

Nightlife sector finally finds own voice



By MELISSA KOK

FINALLY, Singapore's nightlife industry has an association to call its own. The arrival of the newly formed Singapore Nightlife Business Association comes at a crucial time, given how much the industry has changed over the past decade and especially in the light of recent changes in regulations that seem to have caught it flat-footed.

The multibillion-dollar nightlife industry now has a collective voice, and some lofty targets. The association wants not only to be the first port of call for consultation on regulatory issues, but also to give the industry a classier image by beefing up service standards and introducing an accreditation framework for nightlife business owners.

The association, the first of its kind since 2006, is not an informal banding of a few heavyweights. It is a proper grouping of 10 industry veterans representing all sectors of nightlife, from commercial dance clubs to restaurant-bars and even Chinese hostess clubs.

But whether this association will deliver on its promises will depend on the cohesiveness and support its members lend one another. It has the potential for real clout in helping to mould the laws and policies governing the industry.

Although it is not a watchdog with punitive powers, it has the critical mass to kick-start dialogues with regulatory bodies.

Already, it has plans to propose changes to the licensing conditions for public entertainment outlets, and is talking to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) about concessions for quotas in hiring foreign entertainers in nightclubs.

At the same time, the cumulative wealth of knowledge and experience of the committee's members will be a useful repository of information for new players to tap into when needed.

A similar association was formed in 1995 when big-time club operators and show promoters came together to coordinate their say on matters relevant to them.

The Association of Entertainment Organisations (AEO) was a 500-member group spearheaded by 11 high-fliers in the industry, including Mr Dennis Foo, the then chief operating officer of Europa Holdings; Mr Deen Shahul, managing director of Nova Entertainment, which ran former popular nightspots Fire and Sparks discos; Mr Fabrice de Barsy of Fabrice's World Music Bar; and show promoter Victor Sassoon of Sunvic Productions.

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— Former AEO president Deen Shahul, on the short lifespan of such industry bodies

The association covered pubs, lounges, discos, restaurants and show promoters, and was active for about 10 years.

Among its early accomplishments was to successfully negotiate a 30 per cent discount on a licence for karaoke video tapes and laser discs from the Singapore Phonogram and Videogram Association of recording companies.

The association also met regularly with immigration officials and the police to help

club and pub owners secure work permits for foreigners more quickly and improve on providing good, clean entertainment.

But with the closure of several nightlife outlets over the years, the association soon weakened. It folded by 2006 for a lack of people to run it.

Times have since changed with a new stream of players entering the nightlife scene, adding a new vibrancy to the industry.

Mr Foo, who also heads the new association, estimates there are more than 1,000 bars, clubs and restaurant-bars in Singapore now, a “significant increase” from a decade ago.

The industry's needs today are different from the 1990s, when the landscape was dominated by KTV lounges and a handful of nightspots like Zouk, Sparks and Fire discos, and Canto pub Club 97.

Back in the early 2000s, notes The Emerald Hill Group's director Heather Seow, the issues that plagued bars and pubs involved tussling with the authorities over matters like bar-top dancing, smoking in clubs and paying copyright fees for playing commercial music at their venues.

Today, cocktail bars serve bespoke drinks to affluent revellers, ultralounges offer premium bottle service, and Thai discotheques and male host bars feature foreign entertainers and flower garland culture.

The issues today include the recent changes to the liquor licensing rules that restrict the sale of alcohol to before 3am in Clarke Quay, the cut in the quota for hiring foreign entertainers, and finding enough local service staff to work in bars and clubs.

Despite the various types of nightlife entertainment and the fact that operators are essentially in competition with one another, there will be shared interests and common goals. Having a collective voice will work to their benefit.

Perhaps things might have worked out differently had there been an association last August, when the MOM announced new restrictions to the number of foreign entertainers nightspots could hire.

This sparked a furore among dance club and KTV lounge bosses, with more than 60 showing up at the Subordinate Courts, requesting the MOM to grant exemptions and more time to tweak their business operations.

Were there an association then, operators could have been in a better position to discuss the rules and negotiate for some leeway from the authorities, saving them time and trouble. History has shown that having a collective voice got things done.

The AEO worked closely with the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, with the clout as a representative voice of the industry to kick-start negotiations and reach agreements with the authorities on numerous issues, such as licensing laws and staffing woes.

The former AEO president, Mr Shahul, who is now in his 50s and works for a company that leases out space to nightclub operators, said: “We worked well together to negotiate for certain things. Frankly, all the problems were ironed out; smoking, licensing issues. There was nothing to do, and a lot of the clubs have since closed down.”

“This type of association never lasts long,” he added. “Don't forget, all of us are competitors at the end of the day. After some time, it fizzles out.”

Complacency in an industry where clubs and bars – its operators included – often do not last more than three to five years without changing hands or closing, is a difficult problem to tackle.

But it can be remedied with an effective succession plan and strong support from the association's members.

Understandably, it is easier said than done, but



Club-goers can party on knowing that things can only get better as the industry works to improve itself. ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

Mr Foo seems confident it will work out. Already, the new association aims to get at least “90 per cent of the market” to sign up as members, noting that the response from business operators they have contacted has been “quite good”.

At the end of the day, a formal framework will lead to a better managed industry that caters to the needs of the customer as well.

Some of the association's long-term goals include rolling out training and education programmes to improve service standards in nightlife outlets, as well as to attract and retain Singaporeans working in the nightlife business.

The association's vice-president, Ms Tay Eu-Yen, 34, said the group plans to set up an accreditation framework in the long term to weed out “mala-fide operators”.

The next few months will be the litmus test to see if the association can make an impact in the industry and garner support from industry peers.

In the meantime, club-goers can party on with the assurance that the nightlife scene can only get better with the industry working to improve itself.

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