

Interview with Norzilawaty Md Isa, Founder of The Good Prawn, Malaysia

The Good Prawn Wins APEC BEST Award

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

The annual APEC Business Efficiency and Success Target Award, known as the APEC BEST Award, recently announced its 2020 winners. The winners were from a diverse group of effective entrepreneurs, innovators and managers around the APEC region. The contest awarded Norzilawaty Md Isa from Malaysia in the Best Business Sustainability in Tackling the Pandemic category.

In an exclusive interview with *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, Norzilawaty talks about the award and her thriving business and future targets.

(Interviewed on April 20, 2021)

The Good Prawn

JS: Could you tell us a little bit about your business?

Norzilawaty: The business that I entered for the APEC competition is called The Good Prawn. It's a company that delivers groceries to homes. It's an online business. I started this business in December 2018. So it's a new business. Before that, I was a lecturer at a university. Due to some family problem – my newborn son had a complex heart problem, I had to quit my job. My husband also got laid off because of the declining economy. These problems made me think about how to make money for the family and, at the same time, stay at home? Then I met a long-lost friend of mine. He was a financial planner who had started his business of prawn farming. He has a Ph.D. in aquaculture. I went to visit his farm and fell in love with the place because it is such a clean place and runs as a sustainable farm. It's almost organic. I will not say that it was fully organic. The feeding was very good: no antibiotics and pesticides added. So it just popped into my mind that I knew a lot of people who are looking for healthy food options, but they are not easily available or accessible. Most supermarkets sell food whose sources we don't know.

So I started studying and reading articles about prawns, as well as sharing my knowledge on Facebook. My marketing is solely through Facebook, Instagram and my WhatsApp contacts. Little did I know that I would be able to sell 1,000 kilograms in one month just doing everything from home. My husband and I drive to the farm which is two hours away from our place to collect the prawns and we do the



Norzilawaty Md Isa

sorting, packing and delivering of the product from our house. As demand went up, people started asking for other products as well – products like organic chicken, good quality fish, etc. In January 2020, we decided to open our own shop. Now we have a shop and we sell around 300 products in our store.

JS: Do you have a big demand for your products in Malaysia?

Norzilawaty: People are now more aware of good healthy options. Before I started this business, we lived in Oslo, Norway, where most seafoods are fresh and we can get organic vegetables and fruits easily. So when I came back to Malaysia, we wanted to find good quality seafood, but I didn't know where

to find it. I wanted fresh, clean, and healthy food for my family. I wanted to know the source of my food. Is it clean, fresh, and healthy? Or is it full of pesticides, and preservatives like formaldehyde? I realized that lots of people also have the same curiosity as me – to know the source of their food, and to eat clean, fresh, and healthy food.

JS: What food items do you sell?

Norzilawaty: We sell local fish, fresh local poultry, and beef. We even sell fresh airflown Norwegian salmon. We also have a good collection of vegetables, but vegetables are not organic because we don't have enough daily demand for organic vegetables from our customers yet. We even make cooking paste to help people cook more easily and quickly.

Photo: The Good Prawn



Prawn farm located in the Straits of Malacca

Photo: The Good Prawn



Sample of foods sold in The Good Prawn shop

JS: You said that you have a good connection with farming. Is farming your family business?

Norzilawaty: My friend introduced me to seafood farming. He is aware of the possible toxic elements in food and his vision is to provide our community with a clean and healthy supply of food. I share this vision with him. My husband also has 20 acres of lime farm, where we occasionally plant varieties of vegetables when we can.

The APEC Award

JS: You have recently won an award. How did you manage this?

Norzilawaty: I won an award in APEC's Best Business Sustainability in Tackling the Pandemic category. I think it was a coincidence or what Malaysians call "rezeki". I opened this store in February 2020 – two weeks after opening our store, my beloved son passed away. I believe this award and opportunity was a gift from heaven.

Then two to three weeks later, the pandemic hit Malaysia badly. We had a total lockdown in the country. People couldn't go out unless they had a letter or a strong reason for going out. People got really scared of going out because of the procedures it involved. So my business was set up at the right time. People wanted groceries to be delivered to them. Initially, only me and my husband worked in the store. And then, at one time, we had 10 workers in our store because the demand was very high and we were not prepared. The process of taking orders, getting supplies, packing and delivering was a complex procedure for a small company like ours.

I think the reason The Good Prawn won this award is just because of the circumstances. It happened at the right time and was a perfect business plan. The pandemic sort of pushed our business. Before the pandemic, not many people did their grocery shopping online. Now it has become the norm in our community, but at the same time you can see a lot of companies venturing into providing groceries online.

Facing Challenges

JS: You said that before you started this business, you had challenges to face. Do you think those challenges strengthened you to face the challenge of starting this business?

Norzilawaty: Yes. We used to have a good life before those challenges came. My husband was laid off and I

had a new-born who had a very complex health problem. I had to quit my job to take care of my son. But at the same time life had to go on. We had bills to pay, we had appointments with doctors. All that made me a stronger person. It made me think outside the box to make a stable income for my family.

These challenges gave me the idea of starting this business. I thought this will be a temporary project while I find something more stable. Surprisingly, the demand was there – and that's because a lot of women are becoming busier every day. They have to work; they have to take care of their house; they have to cook. So this business works well by keeping them and their requirements in mind.

Before the pandemic broke out, I approached this business from office to office. I used to go to a big office building delivering orders. But after the pandemic, we had to change our strategy by going from one local community to another. So the pandemic was a big challenge to face but, at the same time, it gave us a business opportunity and room for improvements. During those days of lockdown, we could sleep for only two or three hours a day – so many orders we had to fulfil. Order-taking was manual. We didn't have our website, so orders were taken manually, and it was a time-consuming process. That's the reason why I couldn't find enough time to sleep. Now people just have to go to the website to place their orders. They don't have to contact me as they did during those days.

On top of that, after my son passed away just two weeks after we opened our store, I had to depend on a couple of friends and my husband to run the business while I had to deal with my emotions.

Have all these challenges strengthened me? Yes, because when I started this, I just had my family and children's needs and comfort in my mind. Business can be very hard with all the stress and worries about bills, and not getting enough rest. But I will never complain because through this business I can arrange my own schedule and make sure I do not miss important moments with my kids.

The Pandemic

JS: The pandemic situation in Malaysia was rather scary in the beginning. Now the situation is not all that grim. Is that right?

Norzilawaty: Actually, it's getting serious, but people are getting used to it. The economy is getting bad. During the lockdown we got the opportunity to start a business of our own. But it was also a challenge for us. People started spending less money because some people had been laid off; some people lost their source of income. The situation is getting worse. The number of pandemic-related cases is rising every day. But then life must go on. So people have to live with it. Now they are getting used to it.

JS: What do you think about the difficulties that women are now facing because of the ongoing pandemic? The APEC document pointed out that women have faced high levels of economic hardships and income loss; they are facing increasing hours dedicated to unpaid domestic work. So APEC efforts should be stepped to support women in the economy, especially small businesses. Do you agree with this view?

Norzilawaty: Yes. You see, in Malaysia – it's part of our culture – women are expected to work for some extra income and take care of their children and family and the serve food on the table. During the movement control order, many people had to work from home. It is tough for women to work from home as they have to do their job efficiently, taking care of house chores, helping kids with online learning and school work (as learning has become online too) . And the kids get hungry all the time. Mothers are expected to serve them food.

I think the challenge is not only for women; it's for their partners as well. For instance, my husband and I believe in what we call “fifty-fifty in everything”. I believe that hard work should be shared. All of the work doesn't belong to the woman. And both man and woman must earn for the family. It's easier for me, but I know many mothers who complain that they don't get enough time for themselves. So the business I am doing now is actually helping women in general. We deliver fresh food to them thereby helping them to save a lot of their time for other activities. The groceries delivered are all cleaned and ready to cook, and cut the way the customers requested. We also sell cooking paste to save time in the kitchen, for example the well-known items in Malaysia “sambal” and “rendang”. You just need to open the packet, pour the contents into a pan and add protein of your choice and heat it up. Having to make everything from scratch could take hours of preparation This business is helping many women. I receive a lot of compliments from them.

JS: You said that many housewives will get benefits from your food service because they work from home. What about non-permanent employees in Malaysia? Are there many non-permanent women employees – women whose income is not assured – in your country? How do they benefit from your service?

Norzilawaty: In Malaysia, most of the jobs were secure jobs before the pandemic. So most of the women in Malaysia worked like men. We did not face the issue of permanent or non-permanent employment. But some industries, for example the food industry, tourism, spas and saloons that have mostly women employees, are affected badly during these times, and companies have had to lay people off or close their business.

But men and women are treated as equals. A lot of men are in the construction business. Most of the construction work in the country had to slow down because of the pandemic. The effect of the economic slowdown was felt equally by both men and women in Malaysia. I still believe these people will benefit from our service as they don't have to go to public areas to buy their food and so can reduce their contact with large numbers of people.

Evaluation of the APEC Women Entrepreneurship Program

JS: You have not played an active role in APEC activities. Nevertheless, could you tell me how you evaluate the APEC Women Entrepreneurship program?

Norzilawaty: This program was new to me. When I joined this program, I was in awe to see all these amazing women who had entered this competition last year, 2020. They ran really good businesses. Some of them started their business because of their family. There was a lady who opened her own café – a gluten-free café for people having low gluten tolerance. She started cooking all gluten-free food because one of her children had a problem with gluten intolerance.

This year BEST award winner was a lady from Russia who owns a very impressive business. Then there was a Chinese woman who owned many chain restaurants that provided healthy food to her customers. She is so young, and she said that she loved healthy food. Many other amazing women were competing that day.

You see, this program is not well-known. I wish the organizers could do more to popularize this program. We could have a platform where women can discuss various issues about business and

Photo: TV1, Selamat Pagi Malaysia



The Good Prawn was featured on “Good Morning Malaysia” (Selamat Pagi Malaysia) in May 2020. Norzilawaty Md Isa (second from right)

exchange ideas, and motivate each other.

Women in, let's say, Indonesia may not have heard about the kind of business I am doing in Malaysia. In return, some of the activities that women are doing in Indonesia could be replicated in Malaysia. After all, business is replicable. APEC can make all that possible. So it should be more active in this area.

Vegans & Beegans in Malaysia

JS: It is particularly good to learn that your country gives a lot of importance to health. What have you to say for Vegans and Beegans in Malaysia?

Norzilawaty: Well, that is an exceedingly small community in Malaysia. In our country, we have several religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, and they have different food restrictions. We do not see a lot of vegans in Malaysia, and I am not aware of any beegans community here. We live in mixed communities. The vegetarian business is not really a big business in Malaysia as most people here like me enjoy eating seafood, beef and chicken. In big cities, people are becoming more and more health conscious. So many of them have changed their diet – they have started eating grains instead of rice, and becoming vegetarians or vegans just because we have a group of dietitians recommending this lifestyle. But they are only a minority group and the majority in Malaysia still eat what we regard as normal food.

Future Targets

JS: Could you tell us a little bit about your future targets? Are you interested in exporting your products to neighboring countries?

Norzilawaty: I checked markets outside Malaysia, but because of so many laws and paperwork related to exporting food items to neighboring countries, we decided not to go overseas. We have not penetrated the entire market in Malaysia itself. There is still a lot we can do in our own country. Whatever I am currently doing is way too small. We want to touch more people here. We will launch our first supermarket this coming month, June. So our business will no longer be just groceries online, but we will also have a walk-in shop for customers. We are also planning to open a couple of more supermarkets this year.

The difference between these stores and my current shop is that my current business serves people in Klang Valley in Kuala Lumpur within a 30-kilometer radius. This new store would be more like a community supermarket. We are planning to have a supermarket every 10 km where we could serve the community nearby through walk-in purchases as well as online purchases. We will have a wide range of items for our customers to choose from. We are planning to open 10 more supermarkets in the coming year. Currently, we are focusing only on Selangor, but soon we hope we can venture into other states.

Photo: The Good Prawn



The Good Prawn will be rebranded as Serai Grocer. This will be the first walk-in Serai Grocer chain supermarket.

JS: Since your business is online, you should not have many business expenses. That is a merit, isn't it?

Norzilawaty: Yes. When I first planned to start my business, I did not have enough money to start it. So I told my friend on the farm that I would get the prawn from him, sell it, and pay back to him. My friend told me to go ahead with my business plan. So I started my business with zero cost. In the first month, my business had \$10,000 in revenue. It was then that I realized that my business could go far.

When I opened my shop last year, I needed some money to get started, for paying renting and small renovations, buying equipment and company transport, and so on. I had an angel investor that gave us a headstart with the shop. It's a good thing that most equipment is only a one-time purchase.

Now the new supermarket is a different story. We have a friend with a very big heart who is very supportive and together with his experience in retail we work as a team to make our business planning successful. He is the investor for this project.

Bright Future

JS: Are you optimistic about your future?

Norzilawaty: Yes, I am optimistic about my future. I cannot fully depend on online business anymore because there are so many competitors nowadays. More people are now pursuing similar kinds of business ideas as the demand and opportunity are bigger. This business is so easy to duplicate. Because there are so many competitors, I must find ways of getting ahead of them. After the pandemic is over, we will focus on expanding our business as much as we can. You see, the best thing about this business is that demand for our products can never decline, as people will always need groceries that are clean and healthy.

JS

Written with the cooperation of Rajesh Williams who is a professional editor and a writer with a background in instructional design, technical writing, technical editing, and teaching.