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Answering the call

By Intan Maizura

TWO childhood buddies show that Malaysia can definitely introduce winning products to the global market, says INTAN MAIZURA.

It took us four years to do this - quarrels, money issues, etc, were the norm - but we pressed on because we believed. I believed in it from the day Raj and I decided to build something that we could be proud of," says Datuk Farid Ridhwan, 48, with undisguised passion. "We always said that when we retire one day, we would leave a legacy."

"Yes, and this is going to be it," nods V. Rajendran, or Raj, 48, Farid's childhood buddy for more than 33 years.

It is no surprise that the duo are on a high, and well-deserved too. Months and months of "turbulence", that at one point even saw the normally confident Raj filled with doubts, have resulted in the introduction of the Ezeephone - reputedly the world's first prepaid fixed line phone system and service - via a partnership between Farid's Alif Manufacturing Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of the Farid Associates Group, and Telekom Applied Business Sdn Bhd.

"I got worried at one point," admits Raj. "Where are we going to get the money from, I remember asking Farid. He just told me to concentrate on the creative side and he'd worry about all the rest!"

Farid adds: "Well, I had to believe that it would all turn out right. A lot of money had been pumped into it."

Since its introduction in 2002, over 35,000 units of the phone have been successfully deployed, and strong interest from foreign phone companies has been received too.

What's more, this Malaysian invention has three patents pending.

"The Ezeephone is a pre-paid service for the fixed line user, effected through the adoption of concepts that are used in cellular prepaid," explains the ever-smiling Raj.

"It's easy to use, has faster connectivity, is fraud-resistant and can be deployed in any premise, public or private. This platform actually brings to market the best of fixed line telephony and the more popular cellular prepaid technology."

The phenomenal growth in prepaid mobile services, despite the high cost per call, must augur well for the guys and their product. But, for people who already have a prepaid mobile phone service, why install Ezeephone at home?

"I knew you'd ask that," retorts Raj.

"There are four reasons. First, the calls are clearer; second, they are cheaper - 10 sen a minute on a local call; third, Internet access; and fourth, health concerns. If you want Internet access, you have to have a fixed line, while some safety issues related to cellular technology are not entirely resolved."

Other benefits abound; for example, control.

With this offering, customers can keep their phone bill in check. Parents could avoid the shock at the end of each month of the huge phone bill that's obviously been run up by the resident teenager or teenagers, Raj adds.

And gone too will be the quarrels in a rented house full of students over the phone bill as each can have a card and they pay for the respective calls as they make them.

Other places where this product would be useful include high tenant

occupancy premises, universities, schools, hostels, hospitals and factories. Extended family households and those with maids will appreciate the Ezeephone too.

As for the service providers, an immediate advantage is that the prepaid business model allows for a 100 per cent bill collection success rate. In addition, billing costs as well as that of managing the collection process will be eliminated. Indeed, it represents an opportunity for fixed line operators worldwide to claw back some of the market lost to mobile telephony.

"We've always had this aim to build something for the global market," confides the gregarious Farid.

The initial idea was actually conceived by Telekom Malaysia, but after a number of false starts, "they came to us," grins Farid.

"I shall not say that we were the last resort but we ended up being the ones they could really work with."

"And the ones who delivered," interjects his partner.

Farid acknowledges that for the project to take off, Telekom Malaysia has to be 100 per cent behind it.

"They allowed us to design and develop the product. And they tried it out once it was completed, if not, we couldn't possibly proceed from there, including selling overseas," explains the group executive chairman of the Farid Associates Group.

According to the well-travelled Farid, it is always the case, that once the formalities are done with, the first question asked at his business meetings overseas is: "Is your local Telco using it?"

If the answer is yes, you're on your way. If not, "they'll just say 'leave your card' and give you a 'don't call us, we'll call you' brush-off."

That's understandable, he continues: "If even your own country can't accept your product, why should they? That's why we appreciate the fact that Telekom Malaysia has provided us with a test bed. Now, we have 50,000 test sites."

And the Ezeephone has managed to garner keen interest from over 20 companies in 20 countries around the world.

"They've been coming here to us for training and that's fantastic," Farid gushes. "And every time they come, we show them what else the country has to offer. We are not only selling the product, we are also selling the country. This is what we want - we want the revenue but we also want the country to benefit."

Helping to place the country on a platform for bigger things is definitely in his agenda.

"Our intention is actually to globalise. Can you imagine how it feels to have Malaysian phones being used, say, in Italy? To date, I know that our product is the only one of its kind in the world.

"As far as Malaysia is concerned, I don't think we've had much to offer to the world. I mean, people know about Proton because we had the greatest salesman in the world - Dr Mahathir. I have been a part of his entourage overseas. Ok, what shall we trade with people? Palm oil? Rubber? That's about it."

Turning a little thoughtful, he adds: "This has been the driving force for me - thinking that one day, I would get a product on the table and have the greatest salesman of our time to go out and sell it. Unfortunately, he's retired. I'm sure he would have done it and be proud of us. Everything in this product is homegrown; that's what he's been wanting..."

Raj agrees: "For Malaysia to be a major player on the world stage, it's important to have the right image - an image that will give people around

the world a favourable perception of you."

He cites an example: "Take Japan in the 1960s. Mention the country, you immediately thought of slippers. In those days, Toyota was a joke. We used to call it Milo tins. Today, everybody in the US wants to drive a Lexus, which is made by Toyota. It's all about brand-building."

The partners hope that their home-grown technology will spur others in Malaysia to strive harder.

"For us, this is just the beginning," Farid concludes.

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