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Putting the 'green' in built environment

A provider of urban greenery solutions, Elmich goes the extra mile to fulfil its customers' urban landscaping needs

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Mr. Lim Kai Xiang, Elmich's focus on research and developing customer needs

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IN 2016, after Super Typhoon Meranti devastated southern China with wind speeds of 170 kilometres per hour, Elmich's Green Wall at JI Hotel Xiamen remained completely unscathed - concrete evidence of the company's superior product.

Two years later, Elmich Pte Ltd received the Enterprise 50 Award as well as the Inaugural Enterprise Transformation Award. The latter was in recognition of a company that has transformed itself to be innovative and future-ready.

Currently, Elmich - a leading provider of ecologically-minded urban greenery solutions to developers, contractors and architects worldwide - holds over 160 patents and design registrations granted and pending under its name.

The company was founded in 1985 by then 35-year-old Alan Lee, the executive chairman, when his uncle requested waterproofing coats for public housing projects at Simei. A trained naval architect who used to work for a Soviet fishing company, Mr Lee resourcefully supplied the same waterproof lubricants he applied to fishing boats to waterproof roofs.

Over the decades, customers presented Elmich with increasingly complicated urban landscaping needs. "We respond to the demand," said Mr Lee, who utilised his background in engineering to create new solutions, marrying nature and urban living.

Elmich, which now has a local staff strength of 46 and is headquartered in Singapore, has branched out to Australia, Germany, Malaysia, Switzerland and the United States. Its products are also exported to Southeast Asia, Australia, Europe, and America. Exports constituted almost 70 per cent of the company's 2018 revenue of \$13 million.

Locally, Elmich's products have been used in many projects over the years. It has provided urban greenery products to most of Singapore's hospitals and polytechnics. It supplied waterproofing materials to the Esplanade, Marina Bay Sands as well as Resorts World Sentosa. Elmich manufactured the green curved roof for Skool4Kidz @ Sengkang Riverside Park, the largest childcare centre located in a public park in Singapore. The special design, which resembles a "green cocoon" from a bird's eye view, integrates seamlessly with the park surroundings.

Customer-driven innovation

Since its inception, Elmich has focused on meeting market needs and its innovation is mainly customer-driven.

"Invention is like building an aeroplane," said Mr Lee, who pursues it passionately. When he gets an idea, he stays up late designing before he gets the engineers and designers involved in drawing up sketches and producing a 3D model. The end result is not the work of a single person but the product of all staff at Elmich.

Elmich also conducts in-depth research on the offerings of competitors. For example, Elmich won the bid to provide waterproofing materials for Woodbridge Hospital (now known as the Institute of Mental Health). Understanding the specifics of the requirement, the company conducted intensive research on various types of membranes and offered a superior waterproofing alternative to the consultants' specified brand. This not only met but exceeded the performance of the specified material, resulting in significant time and cost savings for the project.

Ensuring quality control

Elmich has always maintained excellent quality for its products. It pays special attention to the selection of raw material suppliers, sourcing only from reliable environmentally-conscious suppliers, certified in ISO 9001 Quality Management and ISO 14000 Environmental Management Standards.

A self-proclaimed "gadget freak", Mr Lee places much emphasis on investing in technologies for Elmich's quality assurance engineers to conduct quality checks on products. The company even purchases equipment to conduct destructive testing on a product's potential limitations. Elmich also conducts regular independent laboratory test results to ensure materials in its manufactured products meet its own set requirements as well as Singaporean, Swiss, German, American, Australian, and Japanese standards.

Mr Lee abandons products with the tiniest imperfections even though substantial investments have been made. "I am a perfectionist," he said. "If (a product) is not good enough, I'll do it again."

When product prototypes are not up to Mr Lee's standards, he scraps and remodifies them to his satisfaction before finally releasing the products into the market.

Said Mr Lee: "The secret behind Elmich's success is its unparalleled customer-centric innovation, renowned excellence in quality, technical support and its talented and driven family of employees."

Employee-centric company

In its 34 years of business, Elmich has neither retrenched anyone nor implemented a pay cut. It provides a nurturing environment for its employees and emphasises staff training. "We equip employees with the knowledge to go the extra mile for our clients," said Mr Lee.

"This is critical in an industry where unexpected and unforeseen problems can easily jeopardise a project. By helping employees to be flexible, Elmich can provide a more tailored solution, helping clients to anticipate their future needs."

Future challenges

Elmich is positioning itself to become an urban greenery leader by growing its global presence and expanding its product lines. For the export market, Elmich intends to penetrate deeper into current markets in the US and Europe. It began its foray overseas in 1999 by exporting to Australia and, to date, has a presence in more than 30 countries across six continents.

Product-wise, Elmich has cautiously expanded into more urban greenery products. "We are a firm believer in taking small but steady steps," Mr Lee said. "Elmich focuses on meeting as well as anticipating customer needs. Existing products need to be improved and new products added."

Tips for aspiring entrepreneurs

Mr Lee advises young entrepreneurs to "work hard and work smart, there is no substitute for hard work. Have confidence and trust in the people helping (you).

"And stick to your goal and keep your nose clean. Never sacrifice short-term benefits at the expense of long-term reputation for reliability".

