

Transforming dentistry through branding

A pioneer in the use of advertising in the local dentistry sector, Smile Inc now plans to expand its footprint overseas

AVISIT to the dentist is often synonymous with pain and avoided at all costs by most. But this is an experience that Smile Inc has been keen to avoid, carefully calibrating the dental experience for its customers. And this achievement—helping to change the public perception of dentistry in Singapore—is one that the firm is proud to highlight. “The success of Smile Inc and its lifestyle focus has changed the Singapore public’s perception of the dental industry—from one associated with pain and fear of visiting the dentist to one associated with enhancing one’s self esteem and confidence through an improved smile,” says its CEO and co-founder Grace Chong-Tan. “Dentistry is no longer about fillings, drilling and extractions, but providing the consumer with a myriad of choices: with procedures from maintaining and sustaining one’s oral health to techniques on improving one’s smile, in addition to restoring dental function and aesthetics.”

Established in 1997 by Mrs Tan and Ernest Rex Tan, the firm had set out to revolutionise the dental experience from the beginning. It aimed to provide high quality specialist and general dental care and services through the use of the latest technologies and state-of-the-art facilities. These are set amid a patient-friendly setting with a strong emphasis on architecture and design—like its current duplex-fronted dental practice at The Sail at Marina Bay—which would help to allay patients’ fear of visiting the dentist, says Mrs Tan.

Architecture and design has always been an integral part of Smile Inc’s brand. The firm set up its first reconstructive and aesthetic boutique practice at Mandarin Gallery in 2010, and then its duplex fronted dental practices at The Sail, Marina Bay Downtown in 2013 and at One Raffles Place last year.

The company was among the first in the medical and dental field to practise advertising, now a commonplace practice for the sector. “Advertising, previously not practised by the professional sectors, was important in assisting the public to be informed and be able to make educated decisions on their treatment choices,” says Mrs Tan.

The many accolades that Smile Inc has clinched are testament to its successful branding. The group was recognised as the overall winner of the “Established Brands” category at the Singapore Prestige Brand Award (SPBA) last year, the Oscars of local small and medium enterprises, and inducted into the Awards’ Hall of Fame. Before that, it had won the winner of “Established Brands” for five consecutive years, from 2010.

Along the way, Smile Inc has also notched up many firsts in the field. The group was the pioneer in Singapore to introduce chair-side teeth whitening procedures in Singapore when it first set up in 1997. The procedure to help pa-

tients to significantly whiten their teeth in just one visit is today commonplace in the country, but Smile Inc remains the only practice in Singapore to employ this Laser Teeth Whitening technology that is still touted as the gold standard in teeth whitening, says Mrs Tan. Smile Inc was also the earliest to fully computerise its operations, from the front office to the back room, she adds.

The group has grown its cosmetic dental practice as well, using a unique combination of artistry with cosmetic dental techniques to address the aesthetic concerns of patients through its “The Smile Inc Makeover” trademark suite of services. The procedures, which help to enhance the smile of its patients, can have a significant impact on their self image, confidence and quality of life, says Mrs Tan. “This has led to the growth and popularity of cosmetic dental procedures among the public and fellow colleagues in the dental industry over the past decades.”

Singapore has “been a solid base” for Smile Inc, she added, particularly with its stellar reputation for the healthcare industry, a highly trained workforce and excellent infrastructure, providing a “strong foundation” for Smile Inc to grow its business. “These steadfast qualities of Singapore Inc are also well aligned with that of Smile Inc’s, and Smile Inc’s success today is a validation of the achievements of the former.”

Given the limited domestic market, however, Smile Inc plans to expand overseas. With its strong brand and multiple awards and achievements, the company

has received “numerous expressions of interest and proposals from private and institutional investors to advance its footprint overseas”. “It is in this respect that Smile Inc’s strategy for growth and expansion will take flight, and where opportunities abound,” says Mrs Tan.

As Singapore reflects on its 50 years of independence and looks back on its many achievements, Mrs Tan hopes for Singapore to continue having a strong, stable economy while continually making a positive impact on the global stage, in politics, economic policies, environmental issues and in social initiatives.

At the same time, there is an “urgent need” to tweak Singapore’s healthcare regulations in order for the city-state to remain competitive against its neighbours, she adds. “We need to have our regulatory bodies in the medical and dental fields be more open and not microscopic in their outlook.”

Singapore needs to liberalise “outdated and conservative regulations that hinder progress, and stifle Singapore’s passage to stay ahead in the healthcare game in the global arena,” says Mrs Tan.

“The ministry needs to continually work on building a regulatory framework that encourages progress whilst maintaining high standards in patient care in Singapore. . . One way forward is for the ministry to have open dia-

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PHOTO: JOSEPH NAIR

logues with Singapore’s private healthcare sectors and be more receptive to our needs.”

This is critical, especially as the costs of operating a healthcare business rise in Singapore, with the lack of skilled manpower—whether surgeons, nurses or auxiliary staff—and the increasingly high costs of rental. These would eventually translate into higher treatment costs for patients, Mrs Tan warns.

But no matter what comes, she is confident of Smile Inc’s future. “Challenges will always abound and change is constant. Our shared vision with a committed core team and workforce as well as a strong focus on our key strengths will stand us in good stead in our drive for growth.”