their support – especially his wife and two kids – what drives him.

One of his breaks from work is a regular jog he takes most Saturdays to maintain his fitness level and prepare his mind for the week ahead.

Committed staff

He says that Sekko’s competitive advantage over other players in the industry comes down to its reputation, backed up in large part by a core team of committed long-term staff.

Most of the firm’s key service management personnel, for example, have been with the company for more than two decades.

Cheong believes that retaining key staff helps underpin the company’s culture, yet he is also mindful of the importance of recruiting new talent for succession planning and taking the business into the future.

Another significant factor he says places Sekko above others in the business is the high degree of vertical integration in the firm’s product offerings.

That means the company is able to offer a one-stop-shop service, from drawing board design work, through production and testing, to the final installation of the finished product in the building the client is working on. ‘From the moment our materials enter the company, we do almost everything ourselves,’ he says, pointing to the firm’s design offices in Singapore and Shanghai, production plants in Singapore and Malaysia, and its own teams of workers deployed on-site at construction projects to oversee the installation of its products.

In a highly competitive industry, Cheong says Sekko differentiates itself from rival firms by providing a higher standard of service. That means bringing a professionalism to every project it works on, anticipating and understanding the client’s needs at every stage.

Sekko’s business philosophy, he says, is “with brains, not without”. Adventurous projects

The combination of hard-earned reputation, committed staff and a vertically integrated, one-stop-shop business has served Sekko well as it enters its fourth decade of operations. Mr Cheong says the firm has made a strong name for itself as a specialist, professional contractor known for taking on architecturally ambitious projects.

Rather than run-of-the-mill standardised building designs, the past decade in particular has seen it taking on a growing number of more technically challenging and innovative projects which require the complex curtain wall systems.

Notable projects the company has worked on include Changi Airport’s Crowne Plaza Hotel, the Carlton Hotel in Bras Basah Road, and The Light @ Orchard roadfronts.

Cheong says Sekko’s technical expertise and experience has made it one of the industry’s leading names in complex construction facade engineering projects. In 2017 the company won the Singapore Enterprise 50 Award for an eighth consecutive year.

As the company continues to grow, it has leveraged on lower operating and production costs to venture beyond Singapore, opening subsidiaries and offices in Malaysia and China.

With its reputation spreading overseas, Mr Cheong says he has been receiving calls from prospective clients and partners from around the world. However, for the moment, he is cautious about international expansion given the recent trade barriers imposed by the United States and the resulting knock on effects on international trade.

Nonetheless, he acknowledges reputation alone is not a guarantee of a sustainable business – it is something that must be continually worked on, enhanced and upgraded. That means keeping up with rapid changes in technology, absorbing and anticipating new trends and always staring ahead into the industry.

‘A business model does not serve you forever. It has an expiry date to it. We must be forward-looking and look for business opportunities.’

Rodney Cheong, CEO and managing director of Sekko Architectural Wall Systems