

It can be tough and costly for small and medium-sized enterprises to expand their footprint in Singapore and the region. Some SMEs have found franchising and licensing to be a good strategy to spread their brand without high costs. In the last of a four-part series, **Rachael Boon** hears from My1st3D about how licensing has helped it to grow the brand.

A LOVE for Lego and tinkering with models, coupled with a passion for education, inspired Mr Jackie Lim to develop and franchise his brand.

In 2012, Mr Lim, 38, founded My1st3D, which offers Lego enrichment programmes to children across Singapore.

These include 3D creative writing, speech and drama, and robotics classes for children aged four to 16, using sets and models from Lego Education, the educational arm of the Danish manufacturer.

Mr Lim, who owns a tuition centre in Canberra Community Centre in Sembawang, found that parents wanted to help their children shine in creativity.

“We had feedback that the students’ compositions lacked feeling, and they were just writing about what happened.

“Using Lego characters, we projected feelings on these characters and used that to develop their composition skills.”

He discovered that the Lego mini-figurines, sets and models brought out the best in the children’s imagination.

The initial business idea was to set up a Lego Education centre, which could possibly be a flagship store selling the sets to schools and institutions, but that did not pan out.

He came to know the distributor of Lego Education sets and decided to develop programmes using Lego Education in 2012 instead, under the brand My1st3D.

The classes incorporating Lego blocks and related software were first offered at his tuition centre. They range from \$420 to \$440 for 10 lessons, and each lesson is 90 minutes long.

Mr Lim also set up the first My1st3D branch at IMM in Jurong East, with an initial \$50,000.

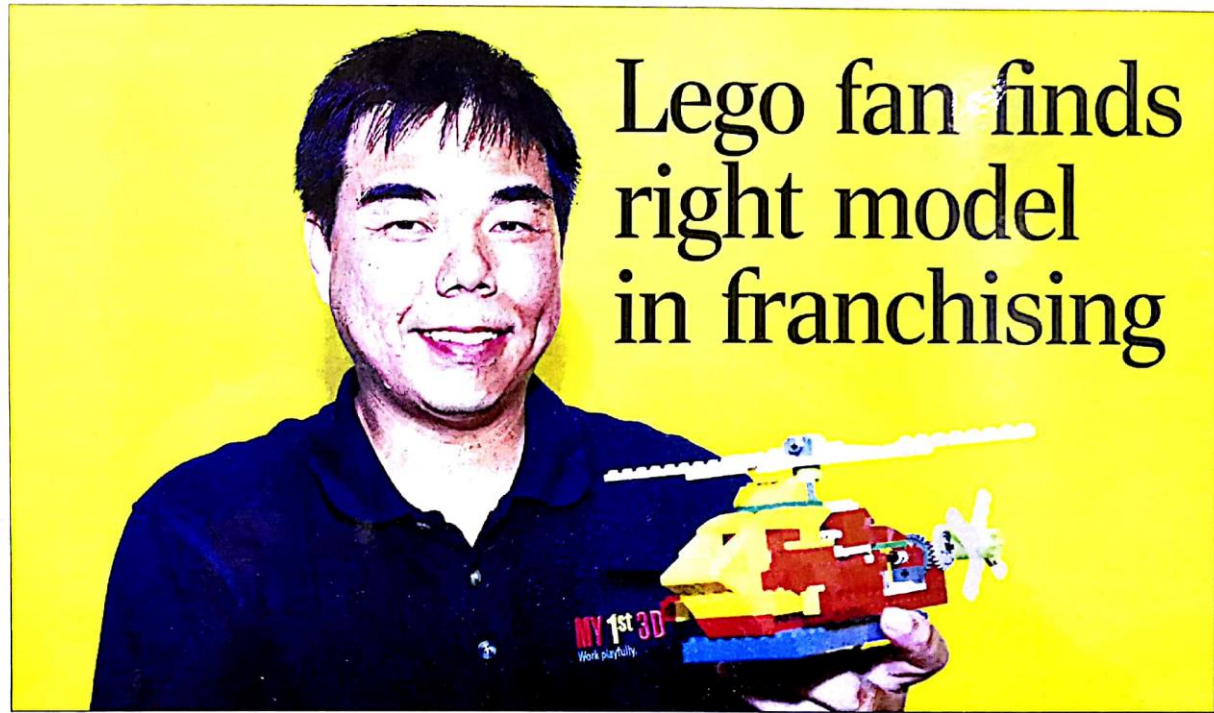
For the first few months, running the new business was tough going and only six students signed up. However, over time, the programmes started to gain traction.

But he had a second strategy and was running franchise seminars, where he found two interested parties who became My1st3D’s franchisees.

Franchising is the fastest way to grow the brand, said Mr Lim, who learnt the hard way when he tried to expand his tuition business by himself.

“By franchising, the franchise owners will take charge and make it their own business, which it is.”

The franchise fee is \$45,000, which includes necessary equipment such as Lego sets to conduct lessons for six students each time.



Lego fan finds right model in franchising

Mr Jackie Lim, founder of My1st3D, with a Lego model that can be powered from a laptop USB port. The former school teacher stays ahead of other robotics programmes by catering to pre-schoolers and offering 80 different unique Lego models to learn with, on top of the 12 provided by Lego Education. ST PHOTO: DANIEL NEO

Mr Lim said he works very closely with his franchisees, and has monthly meetings to discuss matters such as the fees and logistics of conducting programmes at childcare centres.

“My two franchisees are very supportive. They do give me feedback on what’s working or not.”

A franchisee took over the IMM branch in November 2013, and moved to JCube in Jurong last year because of the bigger student intake.

Another franchisee opened a branch in PoMo mall in Selegie Road in November 2013.

He added that My1st3D recently implemented an after-school programme at Canberra Community Centre, where children attend robotics classes and

what he calls 3D creative writing lessons, up to five weekdays a week. The business is growing, Mr Lim noted.

The JCube branch, for instance, has at least 50 students, and turnover has grown from at least \$6,000 a month in 2012 to at least \$29,000 a month.

My1st3D is also tying up with childcare centres and organisations such as the Chinese Development Assistance Council to offer programmes.

With things taking off, Mr Lim focuses on My1st3D programme offerings these days, creating more models for pre-school children and developing a systematic approach for the senior robotics classes.

He is also looking to open another branch in the east, and has plans to expand the business regionally. The former school teacher stays ahead of other robotics programmes by catering to pre-schoolers and offering 80 different unique Lego models to learn with, on top of the 12 provided by Lego Education.

He also makes sure to hire former teachers who are trained by the National Institute of Education for the 3D creative writing courses.

Mr Lim added: “We have our research and development department to constantly improve our curriculum and introduce new robotics models.”

Mr Lim also tests the models and programmes with his three children, aged four to 10.

“They love it,” he said happily. This testing helps him to ensure everything is suitable for My1st3D students.

The young ones seem to love it. Some students from the JCube branch entered last September’s National Junior Robotics Competition and won three awards.

They were later sent to participate in global Lego robotics competition World Robot Olympiad in Russia last November.

Mr Lim feels franchising has been the right decision for the brand, “rather than holding onto it and saying it’s mine, I can’t let you know the secrets.”

“When I chose to franchise the business, I only had the children in mind. I want children to learn and every child to learn robotics. That’s my vision.”

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WRITING COMPOSITIONS WITH FEELING

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– Mr Jackie Lim, who founded My1st3D, on helping children shine in creativity

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