

## IMPRESARIO EXTRAORDINAIRE

As an investment professional with private equity firm First Alverstone, Gary Loh has more balls in the air than a circus juggler. But the debonair single-handicapper is unfazed, and masters his businesses with the same skill he shows in golf / **compiled by Ju K. Tan**

**GOLF DIGEST SINGAPORE:** Friven & Co, and SunMoon Foods are two very recognisable brands of yours. Is there a link between the two?

**GARY LOH:** They're both in the consumer sector. The main investment thesis here is the rise of consumerism in Asia. As the region develops, the demand of better quality products and better quality food would increase. This in mind, the other sector that we focus on would be healthcare, natural resources, property and financial services.

**GDS:** Everyone's eating healthier these days. How do you feel the natural approach from your SunMoon business serves to meet this demand?

**GL:** As a country progresses and becomes wealthier, people's eating habits become healthier and more fruits are consumed than meat. It's this trend that SunMoon is positioned to benefit from. Currently, SunMoon is known as Asia's largest fruit brand and is a large exporter of Fuji Apples. We are expanding the offerings to include citrus, grapes, peaches, tropical fruits and we have also started our lines of cut, processed fruits and juices. All these products

serve to meet this healthier lifestyle demand.

**GDS:** How do you go about sourcing for products for SunMoon foods?

**GL:** SunMoon's main source is China and we have started to look at the Southern Hemisphere to include countries like South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and South America. This will provide SunMoon with the ability to market counter seasonal products to our distribution channels all year round. The main comparative advantage is the distribution channel of the company, it's not commonly known that our apples and pears are sold to countries like Australia, New Zealand, US, Canada, Thailand, Indonesia, Spain, U.K., Russia and China.

**GDS:** What and how do you feel sets products and services from Friven & Co from the competition?

**GL:** We have to focus on the segment that caters to the kids in the home. We have already moved our operation manufacturing and sourcing to align the product offerings to cater to this segment. While Friven is known as a bedding

brand, the company business in bedding is actually less than five percent of total sales, nevertheless, the bedding product is also moving towards the nursery and toddler segment in the home. To further set the company apart, quality and brand recognition will be main focus of our sales strategy. We will use the group's sales distribution network, especially in China where we now have 107 stores and growing, to reach out to the consumers.

**GDS:** Any new business ventures in the works?

**GL:** Our sourcing arm, Friven Eagleton, has been selling toys and children products to the U.K. and Australia for more than 10 years. Our children apparel manufacturing arm, Friven CCFH, has been in the business for the past 20 years. Therefore, the recent acquisition of Hi 5 children product group is an extension of our overall business strategy. The group now has a fully integrated business platform from products, manufacturing, design, sourcing, brands and distribution. We will continue to expand the children licensing segment to fully exploit our fully integrated business platform.

**GDS:** What approach do you take in looking for opportunities, and how successful have you been?

**GL:** I am in private equity business and am in the business of looking for value opportunities. Our main

approach is in growth capital and value investing, but we also take an activist approach to demonstrate our ability to build up greater value. That is a differentiation that we like to make. We do not invest passively. When things don't work out, we do not just write off the investment.

I have had different levels of success. I have generally been positive in all the investment except for one (that was before we incorporated the activist approach in our investment). Therefore, I would consider myself lucky.

We have the next two years to realise our investments in SunMoon and Friven. However, I feel confident that our approach to rebuild the companies in three years and then reap the benefits in the following two years will bear the fruit.

**GDS:** You're a pretty sharp golfer from what we hear. When did you start?

**GL:** I took up the game very late in 2003 and I currently play off a handicap of 7. It's a game that features prominently in my life as it revolves around the business that I am in as well as a sport that I am passionate about.

**GDS:** What advice can you give a beginning entrepreneur that's looking for the next big thing?

**GL:** Remember to "keep your eye on the ball". Have patience and perseverance. It's almost the same advice I'd give to playing good golf! ♣

