

## KIM SOON LEE

### Moving with the times

*One-lorry business grows into a full-fledged transportation and logistics company.*

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**I**t all started with the purchase of a lorry back in 1968. After gathering some experience working as a lorry driver, Mr Lim Chai Kiui decided to strike out on his own and founded the present day Kim Soon Lee company. "I used to take orders at the kopitiam telephone," reminisced Mr Lim, illustrating the tough times faced when he was carving out his business.

The company has since moved on with the times. "Today, we use the handphone and email for client correspondence," said Mr Lim. At the same time, the one-lorry business has also evolved into a full-fledged transportation and logistics company with over 250 transportation vehicles.

Mr Lim's hopes for a prosperous business is embedded in the name that he chose - the Kim in Kim Soon Lee represents gold, while Soon Lee means smooth-sailing. However, Kim Soon Lee has not been 'ferrying gold' through the years, and the business has seen its fair share of ups and downs.

In its early days as a one-man show, the company encountered its first major obstacle - the machinery on one of its trailers exceeded the maximum width allowed for vehicles on roads. But with that incident, Mr Lim became an expert on the procedures and paperwork involved in heavy vehicle transportation. "We were quite famous at that time because we had a police escort for our vehicles," quipped Mr Lim.

Among the various reasons for its success, the founder cites the ability of Kim Soon Lee to adapt to the changing environment as a critical factor. "As the times change, so do customer requirements - that's why we need to constantly keep up," said Mr Lim.



Founder Mr Lim Chai Kiui sees strength in Kim Soon Lee's emphasis on communication, both within the organisation and with customers.

While providing point-to-point transportation services, Mr Lim realised that there were many other related services that could be incorporated into his business model, such as the pre- and post-services of transportation. For example, a piece of cargo first needs to be packed for transportation and unpacked thereafter.

By being able to see the interrelatedness of these services and responding to customer needs, Kim Soon Lee derived its unique selling proposition in being a "one-stop transportation and moving specialist". Mr Lim prides himself in providing a full range of services and being able to accommodate any customer requirements.

#### **Going against the norm**

Kim Soon Lee also sees opportunity in going against the industry norm. "If there are new (project) jobs that no one has done before, we are willing to undertake the challenge," said Mr Lim, as he went on to describe how the company had devised new tools for a high-risk project – to move telecommunications equipment across the rooftops of Housing Development Board (HDB) flats using a technique known as 'skidding'.

Moreover, Kim Soon Lee is proactive in employing young people for its business. While other companies are hesitant about hiring inexperienced workers who would require training, Mr Lim believes that the dynamic nature of the transportation business requires new blood to cope with the changing times.

"New things come up every day. We want employees who are loyal, hardworking and are willing to take challenges," he said.

The company's risk-taking appetite in undertaking new projects and hiring inexperienced workers is complemented by Mr Lim's prudent financial management. While many companies seek aggressive expansion strategies, Mr Lim takes a conservative stance with his business. This has allowed Kim Soon Lee to grow despite the economic recession.

However, he still sees obstacles for Kim Soon Lee in the future. The transportation industry is still highly competitive and price is still an important consideration for customers.

"If our price is so much higher than others, it doesn't matter how good our services are, (our) customers will go to other people," he said. "So, we might need to lower prices to retain and attract customers."

"The industry is also all about timing," he added.

These service providers need to be available whenever the customers require the goods to be transported. That is the reason behind the recent expansion and diversification of its vehicle fleet, which gives Kim Soon Lee more flexibility to cater to the time-sensitive requirements of its customers.

Kim Soon Lee has also recently undergone an internal restructuring which has resulted in higher efficiency within the company. "It's all to do with human interaction," said Mr Lim, who sees strength in Kim Soon Lee's emphasis on communication, both within the organisation and with customers.

"When the customer has a problem, he expects you to solve it," he added. The internal change has improved the effectiveness of information flow within the company which helps it respond faster to client demands.

As ever, Mr Lim is hopeful about the future. "We're looking into possible overseas ventures," he said.

To prepare for the times ahead, Kim Soon Lee intends to go all out to retain its current customer base and generate further sales. It is also continuing its current strategy of maintaining a young fleet of vehicles so as to minimise problems such as vehicle breakdowns.

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