

Get water from thin air? No sweat

Guts and gumption a rewarding formula for entrepreneur's venture

BY FRANCIS CHAN

AT&T, Texas Instruments, Compaq, Citibank and Goldman Sachs: All-American behemoths and impressive names for any young man to boast on his resume.

But self-made local entrepreneur Vincent Oh, 32, is rather blase about these past accomplishments.

Mr Oh, who founded "water-from-air" technology firm Aridtec last November, wanted more than the prestige and fat salary offered by a big name multinational employer.

"I was sick and tired of working for others, so I decided to venture out on my own," he said.

Today, after barely one year in business, Aridtec has already established a wide distributorship for its patent-pending AirQua atmospheric water generators.

These generators, which sell for about US\$2,000 (S\$2,900) each, effectively speed up the condensation process to produce water from air.

Aridtec's products are now sold in the United States, Europe and emerging markets in the Middle East and Asia.

He said Aridtec has orders and distribution contracts worth more than US\$12 million: Not a bad result for a young start-up with only nine full-time staff.

But the road to success for the self-confessed polytechnic drop-out was a long and winding one.

"I never took the conventional route in

my entire life but I must say a word of thanks to my mother who signed me up for computer classes when I was young," said Mr Oh, whose mother is a housewife and father, a taxi-driver.

"That ignited my interest in computers and other technological innovations," he said.

Mr Oh, who holds a master's degree in computer science, had his first taste of entrepreneurship when he tried marketing software that he had developed.

"It was a programme I created in school which provided a forecast of the financial markets," he said.

"A research house here actually tested it and found it to be 70 per cent accurate but it failed to take off because I did not market it through the right channels."

That setback, however, only spurred him on and after a brief spell running a marketing agency, he hit the jackpot when he came across the "air-to-water" technology.

"The business of water is one of the few things that is almost immune to economic cycles," he said.

"When I stumbled upon the technology of harvesting water from air, I got very interested and spent two years figuring out how it could be developed and commercialised."

With just a prototype of the first water generator that he had built, Mr Oh managed to raise initial seed money of about \$500,000 from private equity investors.

By the time the company was up and running in November last year, Aridtec had attracted funds to the tune of \$1.3 million - all based on an idea the young entrepreneur had conceived.

When asked how he handles the challenge of running a multi-million dollar



Mr Oh says Aridtec is the first company in Singapore - and one of a handful worldwide - that develops, manufactures and distributes its own line of atmospheric water generators, which can be put to consumer, commercial and industrial uses. ST PHOTO: WANG HUI FEN

MOTHER KNOWS BEST

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company at the relatively young age of 32, Mr Oh cited his early introduction to the workforce as the key.

"The good thing about working for large MNCs (multinational corporations) was that, as long as you prove yourself, the bosses will have no qualms about entrusting you with more responsibilities," he pointed out.

The University of Wisconsin graduate started working at AT&T - the world's largest telco - when he was a mere teenager.

And the fact that he was just 19 did not stop the US-based firm from sending the young database officer to Japan to work on a project for semi-conductor giant, Texas Instruments.

"One day, my boss at AT&T called me to his office and asked what I thought

about going to Japan," he recounted.

"I said: 'Sure, why not?', thinking he was just joking. But he pulled out an air ticket and told me to go home and pack."

The call of National Service saw a pause in his promising career at AT&T. After he left the army, Mr Oh finished his diploma, followed by a US degree before returning to work.

After that, he worked in information technology-related jobs at blue chip firms such as computer manufacturer Compaq and banks such as Citibank and Goldman Sachs.

But while he may admit that it was a good experience working for those big names, Mr Oh knew he was never going

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to be an employee for life.

"Yes, it was at those big MNCs where I had built up my confidence and learned a lot, but it was always my aim to run my own business," he said.

He said Aridtec is the first company in Singapore – and one of only a handful in the world – that develops, manufactures and distributes its own line of atmospheric water generators.

"There are not many companies like Aridtec in the world that oversee the end-to-end business of atmospheric water generators.

"Plus, our line of products can be applied to consumer, commercial and industrial uses."

In simple terms, Aridtec's AirQua water generators are special water dispensers that literally produce water out of thin air.

He said the air-to-water technology, which he developed, creates a faster condensation process to turn water vapour into fresh drinking water within a short period of time.

While critics might argue that air-to-water technology is not exactly new, Mr Oh claims that the technology behind his water generators allows them to produce more water, with less energy.

"I can't reveal to you how it is done exactly, but our products can produce more water faster while using less electrical power," he said.

"And I spared no expense in ensuring that it not only works, but also fits in well in a modern home."

When The Straits Times visited Aridtec's 2,200-sq ft factory along Bendemeer Road last week, it had a glimpse of how Mr Oh is clearly a man on the move.

"I've got to deliver over 3,000

units of these atmospheric water generators by the end of the month to clients in the Middle East," he said, pointing to a row of half-assembled AirQua Sano water generators on his factory floor.

"And at the same time, I have to find, lease and then set up a bigger plant with at least 6,000 sq ft of factory space to increase production capacity," he added.

On what truly differentiates Aridtec and his products from the competition, Mr Oh said it was all in the numbers.

"Conventional products out there can typically produce between 10 and 12 litres of water – in 60 per cent humidity – with 1,000 watts of electricity," he said.

"But my water generators can produce double that amount with just 990 watts."

Water generated with AirQua machines is also cheaper.

"Using Aridtec's technology, water costs 10 cents per litre – inclusive of electricity – much cheaper, compared to the 40 or 50 cents for bottled water," he said.

That high level of efficiency, said Mr Oh, was down to his emphasis on research and development.

"It all started with my own research and we intend to continue with our R&D efforts," he stressed.

"In fact, we already have a second generation series of products on line."

Asked whether Aridtec's business has been affected by the current economic slowdown, Mr Oh coolly said: "No, not really."

He added: "We're still getting orders – in fact, just yesterday, I got an order for 80 units (of AirQua water generators) from, of all places, Bangladesh – now, that was something I had least expected."

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