

Opto-Pharm invests to fight the recession

Opto-Pharm, which makes contact lens solutions and eye-care products, is one company that is investing – rather than cutting back on expenditure – to fight the recession.

“If I say we are doing well, then I am not telling the truth,” Managing Director, Mr Robert Khoo, said at the company’s open house on 29 November, 2001. “We struggle through this economic crisis and are trying to turn crisis into opportunities.”

The open house was to announce Opto-Pharm’s new Optometric Clinic, a research centre for clinical studies on how the eyes of contact lens users respond to contact lens solutions.

The clinic costs more than \$70,000 to set up, and is another example of how Mr Khoo had not allowed poor business to hold back his expansion plans. Opto-Pharm is believed to be the first producer of contact lens solutions in the region to have such a facility.

“Clinical studies are required before we can export to the United States, Japan and China,” Mr Khoo told *Singapore Enterprise*. The studies will be conducted by Ms Lyn Khoo, a graduate optometrist from Bradford University, United Kingdom.

“Investment are of two types,” Mr Khoo added. “One is direct investment in equipment, the other is indirect investment in research, new products and so on.”

Productivity and Standards Board Chief Executive, Mr Lee Suan Hiang, who attended the open house said: “While most companies are focusing on cutting cost, Opto-Pharm has demonstrated boldness and confidence in its future by investing for growth. I strongly urge more small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to emulate Opto-Pharm.”

Mr Lee added that the government, through the PSB, is providing more assistance to help SMEs and workers to tide over the current recession.

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In 1998, Opto-Pharm became the first contact lens solutions maker in Asia to be awarded the ISO 9002, EN 46002 and CE 0120 certification. The EN and CE certification are needed for access to European markets.

The company also launched new products and repackaged older products in an effort to maintain or even increase sales during the economic downturn.

One new product is a multi-purpose solution called P2 Penta-Plex. This is a single solution for cleaning and storing contact lenses as well as removing protein, doing the jobs of three different solutions that are normally needed for

these purposes.

The P2 formula contains HPMC or “artificial tears”. It keeps contact lenses clean and moist for more than 12 hours, giving users greater comfort.

At that time, only one other contact lens solution, by US manufacturer Allergan, used HPMC. “They launched their product in April 2000, we launched in May,” Mr Khoo said. “It showed that we were both thinking along the same lines even though we did not know of each other’s plans.”

Last year, Opto-Pharm relaunched its Eye Wash, Eye Drops and Sterile Wash with new packaging design and a new concept packaging.

Currently, other brands of eye-wash come in one large bottle with one eye-wash cup. Unless that cup is thoroughly sterilised, it could carry bacteria and the risk of infection.

“Who will take the trouble to boil the eye-wash cup?” Mr Khoo asked. “If you just rinse it in water, the bacteria will still be there.”



Mr Khoo packed his eye-wash in small, disposable ampoules which contain enough solution for a single use and provided a separate eye-wash cup with each ampoule. It is a simple but effective way to prevent contamination. Yet no other company had thought of it before.

He even considered investing in patent rights to protect this idea, but his

lawyers advised him that such an idea could not be patented.

Opto-Pharm’s eye-wash has another plus point. As the eye wash is packed individually, unopened eye wash ampoules can be kept till expiry. Unlike bottled brands, once opened, the solution would be exposed to contamination. Other brands typically expire 30 days after opening.

Meanwhile, Opto-Pharm is selling its contact lens solutions in a

bundle of two bottles, with a travel gift pack.

“I cannot afford much advertising, so I am giving samples away,” Mr Khoo explained. “It’s another form of marketing.”

He is also giving free contact lenses and contact lens solutions to staff of his neighbouring factories at Tuas. They will be the first group of subjects for the Optometric Clinic’s clinical studies.

For information on assistance schemes, please call PSB’s SME First Stop at Tel: 898 1800; or E-mail: firststop@psb.gov.sg.



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