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## Lighting up people's lives

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MR V.J. Balan sees his business as lighting up people's lives. But his reply to queries from friends and strangers about his career has the tendency to leave them in the dark.

"It is only after I explain that I sell lights for a living that their puzzled look fades away and they begin to understand the nature of my business," said the group managing director of Light Style, a lighting retailer set up in September 1995.

Strangely enough, he stumbled into this line purely by chance. Initially, he wanted to be an accountant as he had a background in finance and marketing.

But life has a way of working by itself. He started as an apprentice at Seng Hup in Singapore when he was 22 years old. And the rest, like they say, is history.

At Light Style, customers can shop for the smallest of lights to the biggest of chandeliers. There are currently 3,000 types of lights available with prices ranging from as little as RM38 to as high as RM15,000.

Having been in the lighting business for the past 24 years, lights and their related activities and businesses are a passion to Balan. And it is little wonder that he wants the company to grow into a regional player.

"The international lighting market is extremely huge. For me, I'm a very contented man. To be able to grab the market regionally is enough for me," Balan said modestly.

The biggest players in the lighting market are companies from the US, including Lithonia whose exports are worth US\$1.3 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80), followed by Coopers Light with US\$1 billion, Lighting Corp with US\$500 million, Germany with US\$200 million and Spain with US\$100 million.

"Light Style's exports are within the RM20 million to RM50 million per annum range. It is very small. But for me, that is more than enough," Balan said.

The company also has a branch in Bangkok, Thailand, which is reporting good sales. It is in the process of setting up an office in India.

It plans to penetrate the Japanese market, which is very stringent technically.

"We haven't discounted the possibility. Besides, we have to first build up our contacts and ground knowledge. I don't want it to be like in Indonesia. We burned our pockets there because it was an extremely difficult market," he added.

The lighting specialist sources its diverse range of lights locally as well as from Italy, Spain, Czech Republic, Germany, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and the US.

Exclusive brand names include Raylo from Spain, Preciosa (Czech Republic), Schonbek (US), Faustig (Germany), Beby and Artemide (Italy) and Alabastar (Spain).

There is even a chandelier which does not really have a name, but "a certain Empress Mary Theresa from Europe liked it so much that we decided to name the chandelier after her", Balan said.

Light Style's corporate office and premier showroom is in Petaling Jaya. It has a branch each in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Johor Baru. By the year-end, the company hopes to set up two more additional branches in the Klang Valley.

Interestingly enough, Light Style has opened a cyber retail showroom where it offering a wide range of products.

"We talked about it for the last six months. Finally, we tied up with Maxis to go ahead with the launch of our website. We invested RM50,000 in its development. This is what I would call our sixth showroom, or to be exact our virtual showroom," Balan quipped.

In a move believed to be the first of its kind, the lighting retailer described the online venture as a "natural extension" of its business. It will allow customers quick and easy access to its products and services.

Customers can log on to [www.lightstyle.com.my](http://www.lightstyle.com.my) and choose from a catalogue of lights, be they wall, pendant, floor or table lights.

"The initial offering of 100 different types of lights will gradually be expanded to 1,000 so that online shoppers will have even more options in their choice of lightings," Balan said.

The company hopes to receive an average of 20 hits per day, mostly local. "We hope to close a deal soon and have more 'hits' from all over the world."

Light Style has targeted an on-line revenue of RM1 million a year for the next three years and expects this to gradually grow to RM5 million to RM8 million a year after the third year.

Asked about people's perception towards this relatively new concept, Balan said it is natural that people are reluctant to transact a purchase online.

"This whole concept is very new... I assure you that given time, this mental block can be overcome and the whole nation will be getting into it one day.

"You see, people are not convinced... (they ask) how can you sell big, heavy chandeliers on the Web? They need to see and touch it first to be sure. It's not a problem for a small, light table lamp, but for the big lights we have a lot of work to do to dispel their fears.

"We have to do some fine-tuning... a lot of info-fittings on what the products are made of, how heavy they are, what are their main components as well as educate buyers on how to trade and buy lights on the Internet," Balan explained.

He also said that there is a solutions page on its website.

"Many people do not know that lights have a science to it... to be compatible with its surroundings, such as the furniture or the room colour to create a 'mood' or ambience. We provide the best pointers or tips at no added charge."

Light Style has also formed a new subsidiary, LS Leads Sdn Bhd, which will spearhead the company's diversification into smart traffic lights.

LS Leds aims to tap the market's need for intelligent traffic lights which can reduce power cost by more than 80 per cent and maintenance charges by at least 50 per cent.

The system reduces cost of maintenance, saves energy and comes with a 10-year maintenance-free guarantee.

"The system is already in place in Singapore. As we speak, a mock-up is being carried out in Seremban, Kuantan, Penang and Ipoh. It is currently being studied by the council authorities and should be implemented in Petaling Jaya and Kuala Lumpur soon."

Under its retail business, the company has also diversified into top quality furniture. Light Style has the exclusive rights to promote Erpo, a brand name from Germany, which Balan is confident will be embraced by the market given its strong contemporary designs and high-end quality.

"Due to the Deutschemark depreciating in the international foreign exchange, the import duty has been removed by 42 per cent, making the furniture affordable.

Its architectural and project divisions have also made the company proud by leaving their distinctive mark on numerous prestigious landmark projects, such as the Petronas Twin Towers, Dewan Philharmonik Petronas, the government building at Putrajaya, Dataran Putra, Putrajaya mosque and the KL International Airport's VVIP lounge.

It has fully completed its Parcel A project at Putrajaya and is currently concentrating on Parcel B and Parcel C projects.

The company has also undertaken project work for numerous hotels, resorts, corporate buildings, theatres, museums and shopping malls.

Light Style also designs many of its own lights, but not on a wide-scale basis.

"We have tied up with a local designer, whose factory is in Rawang, to come out with new designs. We have also signed joint venture contracts with a design team from India to do projects there, including the Hyatt Regency in Calcutta and Mumbai."

Light Style also had the distinction of being the only lighting company selected to display its lights at the Malaysian Product Centre in London, UK.

The centre, which received the participation of 75 companies, was officially launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on October 5. It is a display area for Malaysian-made products and is specifically targeted at buyers in the UK and Europe.

"Traditionally, Malaysia is not a lighting country. We can never compete with countries such as Italy, Spain and the Czech Republic which have a long history and tradition in light manufacturing.

"But what we can do is to learn every possible detail we can and incorporate them into our technology."

The local lighting industry does not have the technology nor the glass-blowing facility of industry stalwarts such as the Italians.

Among the imported components of the lighting industry are decorative glasses, metalworks, finishings, frames and wood die casting from countries such as Italy, Spain and China.

From a humble beginning of 12 people, the company has expanded and currently has a workforce of 100. Over the past few years, it recorded good growth.

The company exported and secured projects worth RM20 million in 1997, RM46 million in 1998, RM45 million in 1999, and as at September this year RM30 million.

Strange enough, sales increased during the 1997 economic crisis. "I would describe this as a lagging effect. Prior to the recession, we managed to secure projects which would take us years to complete and deliver.

"By the time the project was over the recession had made its way out," Balan explained.

And where does Balan see Light Style going from here?

"There is no telling what Light Style will do next, but I can assure you we are not resting on our laurels," he concluded.

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