

# Asia Apparel Wears Out The Competition

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The key to the firm's success has been its good reputation

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ASIA Apparel, a small t-shirt printing company that has yet to hit its first million in turnover, boasts prominent clients such as Nike, Shangri-La and Cartier amongst the tens of thousands of clients it has garnered in just four years.

Mr Neo: Has set his sights on opening his own local brand of apparel, Printwears, in three to five years time Asia Apparel specialises in printing high mix, low volume t-shirts and has 20 different printing methods, ranging from traditional silkscreen and embroidery to digital transfer that uses advanced technology.

The key to Asia Apparel's success has been its good reputation, which surpasses that of its peers that have been in the same industry for over 20 years.

Its primary form of publicity is through its website, [www.tshirts.com.sg](http://www.tshirts.com.sg), which Neo Hwee Yew, owner of Asia Apparel, managed to obtain by a stroke of luck.

'It was first-mover advantage,' joked Mr Neo about his memorable website address. 'With that website, it is easy because even without advertising people will just go in to see if there is such a site that sells t-shirts.'

Mr Neo's easy-going disposition also plays a large part in building up this reputation. Besides socialising at events, he has no qualms about imparting advice to his competitors.

'A lot of customers are like friends. Even competitors when they come, we teach. If they are my competitors, sometimes I can also sell their products. We can work together. We should be more open-minded,' says a good-natured Mr Neo.

Apart from the company's good reputation, Mr Neo's adventurous spirit also sped up the success of his company.

Just last year, it went through a phase of expansion, when it doubled its number of machines to 10 and also increased its number of staff to 10.

It had a turnover of \$850,000 in FY2009. Mr Neo is aiming for a turnover of \$1.5 million in its next financial year by increasing its bulk of overseas orders.

Since he started the company with his girlfriend (now wife), Mr Neo, 30, has ventured beyond t-shirt printing to distributing t-shirt printing machines and now has intentions of setting up a t-shirt printing school in his 3,200-square-foot office. And it had all started with a heatpress. Mr Neo, then an unemployed fresh graduate, was looking for novel ideas for Chinese New Year wear, when he came across t-shirt printing on the Internet.

Intrigued, Mr Neo purchased a China-made heatpress and started t-shirt printing at home. Though the machine started smoking a mere three months later, it was all the time needed for hundreds of orders to start coming in.

Witnessing the huge demand, it was then that Mr Neo converted his hobby into his career. Mr Neo taught himself t-shirt printing techniques and did his own R&D on printing techniques.

Learning through trial and error, he discovered many unconventional methods that enabled more efficient printing. For instance, when transferring a design to a t-shirt, parts of the design may drop off.

Contrary to traditional methods, Mr Neo uses house glue to stick the design back before reapplying heat, to prevent misalignment.

Another differentiating aspect of Asia Apparel is its capacity to print multi-coloured designs, using digital transfer and dye-cut. The machine costs \$24,000 and is easily available to companies.

When asked if this blunts his company's competitive edge, Mr Neo says, 'We sell the machines also, but Singapore companies are very conservative. They are afraid if they buy, they won't get enough orders.'

Only four out of the less than 20 t-shirt printing companies in Singapore do multi-colour printing.

Another special technique that Asia Apparel uses is sublimation printing, which is a type of heat transfer that allows the ink to evaporate into the fabric. This prevents fading and the hand-feel is good. However, there is a larger margin for error as the temperature goes as high as 220 degrees Celsius.

'As a young company, we must learn how to take risks,' says Mr Neo.

Far-sighted, Mr Neo has set his sights on opening his own local brand of apparel, Printwears, in three to five years time. He has already started printing the brand on the labels of some of the t-shirts he sells, to familiarise his clients with the brand. With a head full of ideas, Mr Neo says he is currently looking for a partner so that he can finally concretise his plans.