

28/04/2003

Progressing with golf system

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LIKE many Malaysians, Arshad Ashraf is interested in golf. But unlike golf buffs who are more interested in improving their handicap, he is more keen to see them using a system called eSmart golf. That is the product which his company eSmart Systems Sdn Bhd has built. ESmart will enable golfers to book golf tee time slots from mobile phones and the Internet.

Arshad and his team members have won several industry awards for the implementation of eSmart golf. These included the Best Business Plan in the Venture 2001, Ericsson Kacip and The Indus Entrepreneur (TiE) awards.

With the wins, he was convinced that he did the right thing in turning his ambition to become an entrepreneur a reality.

But that was the bright side. Capital funds in the meantime had been slow in coming and at one point, eSmart Systems had to survive on the RM30,000 from Venture 2001 prize money to keep it going for three to four months.

The recognition and the awards were not enough to attract investors but the experience has not discouraged Arshad. Instead, it has made him wiser and much more determined.

"The challenges in life made me stronger and when there is a spirit of optimism, you must work very hard otherwise it will disappear and reality will strike," says the 30-year-old Arshad.

"It is like living your day with one cup of teh tarik and a piece of roti canai and learning how to budget with only RM200 to RM300 at hand."

Arshad believes that his company was faced with factors beyond its control, making golfers think twice about having a game on the course. "Situations like the haze, 9/11, Bali bombing and now the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) hurt our business," he says.

But for every struggle he has endured, he worked even harder at creating new products by exercising his creative expertise in technology. His latest innovation is golf card called Tiger in a Box which allows players to play 10 rounds of golf for RM150. "I have to be innovative to stay ahead," Arshad says.

Born in Lahore, Arshad grew up in Karachi and studied in Boston.

He took up degrees in engineering, which was his first interest, and religion because he wanted to have the knowledge to present a convincing argument to his American friends about his religion, especially during the Gulf War.

He also did a thesis paper on the origin of Islam and colonisation in Malaysia. As a result of two different degrees, he was confused as to what he wanted to do. But he was able to make his mind after listening to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech on the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the US.

His family moved to Malaysia while he was studying in the US and he was eager to join them. He wanted to start a company but with no business experience, he knew it was not going to be a piece of cake.

"It is important to go out and get your own ideas, but ideas have no value unless you execute them. To execute your ideas, you must have practical knowledge, hence you need exposure in the business environment and customers," Arshad explains.

He went back to Boston to work as a consultant for two years, servicing major clients like Disney, Nike, etoys and shoe retailer Nine West. Upon

his return to Malaysia in 2000, he was ready to begin his own company. He was only 27 then.

As a kid, Ashraf had always wanted to become a businessman like his father, despite a passion for performing arts. Watching how his father made contacts, entertained clients and struck deals gave him the impression that the world of business was an exciting place.

He took up golf even before the idea of starting eSmart Systems. But he is not as interested to improve his handicap of 22 as his focus is getting people to use eSmart golf.

"If I am too engrossed with the game, I will be carried away with it and not focus on the business aspect. It is better for me to work from a distance. An outsider is able to add more value," he explains.

"We are living in the Tiger Woods generation where you no longer need to belong to the elite circle to play golf. The young generation and everyone else who is not rich can also play," he adds.

On the performance of eSmart Systems, Arshad says there has been a 68 per cent increase in reservations compared to the same period last year while the rise in revenue over the same period last year is 46 per cent. "The increase in revenue per customer over the same period from last year is 54 per cent," he estimates.

Arshad says instrumental in the success is the belief and support from his peers and family, particularly his father who is also in eSmart Systems as the executive chairman. Others who have helped him include his uncle, a friend from Boston and a cousin who has a degree in golf.

"My strength was to take an abstract idea and make a dollar out of it," Arshad says.