

GrandWork fitted for more success

It has earned a reputation of being able to deliver on time and with quality, writes **GRACE CHEW, KIA JIE HUI** and **YEO ZHIWEI**

GRANDWORK Interior's managing director (MD) Jay Chiu is confident that his company is in an industry that is well placed to tide the current economic crisis. This is because his company, which provides interior fit-out solutions and custom-made furniture for upmarket commercial businesses, has the advantage of a market demand that will "always be there".

The emergence of the middle class in Asia has brought big luxury labels to the region, and with labels such as Tod's, Bulgari, Mulberry, Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, Miu Miu, Hogan, Vertu, and Emporio Armani extending their presence in surrounding lands, they would require qualified, reliable builders to build more of their stores.

The team has built Prada, Giorgio Armani and Club 21 boutiques in Kuala Lumpur; Mulberry and Bulgari outlets in Jakarta; and numerous Kinokuniya Bookstores around the world – ranging from 12 bookstores throughout Japan to glamorous outlets in New York and Dubai. By growing with its clients, GrandWork has expanded its operations to form a regional and global network spanning 41 major cities in 18 countries.

The main locomotive driving GrandWork's success is unquestionably the founder and MD of the firm, Mr Chiu. Although Mr Chiu is humble in saying that his company has been fortunate in many ways, GrandWork's success has not come about by coincidence.

Operating in a lucrative market is often very demanding, and the dedicated GrandWork team has gone as far as pulling all-nighters to deliver on tight schedules. As a result, GrandWork has earned the reputation as a company that is able to deliver on its promise of timeliness and quality. GrandWork also prides itself as an innovative and approachable builder that provides superior after-sales services. These characteristics can easily be observed in the company's long-term partnership with renowned Japanese bookstore chain Kinokuniya Co Ltd.

In 1996, GrandWork won the bid to build Kinokuniya's first bookstore in Singapore, at the Sogo Department Store in Raffles City. A good working relationship, built on trust and professionalism between the two companies was established. This then translated into Kinokuniya entrusting a string of local and regional projects to GrandWork, from the Kinokuniya Bookstore at Liang Court, to projects in major cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Sydney. In light of a successful working relationship over the first few years, Kinokuniya appointed GrandWork in 2004 to undertake a major project – an approximately 45,000 square feet bookstore in Hokkaido. This represented a rare and valuable opportunity for GrandWork to penetrate the otherwise highly "Nihon-centric" Japanese market (referring to the common practice among Japanese firms of favouring Japanese partners over foreign ones when cost aspects are close), and marked a milestone for GrandWork.

Kinokuniya project

In order to fulfil its contractual obligations, the team at GrandWork went about preparing for the Kinokuniya project at Hokkaido, manufacturing custom-made furniture in a flat packed manner to reduce damage and transportation costs. There were many considerations such as packing style and shipping documents for custom clearance. However, the most important legal requirement was compliance with the "Sick House Effect" Regulation that was effective in Japan since 2002. This meant that the GrandWork team needed to reassemble its team to work out new production



Driving force: Mr Chiu is confident his company is in an industry that is well placed to ride the economic crisis as interior fit-out solutions and custom-made furniture for upmarket commercial businesses have a demand that will 'always be there'

procedures and other aspects within a very tight timeline.

The company had two options at this point: to abandon the project and risk jeopardising a cherished relationship with an important customer; or to take up the seemingly impossible task of reforming its production processes in compliance with Japanese standards, and still complete the job on time. GrandWork chose the latter, and with barely two months to the opening of the new store, collaborated closely with the fellow Japanese contractors appointed to carry out works in Hokkaido. The team focused entirely on the timely delivery of a product that met all Japanese building standards, even if this meant incurring substantial costs. Their efforts paid off, and GrandWork managed to deliver the final product in time for the store opening. Kinokuniya was duly impressed at the level of dedication shown by GrandWork, and the high quality of the final product delivered despite time constraints. Since the Hokkaido project, Kinokuniya has sought GrandWork's services for new projects all across Japan.

Eye for innovation

In the course of completing the Kinokuniya (Hokkaido) project, Mr Chiu's keen eye for innovation spied an opportunity for GrandWork to produce formaldehyde-free products. The meticulous process involved in producing such products is a key advantage due to the technological know-how and high fixed costs

involved in setting up operations. Mr Chiu anticipated that setting up a fully formaldehyde-free production facility would provide GrandWork with a competitive edge in the long run. With trademark efficiency, GrandWork started production at their premises in Ang Mo Kio, effectively importing "Japanese expertise" into Singapore. In 2006, GrandWork acquired the certification of JPIC's formaldehyde-free standard, a stamp of authority assuring clients that GrandWork's products are of the highest quality. The formaldehyde-free tag has since allowed GrandWork to position itself firmly as a builder catering to an environmentally and health conscious clientele. It has also paved the way for further collaboration between GrandWork and Kinokuniya in the Japanese market.

Besides its openness to innovation, another strength of GrandWork is its strong belief in following up with clients even after the project has officially come to an end. In the case of Kinokuniya, GrandWork is blessed with a valuable employee in Lim Teck Heng, its business development director. Mr Lim is fluent in the Japanese language and handles GrandWork's projects in Japan. He and his team make regular trips to the Kinokuniya bookstores around Japan, primarily to check on the condition of furniture and fittings, and suggest suitable rectifications for any problems. As the builder, GrandWork is better able to anticipate potential problems each store would face in terms of wear and tear, and sees it as the company's duty to antici-

pate client concerns and to provide the necessary maintenance services. Such diligence on the part of GrandWork is also a key reason why Kinokuniya is willing to place complete trust in GrandWork time and again.

Despite the current economic downturn, Mr Chiu believes that ultimately, the interior construction business will rebound with the rest of the economy. Thus, GrandWork is choosing to view the present economic crisis as an opportunity. Plans for international expansion are being held back in favour of strengthening the fundamentals of the company. For instance, GrandWork is using this opportunity to renegotiate terms with current suppliers and sub-contractors, as well as seek new partners for future collaboration.

Most importantly, GrandWork sees these bad times as an opportunity to recruit new blood for their team. At a time when large corporations are retrenching, GrandWork is looking to take on members from the swelling pool of young talents and veterans with valuable expertise. Mr Chiu and his team agree that recruitment is their biggest worry because of the difficulty in recruiting highly qualified young talent who are passionate about the job. This is because of the common misperception that SMEs do not offer career growth opportunities and the stigma attached to the construction industry.

However, the success of GrandWork's assistant general manager, Fion Ng, soundly dispels that myth. Ms Ng holds a Bachelor of Science in Building from the NUS School of Design and Environment. She joined GrandWork Interior in 2002 and has since become an indispensable figure in the company.

"Despite the fact that most of my fellow peers had joined big corporations like Kajima construction or prestigious banking industries and were giving away their name cards bearing glamorous corporate titles during get-together luncheons, I had gone against the trend to stay on with GrandWork as I trusted that one day, this company will be a well-known name in our industry," she said.

Looking at GrandWork's performance today, one can certainly congratulate Ms Ng on her foresight. GrandWork Interior has come far since its humble beginnings and looks en route to greater success. It would not be an exaggeration to say that GrandWork's employees can now hand out their name cards with more than a dose of pride.

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