

PUBLISHED JUNE 03, 2014

G  
S

ASIAN LEADERS

## En route to a billion-dollar empire

**With a penchant for dreaming big and a knack for innovation, G S Sareen is on course to steer Singapore-based Omni United into the big league of the tyre game, reports FRANCIS KAN**



- JOHN HENG

Sareen doesn't believe in doing things by halves. In just over a decade, the charismatic former Indian Army captain has built up a half-a-billion-dollar upstart that today sells hundreds of millions of its branded tyres every year to almost every corner of the world.

Offering high-quality products at reasonable prices, his company, Singapore-based Omni United, has left many smaller rivals in the dust, even as it steadily gains on the industry's biggest players.

In person, he is self-assured and speaks eloquently, and often excitedly, about his business and philanthropic adventures. Indeed, he appears like a man very much in control of his own destiny.

However, he readily admits that when he's on the golf course about to strike a ball, he has absolutely no control over its outcome. "You can hit the ball perfectly 100 times, but on the 101st it can go anywhere. You have to accept that the best you can do is try to hit it as well you can," said Mr Sareen, 48, an avid golfer who came to Singapore from India 20 years ago, before founding Omni in 2003.

Within those fatalistic parameters, however, he has hit the ball often and very well, both on and off the course. The eight-handicapper was part of the team that won the Pro-Am event at last year's HSBC Women's Champions tournament held at Sentosa.

In the business world, his successes are equally impressive. This year, Omni expects to sell 6.5 million passenger tyres in almost 90 countries, with sales of \$400 million in the process. That is double what the company recorded just a couple of years ago. He expects revenue to hit \$500 million in the next financial year. In entrepreneurial terms, Omni has raced from zero to 100 in mere seconds with Mr Sareen at the wheel.

Unsurprisingly, the accolades have come rolling in. He was named in Fortune magazine's 2012 list of Asia's 25 Hottest People in Business, while Omni has been honoured as one of Singapore's fastest-growing companies.

After leaving the army "where he fought terrorists and received an award for gallantry", he dabbled in various trading businesses before falling into the tyre trade. Feeling stifled by the then tightly regulated Indian economy, he debated moving to either Singapore or Dubai. After literally flipping a coin to decide, he arrived

in Singapore with his wife in 1993. They became Singapore citizens in 2009.

Omni's rapid growth can be put down to a potent mix of foresight, an uncanny ability to innovate, and most importantly, the courage to dream big.

Mr Sareen has transformed the business faster than his rivals can keep up. Omni started as a distributor for other brands, but quickly moved up the value chain to control every aspect of the business except manufacturing. Today, it sells under its flagship Radar brand that offers high quality at reasonable prices.

"To be a leader it's very important to have foresight; leaders are leaders because they can see what others cannot and that is perception. It's what we commonly refer to as gut instinct. A leader should have foresight and he must be able to react and use that to better the cause." For instance, he hired PhDs in rubber polymer science for the technical department well before the company embarked on producing tyres under its own brand.

He is now setting up the company for its next stage of growth - one that will see it propelled into the ranks of billion-dollar companies. The first stage of his expansion plan involves either expanding his distribution network - whether increasing activity in existing markets or moving into new ones - or taking over the manufacturing aspect of the business. Both options are under consideration and could potentially add another billion to revenue.

However, Mr Sareen's most ambitious plan yet is both environmentally friendly and commercially ingenious. The initiative will only be announced later in the year, and as such he is unable to reveal more details for the moment.

The first part of the plan kicked off earlier this year, when Omni's tyres were declared carbon neutral by consultants EY. Essentially, whatever carbon emissions generated during the production of Omni's products are offset by an investment in windmill projects that yield carbon credits. The next stage will see the company offset all the environmental damage done by his tyres past the point of sale.

"We are a young company without too much legacy. So we asked ourselves what could we do differently that could make an impact right away. The landfills around the world are filled with used tyres. Instead of contributing to the mess we wanted to fix the mess," he said.

It is a massive undertaking, but one that also includes a commercial element that could result in a substantial payoff for Omni. It is a project made for dreamers; how else could someone envision helping to save earth while making huge profits along the way. "Everything you do in life is in a cyclical manner. If you want to break that cycle you need to make a quantum jump."

Mr Sareen's philanthropic efforts have distinguished Omni in the industry. The most high-profile of these was the company's partnership with the Breast Cancer Research Foundation in 2011 to launch the Radar "Pink Ribbon" tyre, with a portion of proceeds from its sale going to the foundation.

While he is confident of pulling off his next trick, he is also well aware that with so many grand plans to be realised, he needs talented people around him to help him execute. "You need to hire capable people. You can't be the engine forever driving multiple trains," he said.

On that front, turnover has been low at the firm and there are many long-time employees who have worked for many years in the still-young company. One employee who started with Omni eight years ago also brought her sister on board. Soon, their sister-in-law and other relatives followed suit. Today, there is a group of eight relatives working in the company.

Much like his approach to golf, Mr Sareen takes nothing for granted despite his success so far. "Golf is like business. You can learn all the theories, but you won't know how they will turn out until you actually put them into practice. You can never be sure that things will end up the way you planned."

---

## **G S SAREEN ON LEADERSHIP**

'Leaders are leaders because they can see what others cannot. It's what we commonly refer to as gut instinct. A leader should have foresight and he must be able to react and use that to better the cause.'

## On the importance of dreaming

'Dreaming is very important, and if you are dreaming, dream of something substantial. Everything you do in life is in a cyclical manner. If you want to break that cycle you need to make a quantum jump.'

## On motivating employees

'When I was in the army, I was motivating people to die for us. For commercial motivation, it's just getting them to work harder.'



|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Referenced Media</b>          | <b>Thumbnail - filename (104x68):</b><br><a href="#">BT 20140603 SAREEN3 1114188n</a> |
| <b>Hermes Info</b>               | <b>Document ID:</b><br>1114132  |
| <b>Author ID:</b><br>YUCF        |   |
| <b>Source:</b><br>SPH            |   |
| <b>Copyright:</b><br>SPH         |   |
| <b>Definition type:</b><br>STORY |   |

Invest in our Treasury products  
and receive SGD2,800 in vouchers.  
Terms and conditions apply.

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

DBS TREASURES PRIVATE  
CLIENT