

THE FACE BEHIND SAKAE SUSHI

MR DOUGLAS Foo, the eldest of three children, was born in Singapore in 1969. He studied at Red Swastika Primary School, Dunman High School and Victoria Junior College, before graduating with a distinction in Business Administration (Finance) from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1994.

1996: Mr Foo registers Apex-Pal as a trading office, manufacturing garments in India for sale to countries like Japan.

1997: Apex-Pal diversifies into F&B – first Sakae Sushi outlet opens in OUB Centre.

2002: Mr Foo is the Rotary-ASME Entrepreneur of the Year.

2003: Mr Foo receives the Singapore Youth Award; Apex-Pal is listed on the Singapore Exchange.

2004: Mr Foo receives the Asean Youth Award.

2006: Apex-Pal wins the Singapore Prestige Brand Award.

2007: First Sakae Teppanyaki restaurant opens at Century Square. Mr Foo receives the Public Service Medal at the National Day Awards.

2008: Sakae Sushi opens 70-seat conveyer-belt restaurant in New York's Chrysler Building and a second restaurant opens in Greenwich Village. However, the Chrysler branch closes within the same year due to the ailing economy.

2009: Mr Foo and other Young Business Leaders start Beat the Recession, a private initiative to give young start-ups tips on surviving the downturn.

In this new fortnightly series, our writers talk to people who stand out in their areas of interest, especially those from the corporate world



BY KOH HUI THENG

CONTACTING Mr Douglas Foo, 40, is a breeze. The chief executive of Apex-Pal International answers his phone with a cheery "Hi, Douglas here" and readily agrees to an interview.

There are no public-relations hoops to negotiate. No voice messages are needed, and there are no **exhortations** for you to call back another time. But confirming a time for the meet-up was indeed tough.

The first interview date proposed was a no-go. He was in Guangzhou. The man behind the Sakae Sushi restaurant chain was unavailable the following week too, due to business trips.

When the interview eventually takes place in February, almost a month after that initial phone call, Mr Foo promptly lists the appointments he has lined up after the 4.30pm interview.

A National Youth Council meeting and a parent-teacher association (PTA) meeting await. He laughs when you point out that it will be a very long day.

"I'm used to long days," he says. "Otherwise, I won't know what to do with myself."

The head of a 1,200-strong food-and-beverage (F&B) team is involved in 18 committees, ranging from **alma mater** Red Swastika's PTA to Dunman High School's Advisory Committee. He is also part of the Young Business Leaders board and sits on the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts' film-consultation panel.

Ask what keeps him going and he responds with a question: "How many days are there in 100 years?"

The answer – 36,500 days – shows that "time is finite". Asks Mr Foo: "How do you spend it meaningfully and say meaningful things?"

It is hardly surprising then to hear that he is one of 11 voluntary directors on the Khoo Teck Puat Hospital board.

But what does an F&B boss know about running a 550-bed hospital, which opened in Yishun last month?



EYE ON SUCCESS: Mr Douglas Foo, CEO of Apex-Pal International, plans to build Sakae Sushi into a global presence. (PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN)

"Coming from a non-medical background means we bring in new perspectives. For instance, the directors can examine how to do things that will make a patient more comfortable, such as making it easier for a patient to move from place to place. So, we're looking at things beyond a doctor's point of view."

Given Asia's ageing population, there will be more demand for geriatric care, both at home and from around the region. And he foresees that "Singapore leading the way as a centre for good practices".

With so many commitments jostling for his attention, where does he find time to handle everything?

"That's why I sleep about five hours daily. I used to think sleeping's a waste of time and retiring will be like sitting around, waiting for death," he says with a laugh.

"My weakness is not being able to say no. If I believe I can contribute or help in some way, then I will."

Sakae closed its Chrysler Building outlet in New York in 2008, barely a year after its opening. What lessons did you learn from the American foray?

I think we excited the market a bit when we entered. There was so much money flowing in from **private equity** and hedge funds but when the financial crisis hit, it all dried up.

The Americans have their version of "kopi money" where funds exchange hands to grease the wheels of commerce. They call it "key money". For example, one businessman offered us US\$100 million (S\$140 million) in cash to take over the Chrysler unit.

The financial crisis was a blessing because it made us revisit our

business fundamentals. We'll probably go into management contracts instead of direct investments in the United States.

Who would you pick to have lunch with and why?

Probably a CEO from a multinational brand, like Mr Ray Kroc (McDonald's) or Mr Howard Schultz (Starbucks). I would ask them how they built a global brand, with up to 30,000 outlets across the world.

When you say "hamburgers", you think of McDonald's. But there is a vacuum when it comes to sushi.

My dream is to build Sakae into a global presence. Right now, we have 100-plus outlets worldwide.

How do you balance work and family demands?

My very capable wife, Yen Khoo, does an amazing job looking after our four boys. I always make it a point to join my family for weekend meals.

Life is like a financial portfolio. You cannot invest everything in one area. When my first son was born, we were **catering** for Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's birthday function. I chose to be at my wife's side during the delivery as I had full belief my staff could run the show without me.

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HELPDESK 我的字典

Exhortations: 劝告 quàn gào

Alma mater: 母校 mǔ xiào

Private equity: 私募股权 sī mù gǔ quán

Catering: 提供伙食包办服务 tí gōng huǒ shí bāo bàn fú wù

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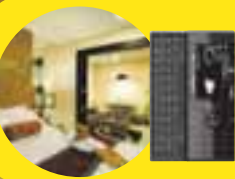
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