



Mr Stephen Lim is marketing his IT company's products to more countries even as he continues efforts to develop new and better user-centred products. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

Making it with the help of a brand-name customer

Winning Finance Ministry tender took SQL View to the top of the electronic records management market here

By GRACE CHNG
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NOTHING helps a local company better than having a brand-name customer use its locally developed product.

Mr Stephen Lim discovered this when his software firm, SQL View, was struggling to develop an electronic records management program for a tender called by the Ministry of Finance (MOF) in 1997.

SQL View lost the tender, but Mr Lim, 53, did not lose heart.

After having spent a year and tens of thousands of dollars preparing for the tender, he had the bare bones of Kris (knowledge repository information system). It would be a waste to kill it, so he continued with its development. As luck would have it, the company which had won the tender pulled out, and SQL View successfully won the second tender, worth \$1.2 million, in 1999.

Today, there are 12,000 Kris users in many government agencies here, such as the Monetary Au-

thority of Singapore, which has been its customer for 12 years. SQL View also has the lion's share of the electronic records management market here.

In 2006, the company received the Technology Excellence Challenge awarded by the Prime Minister's Office. This award was for an artificial intelligence-based filing system based on the Kris technology and which was used at the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Kris is also successfully used in other countries such as Kenya, Botswana, Malaysia and Mauritius.

An electronics engineering graduate of Imperial College, England, Mr Lim started his computer networking company, NetBand, in 1988 after a short stint at Hewlett-Packard. He had been influenced to go into business by his timber *towkay* father.

There were few companies able to design and install networks at that time. A key signature project that he landed was the National University of Singapore's campus-wide network. That project caught the notice of Indonesian oil giant Pertamina, which gave him a \$5.5 million project to wire up its oil refinery in Balikpapan, Indonesia.

Said Mr Lim: "We didn't even know where it was. We had to ship all our equipment there by boat. We'd to build the fibre optic network, the network points and nodes, design the service levels, and integrate it with Pertamina's IBM mainframes. It was a two-year project and very rushed, but we completed it."

NetBand's success caught the attention of a Malaysian company which bought most of the equity, leaving Mr Lim with a small share.

By that time, SQL View was already set up. This time, he set out to build a Singapore software from scratch.

Computing was in its early days then. "Here we were trying to sell an e-mail product when bosses were still dictating their letters to secretaries. And we were telling them to pay us for a system where they had to type their own letters."

There were four to five failed products before he hit on Kris.

"When the MOF electronic records management tender came out, we thought it was a vertical market where we could build our own knowledge and intellectual property," he said.

Kris has helped to transform SQL View, founded 20 years ago. The company started as a group of software developers interested in making a product that worked. It had to ensure the product worked consistently to provide a predictable customer experience.

Today, with executives reading documents on tablets, Kris has to be accessible on iPads and other tablets.

"Previously, my developers need only know Windows and Unix operating systems. Today, they must know others such as Java and Apple's iOS."

Outsourcing some development work has let him build new features, but there are other skills needed, such as design, that he cannot get.

For small companies, it is always a challenge to get the top students to join them, he said.

His solution, using a football analogy: With no Ronaldo to score goals, he has trained his players to function smoothly and effectively as an A team so that SQL View can provide a great product that is relevant to its users.

"We also need to engage with the universities and research institutions to see what we can use to differentiate ourselves."

His search to build great products and find signature projects continues.

Today, he has about 40 staff, some of whom are product managers doing market research, scanning future technologies and planning ahead. He is also actively marketing Kris and SQL View overseas to look for other signature products.

In the last 24 years, Mr Lim has also been active in promoting local IT companies. He was chairman of the Singapore Infocomm Technology Federation between 2004 and 2006. He was also a board member of the Infocomm Development Authority from 2007 to 2008.

In 2007, he was recognised for his contributions to the industry and was named "Person of the Year" by the Singapore Computer Society in its annual IT Leader awards.

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WHAT A RUSH

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— Mr Stephen Lim, on a \$5.5 million project to wire up Pertamina's oil refinery in Balikpapan