

Kulai boy dishes out ready-to-eat Malaysian meals

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Armed with marketing and business development skills gained from the fast-moving consumer goods sector, Liow Ren Jan today has realised his dreams of having his own brand.

"For a long time, I wanted to do things by myself. I seriously thought about it in the past few years," Liow said when met in Petaling Jaya.

From his research, readings and experience living abroad, he decided to venture into microwaveable halal frozen ready-to-eat Malaysian meals.

Liow's strategy is not to start a business from the scratch, but rather acquire an existing business.

Therefore, in February last year, he bought over a local company that had the technology for microwaveable frozen meals.

The acquisition was completed four months later. Liow established AYS Sdn Bhd to manufacture and market the products, and AYS Signatures Sdn Bhd to handle the licensing of outlets that sell the products.

And what else would be more suitable for a person who was born and bred in Kulai, Johor, to choose Sri Kulai as the brand name of his products.

"I'm a Kulai boy," Liow proudly proclaimed. Besides promoting the 30,000-population Kulai town, the brand also features Malaysian culture through the meals. AYS is not only the first company to manufacture the first microwaveable halal frozen ready-to-eat Malaysian meals under the Sri Kulai brand, but it is also the only food company that bears the logos of Malaysia Truly Asia and Zoom Malaysia.

Liow, who spent 14 years outside Malaysia, said frozen microwavable food is part of everyday life in the West but it is still new in Malaysia.

Working for a large personal care products company in marketing and business development have contributed to his new venture.

"Food is challenging but both food and cosmetics are consumer products. My business now is making people's life more convenient," he said.

Liow invested some RM3 million for the factory, equipment, know-how, working capital and brand building. His initial investment came from his personal funds, while the rest are from bank loans.

Sri Kulai now has 89 halal-certified meals and the list is growing.

AYS, which supplies eight meals to low cost carrier AirAsia Bhd, is trying to seal deals with two more airline caterers.

The company is also supplying its products to retailers like Jusco.

Liow said technically, the company's direct competitors are freshly cooked meals providers as well as fast food outlets.

However, unlike fast food outlets that are selling Western food, AYS sells authentic Malaysian meals. "We are selling convenience that everybody is looking for and where money can't buy," he said, pointing out that Sri Kulai meals are the answer to the city dweller's hectic life.

Its dim sum combo is Sri Kulai's best selling item, followed by nasi lemak and prawn sambal. These three items contribute 60 per cent of total sales.

"At Jusco, dim sum combo is the best-selling product, garnering 33 per cent of total sales of our 10 products (supplied to Jusco)," he said.

There are businesses that are hit badly by the economic slowdown, while some are benefiting from it.

AYS is in the latter group as Liow said since the global economic downturn reached Malaysia, sales of Sri Kulai dishes increased, particularly its chicken curry, roasted chicken and prawn sambal.