

# Success story of a restaurant group

By M. KRISHNAMOORTHY

VALUE the customer these are the key words the Lotus family restaurant group has religiously followed to build its chain of eight ceteries in the last eight years in the Klang Valley.

The man behind the group which started expanding as an Indian group of restaurants is former teacher Mohamed Isa Sabu, 51. He is currently also the MP for Kangar.

Focussing on his market-sensing capabilities, Sabu, as he is popularly known, set out to create the importance "customer value" among his managers.

"Its the ability to understand customers' current and emerging needs and wants, competitors' capabilities, offerings and strategies. We kept studying what is it that the customer likes to have in his food and we kept feeding these ingredients to spice up our dishes," he said at the Lotus head office at Jalan Gasing, Petaling Jaya.

"We aspire for quality and we go for customer satisfaction. Even if we get a compliment for a new dish from customers, we strive to make it better. If they remark that there is better food elsewhere, we work to make ours even better. And, if someone says we have the best, we work on trying to be better than the best," Sabu said.

"So, there has to be continuous improvement in our quality of service. While improving our food and beverages we also try to establish better relationship with our clients, suppliers and workers. When we work on all these aspects because we want smiles from all around."

All this was done, he said, without increasing the prices.

"This is the way to remain competitive and attract the people to our outlets which also serve Malay

and Chinese dishes. By keeping workers happy and overheads low, we have worked towards keeping our price competitive," said Sahu.

Tapping on its market potential, Lotus recently opened two Malay outlets called Nasi Kandar and Selera Kampung, both in Petaling Jaya.

The 24-hour Nasi Kandar restaurant also serves western cuisine like chicken chop, fish & chips and lamb chops.

Most of all, Lotus has kept changing its cuisine palatable for Malaysians.

Lotus market orientation is its answer to serving the best for its business success.

A market-oriented company is motivated in all its activities towards creating customer satisfaction.

"First, we sense what is happening in the market by going out and eating in other restaurants and closely monitoring our competitors," Sabu said. "Secondly, we talk to our customers, workers and executives for their feedback how the best could be served at our eateries with a difference."

Sabu gave the example of a fish dish.

"Fish tastes the same everywhere, but the difference is created through the seasoning and ingredients. We spice it more deliciously than the rest. Some special ingredients are added for the relishing taste," he said.

"When people eat once at the Lotus they not only return, but spread the word of good food to their friends and relatives. This works better than advertising. It's the difference that matters and creates customer loyalty," Sabu said.

As the chairman of Lotus, Sabu plays the role of adviser to chief executive officer R. Dorai and managing director Renah Ramalingam.

To Sabu, ranks don't mean anything.

"What matters is getting the job done. We all work as a team understanding each other better, and both the brothers. Dorai and Rama are good at executing our plans for action," he said. "All of us have different capabilities. I have ideas for improvement while Dorai and Rama have years of experience. It is this ideal combination which makes us efficient and expand rapidly in the Klang Valley."

Sabu's initial acquaintance with Dorai's late father has resulted in him becoming a father figure of the company. And, even today, Sabu is reminded of the relishing dishes Dorai's grandmother prepared for him.

Sabu wants his children to follow his footsteps in business and for this reason, his eldest son Ahmad Mahathir Asmadi has been appointed a manager for a cafeteria-style outlet.

"Although my son has a diploma in business management, I made sure that he started from the ranks of dish-washing and cleaning the floors about two years ago. To be a good manager, my son should know what it means to clean dishes and sweep the floor. If he has not done this kind of job, he will not be able to appreciate the difficulties of the menial jobs from a managerial level," said Sabu.

In his pep talks to his son, his advice is "make every worker feel like he is the owner of his workplace."

Here "ownership" does not relate to equity, but a sense of belonging brought by love for the organisation, peers and workplace, Sabu explained.

"It is my duty and the managers responsibility to create this environment and a corporate culture of love so that this culture will permeate through all levels of the organisation."