

personal business

More than just a **wash** and **vacuum**

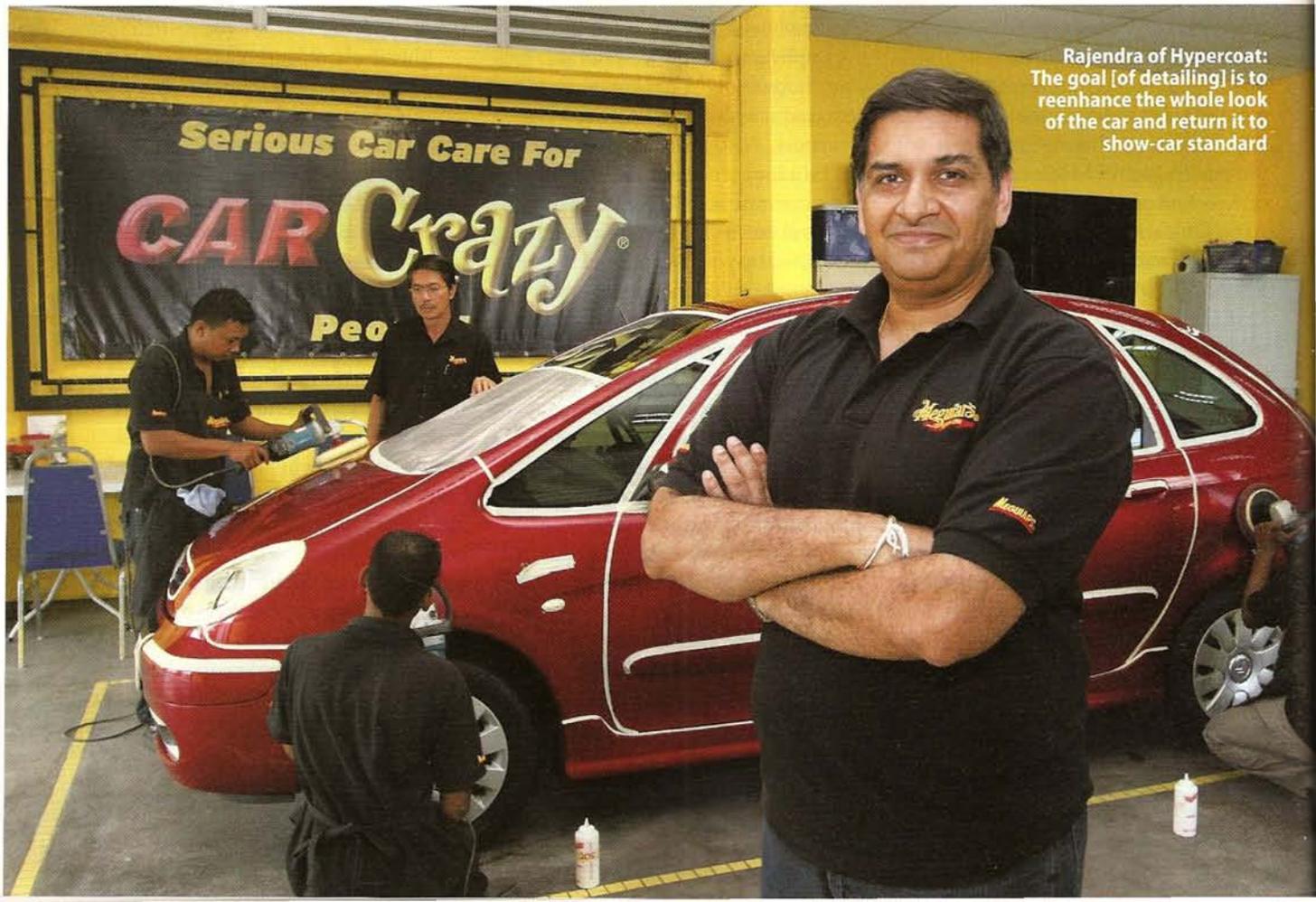
Most men love their cars and think nothing of spending a small fortune on spiffing up their rides. So there's money to be made in the car-care business. Just ask the entrepreneurs in this story.

By Sreerema Banoo

Long-time friends Andrew Wong, Ng Chee Yeong and Paul Ang may have diverse professional backgrounds — Wong is an accountant, Ng is in his family's furniture trading business and Ang is a lawyer — but they all have one thing in common: a passion for cars. "We're crazy about cars," says Wong. It was this shared passion that led the three friends to set up Enhanced Wheels Sdn Bhd in April 2008. "We saw a void in the premium detailing business and we shared the same vision that there's money to be made in this business," says Wong.

After conducting market research

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Meguiar's

SINCE 1901

Show Car DETAIL CENTER



"We are crazy about cars. We saw a void in the premium detailing business," says Meguiar's Wong (far left) with his partner Ng and master detailer Mak (far right)

and getting master detailer Peter Mak on their team, the trio then scouted for the right location for their outlet — Meguiar's Show Car Detail Centre in Jalan Templer, Petaling Jaya. Says Ng, it cost RM1.5 million to set up the centre, which is the first Meguiar's show car detailing centre to be franchised in Malaysia. The trio bought the franchise from Hypercoat Enterprises Sdn Bhd, the owner of the first Meguiar's Show Car Detail Centre — which is located in USJ Subang Jaya — and distributor of Meguiar's car-care products, tools and accessories since 2000. However, the trio's centre is run independently from the one in USJ, merely applying the processes and methods specified by Meguiar's. With a steady stream of customers — from owners of luxury and performance cars to those with smaller cars — and a growing monthly turnover, the trio have no regrets about the venture and are

exploring ways to grow it.

A facet of the car-care business, car detailing in Malaysia is growing, says Rajendra Patel, director and owner of Hypercoat. The car-care business, he says, comprises individuals who purchase the products and undertake do-it-yourself detailing, car wash centres that offer car wash, waxing and interior cleaning, and detailing centres. (He opened the detail centre in USJ initially to promote the brand's products and as a location to conduct training sessions for its customers. The centre has since gained a loyal customer base.)

Car detailing or restoration is basically the process of repairing all aspects and parts of a car — through washing, polishing and waxing — to return it to the exact condition it was in when it was first offered for sale. "The goal is to reenhance the whole look of the car and return it to

show-car standard," says Rajendra. Detailing also helps to preserve the car and, in some instances, increase its resale value.

While centres like Meguiar's cater for a niche clientele, CARS International targets a wider market. No stranger to the car-care market, it has 60 centres in Malaysian shopping complexes. Executive director Lee Yew Weng says CARS International's niche lies in the provision of convenience. "I wouldn't challenge the word of those in the premium car detailing business who say that their services are more detailed. We operate on a different model and, hence, target a different market. We offer convenience; because we are located in shopping complexes, we're more accessible. You can leave your car with us, watch a movie or shop and your car will be done by the time you're finished," he adds.

Established in the 1970s by

entrepreneur Lee Seng Siew and his wife, the enterprise initially focused on the polishing of cars. In the mid-1980s, the business was rebranded and took on the name CARS (an acronym for Comprehensive Auto Restoration Service) International. Today, the group owns and operates about 300 centres across Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Indonesia.

"The car-care industry, before CARS, just offered car-wash services. We were the innovators and the first to come up with the idea of offering membership to customers so that they would be more inclined to take care of their cars on a regular basis," says Lee.

Running the business

What does it take to run a car-care business? At its most basic, a car-care business requires very little in terms of investment. "All you need is a place, water supply, shampoo, a vacuum cleaner and polish," says Lee, adding that while anyone can get into the business and make a living, running a successful and profitable business is another matter. He adds that over the years, there have been employees who left the company, after having learnt the ropes, to set up their own businesses. And some of them have failed because they lacked the established brand name and network.

CARS International, he discloses, spends about RM100,000 for the initial setting up of a centre; it includes rental deposit, equipment and salary for at least five workers.

One of the most important aspects of running a car-care business and, in particular, an auto-detailing centre, is finding the right location. "It has to be easily accessible, with sufficient parking," says Rajendra. Advertising is also crucial, especially if your outlet is

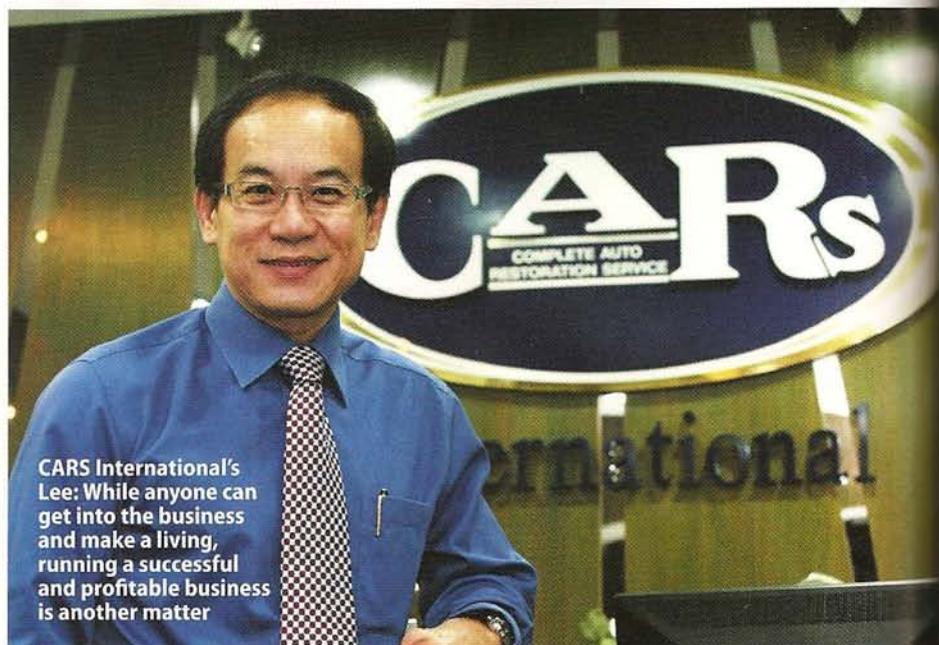
located away from the main road.

To run a premium auto-detailing centre, Ng says, one must have high expectations where quality is concerned. "You need to hire very skilled people or go for training yourself," he says, adding that he and his partners underwent training to learn about the products and also the application and processes involved in car detailing.

Having a passion for the job is also important, he says. "You have

— coping with the volume and at the same time maintaining the standards that set your business apart from the rest in the first instance. CARS International's Lee says running a wide network of car-care centres means having to rely on middle management and supervisory staff to maintain quality standards.

Often, he points out, this involves people management. "It's a huge challenge to get the right people, who can work for you and make money



CARS International's Lee: While anyone can get into the business and make a living, running a successful and profitable business is another matter

to ask yourself: do you really like it and is this something you really want to do?" As in any entrepreneurial set-up, he says, having a business plan and the perseverance to ride out the challenges that may crop up are also crucial. His partner Wong agrees, adding that as in any service-oriented business, marketing can be a challenge. "With a physical product, you can see and feel the product before buying it but for a service, you have to let the results speak for themselves."

The growth in business can also present another set of challenges

for you in your absence. We conduct training regularly. In the beginning, training sessions were on motivation and getting them to have a desire to better themselves but today, we're also trying to impart more noble values like having integrity and respect."

These challenges aside, the entrepreneurs say, there's nothing quite like seeing the look of satisfaction on a customer's face after the car has been detailed. "Whether you call it detailing or car restoration, the end result is the customer driving away happy," says Lee. ■