

Firm markets ad space on restaurant tables

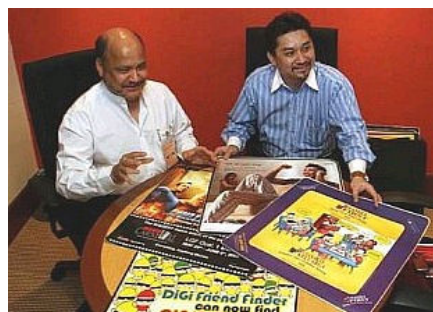
By **M. HAFIDZ MAHPAR**

TABLEVIEW (M) Sdn Bhd, which sells tabletop advertising space, had a difficult time when it was first operational six years ago. It had to work hard not only to gain clients, who needed convincing since the medium was new, but it also had to secure the ad space on restaurant tables.

The first barrier to entry was to acquire the exclusive rights to the restaurants.

Tableview chief executive officer Kelvin Hong recalls: "We started out by going to individual mamak restaurants to talk to their owners. At 2am to 3am, when most people slept, we had to talk to them because that was the offpeak time when the owners could talk to us or when the owners were at the outlets to collect money and check on the operations."

Within three months, the company managed to sign up about 300 outlets. It was slow going because most outlets had individual owners instead of being part of a chain of restaurants.



Shahar Noor (left) and Kelvin Hong show some of the eye-catching table-top ads

But Lady Luck was on Hong's side, for one day he met a restaurant owner who also happened to be the president of the Malaysian Indian Muslim Restaurant Owners Association (Presma). This led to the signing of a memorandum of understanding and securing the rights to over 2,000 outlets under the association.

Presma president Jamarul Khan Kadir, in turn, introduced Hong to the president of the Malaysian Indian Restaurant Owners Association, Datuk Ramalingam Pillai. And the rest is history.

Later, when other parties tried to also enter the tabletop advertising business, they could not sustain their business because Tableview, with its TableTalk brand, had secured rights to all the "good" outlets, Hong says.

Tableview today has rights to about 80,000 to 100,000 tables nationwide, including Sabah and Sarawak.

Besides mamak restaurants, the company has also ventured into the eateries in universities and colleges. As these outlets allow advertisers to efficiently target the youth market, Tableview is able to charge advertisers a higher price than it

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could with mamak restaurants.

(For mamak restaurants, the official monthly rate is RM150 per table. The advertisers need to buy at least 200 ads.)

Tableview compensates the restaurants by paying rental. In addition, the key outlets receive free caps, aprons and serviettes.

Tableview no longer has a hard time acquiring advertising rights. "In the old days, we had to beg the outlet owners to let us use their space. But nowadays, people would call us up and say they want our ads on their tables. The tables have turned!" Hong says with a chuckle.

Despite holding a strong position now in tabletop advertising, the company has not been sitting on its laurels.

In June last year it appointed veteran adman Shahar Noor as executive chairman. Shahar, who previously held important industry posts such as Malaysian Advertisers Association president, has worked on both the agency and advertiser sides. He brought with him nearly three decades of industry experience.

To persuade advertisers and ad agencies that tabletop ads work, Tableview has also commissioned two qualitative surveys so far (in 2004 and 2006).

Shahar, who is also present at the BizWeek interview, says: "Advertisers need facts and figures to convince them.

But really, they don't have to think too much. The ads are right there, where people sit down to eat!"

In fact, one of the medium's strongest points is that customers are exposed to the ads for a duration of half an hour or more. DiGi, one of Tableview's biggest clients, has seen good response to its tabletop ads that promoted downloads and enhanced services.

Shahar says Tableview plans to do a more comprehensive study next year, involving more respondents. The research will be both qualitative and quantitative.

Although Tableview has rights to about 100,000 tables, only about 5,000 of them are currently utilised. Hence, there is still immense potential for expansion.

On why there are many tables left, Hong says: "Big advertisers and a lot of major brands are based in the Klang Valley so the decisions are made from there. The companies want to go into Sri Hartamas, Bangsar, and SS2. All these places are 100% covered, so we're trying to bring them outside the Klang Valley."

He points out that many advertisers are already selling their products outside the Klang Valley; it is just a matter of customising the ads to appeal to the locals there.

Shahar has even suggested the idea of expanding the TableTalk brand beyond Malaysia to other countries in the South-East Asian region through franchising.

Tableview has since started working with a partner in Singapore, and talks have begun with potential partners in the Philippines and Jakarta.

On the local front, Tableview has expanded its reach to the affluent group by securing the advertising rights from Kim Gary chain of 11 restaurants, which command a strong following among the younger Chinese crowd.

"This is where we can bring in more lifestyle brands to advertise, including watches and mobile phones," Hong says, adding that mamak restaurants are more for targeting the mass market.

Tableview sells not just space but also ideas on how to optimise advertising spending. For example, when Listerine

launched its mouth freshener PocketPaks, the product was also made available for sale at the mamak restaurants.

Hence the PocketPaks tabletop ads not only created the desire to buy, but also led to consumer action. The company has done loyalty card programmes, and it also sells non-table media space in the restaurants such as on wall-mounted lightboxes.

Hong says that in November, Tableview will launch a new interactive medium that will further add value to TableTalk ads across its network.

He declines to reveal details, only saying: "While TableTalk ads create awareness, provide information and arouse desire in consumers, this new medium will allow the consumers to experience actual simulation of the products and services offered by advertisers."

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