The Happy 8 Retreat: An "Art Stay"

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Abstract: *It was on 5 March 2019, Tan Kai Lek, the founder and managing director of the Happy 8 Retreat, thumbed through the financial report of the hotel for 2018. The revenue and profit of the hotel was slashed by 20% in year 2018 as compared to the previous year. The revenue decline was partly due to the fierce competition as the number of boutique hotels had increased significantly around Ipoh. In starting a boutique hotel which embraced an ecology and environmentally friendly setting and ambience, Tan described his hotel as providing an "art stay" to its guests, targeting those who want to have a novel hotel experience. Nevertheless, just like other small-sized hotels in Malaysia, Tan lack of effective marketing plan and strategies for his business. Tan believed in the importance of word-of-mouth marketing. However, he was told about the negative reviews posted on the online booking platforms by his staff which can affect the customers' decision in choosing the hotel. Tan was aware that the online reviews had become a major source of the reference for the potential customers, he was wondering how he can improve his hotel's sales through more effective use of word-of-mouth and digital marketing.*

Keywords: Small boutique hotel, Competition, Negative reviews, Digital marketing

INTRODUCTION

It was a sunny Tuesday afternoon on 5 March 2019, Tan Kai Lek, the founder and managing director of the Happy 8 Retreat (thereafter "Happy 8") thumbed through the financial report of the hotel for 2018. The revenue and profit of the Happy 8 were slashed by 20% in the year 2018 as compared to the previous year. Happy 8 was a small boutique hotel, located in Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia. In 2017, tourism in Ipoh flourished due to the promotion of Visit Perak Year. The state of Perak, in particular its capital city Ipoh, was heavily advertised to lure local and foreign tourists. Happy 8 also gained benefits from such development. The revenue decline was partly due to fierce competition. The number of boutique hotels in Ipoh had also increased significantly which followed the success story of M Boutique Hotel in 2013 (Kumaran, 2018). Happy 8 had numerous competitors, such as M-Boutique Hotel Station 18, MH Studio Hotel,

Ipoh Bali Hotel, Sekeping Kong Heng, Indulgence Restaurant & Living, Ban Loong Hotel and others. In starting a hotel that embraced an ecological and environmentally friendly setting and ambience, Tan was inspired to offer a unique and authentic lifestyle and experience for his guests by providing what he calls an "art stay". His passion and interest in wood art led him to design his own furniture and unique art décor for his hotel which distinguished Happy 8 from other hotels that have grown around Ipoh and Perak. The ambiance amidst a tropical setting allows guests to enjoy the uniqueness of Malaysian culture, hospitality, tradition, and history the country has to offer, specifically those from ethnic Chinese community who migrated to Malaysia in the late 19th century.

Tan aimed at serving a niche market, targeting those who want to experience a novel and unique stay as the hotel had beautiful and intricate wooden interior and furniture. However, the primary focus on unique design alone might not be appreciated by all its guests. This was especially true for local guests who expect more modern amenities and services for the price they paid. The rate per night ranged between RM159 (USD39) and RM400 (USD98), which were considered high as other hotels provide better facilities for about the same cost. Similar to a number of small-sized hotels in Malaysia, Tan lacked of effective marketing plan and strategies for his business. Additionally, digital marketing had emerged as an essential part of the hotel operation in the current digital age. Happy 8 had to keep up with the current development by actively employing the new technology to attract customers. While checking the hotel's revenue, Tan was told by his staff about some negative reviews posted on the online booking platforms, such as Agoda.com, Booking.com, and Hotel.com were likely to affect the customers' decision in choosing to stay at the Happy 8. Declining revenue and rising competition resulted to increase pressure for Tan to find ways in attracting more potential new customers and secure returning customers. The hotel's main expenses were salaries and employee benefits which account for 60% of its total cost while the rest was variable costs, such as maintenance and repair, utility expenses, and food and beverage. During off-peak seasons (which last about four months), the hotel suffered losses due to low occupancy, Tan had to use revenue from his family's wood factory to cover the costs. Being a small hotel with limited resources, Tan relied on word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing. Nevertheless, he was aware that online reviews have become a major source of reference for potential customers these days. He was wondering how he can better deal with negative eWOM and improve his hotel's revenue through digital marketing.

BACKGROUND OF THE HAPPY 8 RETREAT

For Tan, the motivation to set up the Happy 8 was driven not only by his interest in wood art and hotels but also by his strong desire to preserve the legacy of his culture, which had its roots in Perak. Tan had a great passion for wood art, nurtured since his childhood due to the influence of his father. He took over his father's wood factory (Bukit Merah Wood Products Pvt. Ltd.) after he graduated from Taiwan in the 1990s. Traditional wood manufacturing was considered a sunset industry in the country, and many family-run businesses were forced to shut down as there were no successors. Tan realized that he needed to find ways to promote his business. Some of the furniture

and art décor found in Happy 8 were made from wood that Tan had collected more than 20 years ago. He had continuously searched for creative ideas through extensive reading and attending exhibitions related to his passion for woodcraft. These led to new ideas converted into a number of award-winning wooden furniture.

Due to the shortage of space in his factory, Tan first built a showroom to display his wooden furniture. Overwhelming positive responses from visitors eventually inspired him to establish his first 'wood art' hotel in 2013 at No. 8, Happy Garden, Pasir Puteh, Ipoh. As he firmly believed that historical heritage and cultural legacy must be preserved, Tan took a bold step in purchasing a historical building in Ipoh Old Town a year later. This became his second hotel and the headquarter of his hotels. In the same year, he bought his third hotel in Kuala Sepetang, Perak. These hotels were purchased with his savings due to difficulty in obtaining bank loans, and thus, the gearing ratio of Happy 8 Retreat hotels was low. Tan would consider crowdfunding to address any financial flow issues in expanding his business.

According to Tan, each of his Happy 8 hotels offered a unique accommodation experience. The Happy 8 branch in *Pasir Puteh* for example was a refurbished and repurposed hotel using recycled wood and bamboo creating a natural and environmentally pleasing and healthy surrounding. The five rooms had different themes. The Happy 8 *Old Town* in the old area of Ipoh city was again a refurbished and redeveloped old building, and it had 12 rooms, each having its unique theme. There was also a cafe on the ground floor. The Happy 8 hotel in *Kuala Sepetang* was formerly a fishing wharf located in a traditional fishing village. It had 35 rooms, each with its own story of the river and the village.

Happy 8 had eight staff and most were based at the headquarter. The housekeeping and front desk staff worked on a rotation basis at three branches. The manager had a bachelor's degree in hotel management, and she oversaw operations of all three branches; her duties included stock checking, human resources, customer relations, procurement, marketing, and operation duties. She had an assistant manager who was a diploma holder. Three foreign workers worked at the café, and they had good culinary skills. The turnover rate was low, and there was mutual trust and a good relationship between the management and employees.

BOUTIQUE HOTELS AND TOURISM INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA

The boutique hotel was a sub-segment of the hotel industry, and recent decades had witnessed a global demand for such hotels (Johnson, 2019). The concept of the boutique hotel was first introduced in the 1980s, and it had witnessed exponential growth. Typically, boutique hotels distinguished themselves from mainstream hotel chains with their unique designs as well as their personalised and customised services. This type of hotel attracted especially young travellers who were looking for a unique experience.

The boutique hotels in Malaysia reflected the country's multiculturalism showcasing designs inspired by Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Peranakan cultures (Arifin et al., 2018). Some boutique hotels were built on previously private mansions, shophouses, and historical buildings. They were typically small-sized, and had between 10 and 100 rooms. They shared common features, such as being smaller in size, having unique character and design, and usually located at historical sites in addition to offering

personalised and individual services with a wide selection of activities and things to do (Aggett, 2007; Mahmoud, 2019).

There had been a change in the tourism sector as a direct consequences of travel behaviours. The hospitality industry had embarked on strategic initiatives to enhance guest experience and provided them with greater flexibility. Flashpackers, who were similar to backpackers, were the one in greater control of their itineraries, had slightly more disposable income, and used technological gadgets, such as smartphones, good cameras, and laptops, to improve their travel experience. According to President of Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA), there were more young people viewed travelling as a part of their lifestyles. The dramatic growth of social media and its various platforms directly linked to the prevalent use of the Internet was directly responsible for this change in behaviour of today's travellers who prefer to be more integrated with the local culture when visiting foreign destinations (Pearce et al., 2009). Walking tours were still the primary physical activity for tourists when visiting a new location, in addition to adopting the eating culture of the locals (Chin, 2019).

Malaysia's tourism industry faced a challenging period in recent years due to a declining number of tourist arrivals. For instance, international tourist arrivals dropped from 27.8 million in 2016 to 25.8 million in 2018. Singaporeans accounted for the largest number of visitors during this period; whereby their number declined by 14.6% from 12.4 million in 2017 to 10.6 million in 2018. However, the number of tourists from China grew by 28.9% from 2.3 million (2017) to 2.9 million (2018) (Ahmad, 2019).

Perak witnessed an increasing number of both domestic and international arrivals from 2015 to 2018 (see Table 1), but the average occupancy rate (AOR) of its hotels plunged from 51.3% (2015) to 44.1% (2018). This was attributed to the increase in the number of hotel rooms.

Table 1: Hotel Guests and Average Occupancy rate in Perak State

	Foreign Guests	Domestic Guests	Average Occupancy rate
2018	291,253	2,613,616	44.1%
2017	267,245	2,466,507	46.3%
2016	267,517	2,325,974	49.0%
2015	265,794	2,308,445	51.3%

Source: Tourism Malaysia (2019)

In recent years, Ipoh had been heavily marketed to international tourists, particularly among Singaporeans, who were looking for natural world and enjoy food trail experiences. Lonely Planet (the world's largest travel guidebook publisher) also listed Perak as a Top 10 'must visit' region in 2017 and pointed out the uniqueness of Ipoh as a heritage and historical site in addition to its vintage and classic cafes (Daim, 2016). Ipoh was a heritage city offering a unique multicultural architectural heritage (Mohamed et al., 2000). The conservation of cultural heritages in Malaysia was essential, especially in urban historic sites (Lai et al., 2013). Ipoh had magnificent temples in limestone caves. The city was known for its famous street food such as chicken bean sprouts and its signature drink – white coffee. Its strategic

location meant Ipoh was not merely a gateway to the hill cool station of Cameron Highlands, but it was also an important stopover city between Kuala Lumpur and Penang.

Many Malaysians and Singaporeans flocked to Ipoh to enjoy its white coffee and traditional food on their way to either Penang (located north of Ipoh), Kuala Lumpur (located south of Ipoh), or to Cameron Highlands. However, most tourists did not stay overnight at Ipoh, usually visiting the city only during the day (Kaur, 2018). Ipoh was located strategically between Kuala Lumpur and Penang along the North-South Highway and was considered as a stop or Rest and Service area (RSA) along the highway. Thus, there was a significant challenge for hotel operators to attract tourists to stay overnight in Ipoh.

THE MASCOT, CULTURAL HERITAGE, AND FOOTSTEPS OF HAPPY 8 RETREAT

The Mascot of Happy 8 was "Yasoh". Yasoh was a seed of the looking-glass tree (scientific name *Heritiera Littoralis*), representing lifelong happiness and good luck. The hotel's customers were offered the Yasoh as a souvenir of their stay (Happy Eight, 2018). The seed therefore, symbolised the art of living. Tan summed it up this way: by providing it with sunlight, air, water, and nutrition, it grows; by giving it love and patience, it can grow into a big tree. A tiny seed could grow into a big dream. Therefore, the inspiration of Happy 8 was preserving and nurturing the environment and uplifting society.

The uniqueness of Tan's "Art Stay" lied in the way he incorporated local cultural elements, creative design and art decor. Happy 8 introduced Malaysian culture as well as immersed its guests in the history of Chinese migrants to Nanyang (Southeast Asia). The guests also had the opportunity to learn the history of Concubine Lane and the early history of Malaysian Chinese business leaders in Ipoh (Booking.com, 2019).

Tan said, "We need to utilise local elements that are unique to attract more tourists. The stories of Nanyang Chinese were valuable, and we should promote them to the tourists. Branding was not merely about the name or logo. The historical stories and cultural values we had inherited can be served as a valuable brand that can attract tourists' attention."

By adopting the concept of "Slow Living" during their stay at Happy 8, guests could learn to live a less hectic life which defines their living in the city. Slow living was a lifestyle emphasising a slower approach to the aspects of everyday life (Parkins, 2006). Slow food and slow living were frequently proposed to be able to resolve the hectic lifestyles. Happy 8 enabled guests to enjoy a slower pace of life by providing a relaxing and artistic homestay concept that make guests feel at home. In terms of service, Tan prided himself by ensuring a friendly attitude and service towards his guests and built positive connections with guests. His staff was well trained in the aspect of customer service.

LOCATION, BRIEF HISTORY OF IPOH AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Happy 8 Old Town was located in a strategic location near the famous Concubine Lane (renamed Panglima Lane) in Ipoh. Through the efforts of local councils, property

owners and traders, century-old colonial-era Chinese shophouses and several historical buildings in this area had been revitalised to attract tourists.

This area was developed by Chinese migrants. In the 1900s, the shop lots nearby the Concubine Lanes were built and owned by a Hakka mining tycoon, Yao Tet Shin. He gave away all the shop lots in three lanes to his three wives (The Concubine Lanes of Ipoh, 2016). The locals named the lane as Wife Lane (now Hale Lane), Concubine Lane (now Panglima Lane), and First Concubine Lane (now Market Lane). The glory of the tin mining industry began to fade in the 1970s due to the collapse of tin price.

Today, Ipoh was one of the most prominent tourist destinations in the country and efforts had been made to preserve its historical architecture (Tam, 2017). Ipoh had unique characteristics and history. First, its development was linked to the history of the mining industry. This was marketed well by the hotel tourists in order for the latter to learn the hardships experienced by the Chinese ancestors in Malaysia. The importance of Ipoh as a major tourist destination was further boosted by Lonely Planet's review in July 2016 describing it as one of the best tourist destinations in Asia (Lonely Planet, 2018). Since then, photos and articles about Concubine Lanes started to appear in the news and social media, gaining this laid-back town international and domestic popularity.

CREATIVE DESIGN, COLLABORATION AND PUBLICITY OF THE HAPPY 8 RETREAT

The boutique hotels' attributes that attracted customers included location, service, architecture and interior design, facilities, customer experience, and social network (Khosravi et al., 2014; Wang, 2013). Tan was attempting to deliver a cultural and environmental message through his hotel which had a unique setting, layout, attractive wooden art decor, design, and paintings. Each hotel room had its own theme. The headboards of all the beds, for example, were made of recycled wood. Guest feedback showed that Happy 8's creative elements which combined all the unique Malaysian cultural values had a memorable and unique experience to them (Airbnb, 2019).

Tan had also designed several upcycled decor for his hotel. Upcycling was a process to convert used materials into products with a higher value in their second life, and it could help to reduce wastage and energy consumption (Sung, 2015). This could be seen at the entrance of Happy 8 Retreat at Old Town, Ipoh. It was genuinely an 'art stay' as various creative upcycling wood and materials could be found in the rooms, lobby, restaurant, and even in the restrooms (Exhibit 1). The hotel was also engaged heavily into recycling. For example, a recycled wooden window panel was used in one of the Happy 8 Old Town's rooms, with the frame surrounding a sunset wall painting.

Furthermore, Tan uniquely incorporated Malaysian culture into his hotel design, and this was also reflected in the room setting, lobby, and café. The roof of the main entrance of Happy 8 in Ipoh Old Town was made of used roof tiles from old houses, combined with modern material to create a new architecture. There were also beautiful wall paintings by Tan's ex-Nepalese worker who showed his incredible talent by decorating the hotel with unique wall paintings depicting nature filled with trees and birds. There were also beautifully crafted lamps with bird nest designs.

Tan also taught his staff to reuse unwanted items, such as roof tile, plate, wood,

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to give them a second life. The discarded wood was converted into creative and artistic furniture designs, such as the self-balancing wine holder (Exhibit 2). Broken plates were not simply discarded, rather were repurposed as the broken part was incorporated into carefully crafted wood (Exhibit 3). The hotel's courtyard was cosy and filled with greenery and natural sunlight. In addition to providing a soothing and calming ambience, this setting also helped to reduce electricity consumption. Wood-based dining tables placed strategically at the corner of the hotel overseeing the pond populated by beautiful fish underneath the steel mesh floor allowed for breath-taking view as guests enjoyed the natural surroundings. The pond was designed in an eco-friendly way with a filter system that did not require changing the water. Thus, it was clear that Tan's creativity had sparked a new way of using unwanted materials, which also helps to reduce waste, energy and water consumption.

Exhibit 1: Hotel lobby and the reception counter of The Happy 8 Retreat at Ipoh Old Town

Exhibit 2: Self-balancing wine holder

Exhibit 3: Broken plate fix with carefully crafted wood

Travellers, hotel guests and art lovers who had discovered this unique art stay have been amazed by the decorations, designs and the story of Happy 8. However, the signboard of Happy 8 at Ipoh Old Town was not very conspicuous. There was no signboard stating the name of the hotel except one big "8" placed in front of the entrance. Thus, one might not be able to locate the hotel easily.

Nonetheless, in terms of public relations, Happy 8's unique offerings and characteristics had attracted some media interest and coverage. For example, 29 Miss Cosmopolitan World 2018 top finalists visited Happy 8 during their roadshow at Ipoh (Yeoh, 2018). In October 2018, Happy 8 hosted a visit of the King and Queen of Perak. This media coverage provided free advertisement and publicity for the hotel.

Happy 8 collaborated with CycleDios that provide bicycle rental services to enable the guests to explore the beauty of Ipoh Old Town. This could help to resolve traffic and parking problems in addition to being environmentally friendly. The hotel also helped the local cottage industry by selling their products such as deodorant fragrance and charcoal-based skincare products. Additionally, Happy 8 provided space for local artists to display their paintings which portray the amazing and unique scenery and attractiveness of Ipoh. Some antiques were sold in the hotel on a consignment basis as well. Besides, Happy 8 had made arrangements for its hotel guests to visit Tan's furniture factory which also displayed many of his wood sculptures in addition to providing workshops for guests who were interested in woodcraft.

FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN HIGH-TOUCH AND HIGH-TECHNOLOGY

Happy 8 in its efforts to attract guests had begun to increase its amenities, facilities and entertainment, such as providing wireless services for its internet-dependent guests, television, and sculpture and woodcraft to increase the appeal of the rooms. Technology had become indispensable in promoting the hospitality industry. Internet apps, websites and other IT-related sites had become increasingly important for hoteliers to conduct their businesses and increase customer experience (Masset & Weisskopf, 2019). Customers can book their rooms via Happy 8 website or through other online booking platforms, such as Agoda.com, Booking.com, and Hotels.com. The hotel relied heavily

on word-of-mouth marketing instead of traditional marketing solutions, such as advertisements and commercials.

Today, electronic word-of-mouth had become essential, especially for experience products such as hotels (Casalo et al., 2015). Reviews of guests could be found on various online booking platforms as well as the hotel's Facebook page. The reviews were generally favourable. Most of the guests described the hotel's ambience as cosy and interior décor as unique. Additionally, its strategic location, which was near many famous eateries and tourist destinations, was a big plus factor.

The hotel attracted both international and domestic tourists. The guests' reviews of Happy 8 in different online booking platforms were generally good, with ratings of more than seven out of ten. Among their comments were: "a lot of eateries nearby. The room is very unique and made entirely out of wood"; "room is tastefully and uniquely designed combining modern art with a touch of nostalgia" and, "this is a Hidden Gem in Ipoh old town! The creator of the hotel must be a fantastic artist! Every corner of the hotel is Instagram-worthy! The room design itself is a joy to use!" (Agoda.com, 2019).

However, there were some shortcomings in terms of its service reflected in guests' negative reviews despite the best attempts of the hotel to fulfil the guest's needs, such as recommendations about good and tasty eateries nearby, popular Malaysian cuisines as well as famous destinations in Perak. Among the negative reviews from the guests found on the online booking platforms included the absence of a 24-hour reception as the counter was only opened from 8 am to 11 pm which caused inconveniences, especially in the case of emergency. There were also complaints regarding in-room services, such as non-availability of instant tea and coffee, the mattresses were too hard resulting in poor and disrupted sleep and back pain; not elderly-friendly as there was no lift in the hotel; lack of designated parking spaces near the hotel, and more serious issues related to pests like mosquitoes. Thus far, Happy 8 did not respond to such negative reviews in the online platforms.

The above generally negative feedback from guests meant the hotel might lose potential customers who nowadays tend to rely on such reviews as reliable sources for decision making rather than rely on information provided by the hotel (Pelsmacker et al., 2018). As guests could share their experiences, videos, and photos via Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and other social media, Tan had to ensure he was at the top of the game to prevent losing potential guests.

On its Facebook page, Happy 8 had uploaded the latest photos and videos on its events and activities. Information about the hotel history, room details and tariffs, promotions, and other offerings could be found on its official website, but not on its Facebook page. Electronic word-of-mouth had been widely documented as efficacious in attracting customers from all walks of life. Responding to customer online comments was an essential part of customer relationship management (Gu & Ye, 2014). Failure to respond to the customers' reviews can negatively affect the hotel's image. On the other hand, effective online management responses would enhance the future satisfaction of the customer who had bad experience or unsatisfied with their prior stay in the hotel and increased the chances of guests recommending the hotel to others (Peng & Liu, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Happy 8 was a relatively new hotel. However, it had managed to establish itself in the public eyes. Nevertheless, declining profitability, rising competition, and escalating operating costs posted a big challenge to its sustainability. The founder must strategise on ways to attract more guests, and to maintain profitability via higher occupancy rates. One way to achieve this was by handling guest complaints more effectively and enhance the use of digital marketing as the hotel industry is highly volatile as it was subject to external forces such as outbreak of major diseases and political uncertainty.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Perform a SWOT analysis to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Happy 8 Retreat at Old Town, Ipoh.
2. Identify and explain the Porter's generic competitive strategy has been used by the Happy 8 Retreat.
3. How can the Happy 8 Retreat utilise digital marketing strategies more effectively in responding to the customers' needs and feedback?
4. Design a suitable word-of-mouth marketing programs for the Happy 8 Retreat.
5. Explain to Tan on the rationales for the hotel to respond to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), especially negative eWOM by the hotel guests.

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