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## Full-hearted Heart Travel

By Ruby Gonzalez | Group Editor

**TRAVEL** is still mostly perceived as an option for people with superfluous income. Thus it comes as an interesting contrast that a travel agency in Singapore was recently founded with aim of using the business to give a break to the society's less privileged.

With the support of Teck Ghee Community Club and Ang Mo Kio Com Care Network, Heart Travel was set up in May this year to train and create jobs for the less privileged people by employing and nurturing them to be proficient travel consultants and, in turn, allowing them to command better job prospects. These are composed of the lower income, home-makers, ex-convicts and unemployed middle-aged. Heart is Singapore's first social enterprise travel agency.

The aims of Heart, also touted to be the first travel agent to be based in a community club, are idealistic. So where does idealism end and tough business decisions begin?

"There is no boundary if we at Heart Travel stay focused and sincere with our social cause because the common problem that all management personnel face is justifying the ROI to their owners. This is an industry where the profit margin is so low and yet when a sales staff makes a mistake like booking a passenger on a wrong date or booking class, the loss can be exorbitant. Hence, owners will instruct the manager to pass the bucket to the staff to food for the loss. This is a bad guy's shoes that no one wants to put on!" said GM Sam How.

"Therefore, to avoid such stress and losses, we have to be very careful, strict and vigilant with our needy staffs in terms of their understanding and knowledge of our products and booking procedures. And we have to be very observant and analytical when conducting interviews in order to decide whether the interviewee is suitable to be trained as a travel consultant," How said.

As of early September, Heart had a staff of six. How explained that the head count "fluctuates regularly" because they would have to let a "needle" go once they find out that he or she is not suited for the job. "The growth of our staff strength will also be dependent on the sustainability of the business and number of needies that we need to help," he said.



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**- Sam How, GM, Heart Travel**

Until he joined Heart in April, How was connected with Asia-Euro Holidays, where he had been GM for two years. He had been in the industry since 2000 and said that the idea of a social enterprise travel agency was initiated by a former boss, Samson Tan, CEO of GTMC Travel, which is a network of inbound cum wholesale outbound tour operator with offices in more than 20 countries worldwide.

Heart has the capability to offer worldwide ticketing and tour packages, and handle most FIT/GIT tour packages based on the industry experience of How and his product planner colleague. In consideration though of the needies' experience, they are concentrating more on the Asian destinations, especially simple coach packages to West Malaysia and packages by ferries to Batam and Bintan, and cruises. He said these services make it easy "for the needies to absorb easily and learn without much stress."

Heart is grateful for the support they are getting from WTS Travel, which is one of the main coach operators to Malaysia. "For the sake of supporting Heart Travel, WTS Travel had opened new pick-up locations at Ang Mo Kio Hub and Toa Payoh Central, in order for us to secure more potential clients in our area. On the other hand, we also focus on travel packages by flight to common FIT destinations like Bangkok, Bali, Phuket, Hong Kong, Macau, Siem Reap," How said.

The needies are being given three months to work on internet-based budget airlines; he said it will take quite a while before a totally inexperienced staff can understand and operate on any GDS system for flight

bookings. Once this period is up, their introduction to GDS systems commences.

How said that being based in the heartlands, they get walk-in clients from the neighbourhood. Their social cause is the out-of-the-neighbourhood drawer.

"We are receiving good responses and support from various individuals, grassroots organisations and companies that focus on their corporate social responsibilities," he said.

How said that they definitely need publicity to create awareness but that one of the culprits of high operating cost is advertisement. To go around this Catch 22 position, Heart refrains from media advertisement and focuses on the traditional handing out of flyers in the neighbourhood and word-of-mouth.

In addition to WTS, heart also gets support from Abacus and TENET Insurance, specifically for sponsoring the company uniform.

"Such support may be of little effort to these companies, but it goes a long way and helps small enterprises like ours to maintain our livelihood," How said.

It will take some time before the travel agency reaches its maturity, he said. But four short months into operations have already given them an indication of the what the future holds. "We are even having clients staying far away in the west of Singapore patronising us. And recently, we had lead a group of 120 pax from a private institution for their three-day incentive trip to Malaysia. Thus, I am certain our growth will progress positively," he said. ■