

SPARKLING MAKEOVER PAST AND PRESENT

Decor changes, new ranges and spiffy staff are all part of On Cheong Jewellery's rebranding exercise

PEARLYN THAM
pearlyn@mediacorp.com.sg

IN HIS younger days, Charles Ho had wanted to be a lecturer. But he soon found himself giving lectures of a different sort when he joined the family business – On Cheong Jewellery – in 1985.

The former accountant – now the company's managing director – had to teach his staff the finer points of dressing up as some of his long-serving staff would turn up for work in slippers. But they did not take kindly to his efforts at changing their mind-set on this.

Recalled the 52-year-old: "They would tell me that since my father had never minded them wearing slippers to work, what right did I have to tell them off?"

His father founded On Cheong Jewellery – which stands for "peace and prosperity" – in 1936 after learning goldsmithing in Malaysia. Charles himself grew up in the same South Bridge Road shophouse where On Cheong Jewellery was established and where it is still located today.

The store still bears nostalgic remnants from the past. In Charles' office on the second storey, rosewood furniture takes pride of place in the reception area while the shelves are packed with old-fashioned folders. In the store itself, traditional Chinese stools line the jewellery counters but Charles said that these will be replaced with modern chairs soon, to complement the revamped interior decor.

The updated store decor is part of On Cheong Jewellery's recent rebranding exercise, which was supported by Spring Singapore under its BrandPact programme. Last month, it also celebrated its 71st anniversary with a gala dinner.

Charles has also looked into other aspects of the business. Where different types of jewellery were once haphazardly displayed, pieces are now neatly categorised,



REVAMP Charles Ho, managing director of On Cheong Jewellery, at the renovated flagship store on South Bridge Road, which includes stylish lighting fixtures like this one.

so "customers can see what they are looking for at a glance".

Solid gold animal figurines are displayed discreetly in an inner gallery. Traditional Indian jewellery has its own corner, as do coloured gemstone jewellery and whimsical charms. The latter two ranges are part of On Cheong Jewellery's move to attract a younger market.

According to Charles, younger customers in their 20s actually like being served by older salespeople. Most of those at On Cheong Jewellery have worked at the store for decades. In fact, Charles'



ON CHEONG TAKES FLIGHT:
Dragonfly pendant-cum-brooch \$799
and amethyst ring \$2,655.



66-year-old uncle still works there.

But he brushed aside suggestions that On Cheong Jewellery will go the route of other homegrown jewellery brands and tie up with celebrities for collaborations and endorsements.

He prefers to let his service standards and the jewellery – which range from \$100-odd to \$60,000 – speak for themselves.

Charles has no plans of offering massive discounts or selling his merchandise at mass market prices. He doesn't even see On Cheong Jewellery setting up many branches, because he feels that that would dilute his brand.

But Charles candidly let on that, given its reputation as a traditional goldsmith, it has not been easy for On Cheong Jewellery to gain inroads into glitzy shopping malls. This is why he hopes that by rebranding his business, it will be able to venture into such new markets.

However, he doesn't have his sights set on Orchard Road or the suburban areas. He would only reveal that he's looking at setting up store somewhere unexpected "like, at the integrated resorts".

Meanwhile, Charles is making sure that his family business gets a new lease of life. He has trained his staff to be computer-literate and has even taken them on excursions to modern jewellery chains to show them that change is inevitable.

And his salespeople now have to wear gloves when handling jewellery. The male staff have to don a tie at work. Slippers are, of course, out of the picture altogether. Only this time, nobody's complaining.

The On Cheong Jewellery flagship store is at 251 South Bridge Road.