

Bodynits gains in leotard war

Five Singaporean sisters, the Tans, are cashing in on the aerobic craze with their new brand of low price leotards. *Sid Astbury* interviewed them and looked at their competitors

Leotards are selling like hot cakes at the Dance Centre of Singapore. 'We've already sold 30 today and it's only three o'clock,' said a sales assistant at the city state's largest retailer of dance costumes. 'A woman came in earlier, an Indonesian, and bought S\$500 worth at one go.' With women in Singapore and throughout the region in hot pursuit of fitness and body beauty, outlets like the Dance Centre are doing a roaring trade in high fashion 'sweat' suits.

The Dance Centre prides itself on exclusiveness and only stocks leading foreign brands like Bloch, Carushka and Roberto. The retailer does not, however, carry leotards made by a Singapore manufacturer known as Bodynits. Fortunately for Bodynits, other Singapore outlets and their customers cannot afford to be that choosy. By pricing competitively and marketing aggressively, the company has won around 25% of the local market for leotards, and a significant presence in the Malaysian and Indonesian markets as well.

Bodynits is managed by five sisters and is an offshoot of a lingerie store their parents started in the 1970s. Explained Yin Tan, the sister who handles advertising and promotions: 'The store could not keep pace with demand for leotards when the aerobic craze hit in 1982 and we saw an opportunity to manufacture ourselves.' By chance, the Tan sisters met an American experienced in the design of leotards and she gave them a crash course. The Tan parents agreed to provide S\$150,000 in seed money. Bodynits was born.

In 1984, the first full year of production, Bodynits posted sales of S\$600,000. This year the company is expecting revenues to reach S\$850,000, some 30% of which will come from exports to Malaysia and Indonesia. Next year, when further markets will be opened and the Bodynits range of products extended, revenues should rise to nearly S\$2 million. The average Bodynits leotard sells for S\$30 — about half the price of imported designer labels — and the profit margin for Bodynits is between 20% and 25%. Accessories like headbands and pullovers, shorts and tights, carry higher profit margins and are



Lynn Tan, right, and modeling the latest creations: the company has already captured 25% of the local market

an increasingly important segment of the Bodynits range.

The basic formula for success is simple: a product of a quality similar to leading imported brands, but at a price the average Singaporean can afford. The Tan sisters have added refinements that gave their product particular local appeal. Explained Lynn Tan, the sister in charge of Bodynits (the other sisters handle production, accounts and general administration): 'Our strong point is that we design for the Asian figure and not the western figure. We have more colours, more style and are less revealing.' Tom Rao of *Her World*, one of Singapore's leading women's magazines, agreed with Lynn's assessment. Said Rao: 'Women here are very fashion conscious.'

Taking risks; being lucky

Design is indeed one of Bodynits' strongest suits. Rather than employ a team of in-house designers, the firm accepts designs from anyone who cares to submit them. Said Lynn: 'That way we get designs from women who are dancers themselves. They have a feel for the local market and for requirements like ease of movement.' New designs are produced every three months and brochures sent to all Bodynits outlets. Orders are fulfilled on a sale or return basis. Said Lynn: 'We knew the sale or return arrangement was risky, but we have been lucky and hardly any have ever been returned.'

Though progress so far has been sure-footed, Bodynits has exhausted the right of the firstborn and is now contending with companies cast in its own image. There are cheaper brands on the market

and there is fierce discounting at shops specialising in foreign brands. Pirated versions of Bodynits designs are appearing. Worst of all, there are signs that aerobics will go the way of the skateboard.

To ensure there is life after leotards, Bodynits is diversifying into other garment lines it can feed into its superslick distribution channels. The company is spending heavily on advertising and linking up with other manufacturers for joint marketing exercises. A recent joint sally was with a producer of diet cola. Said Lynn: 'We believe that with a good name and a good image we can expand into other types of leisure wear.'

Bodynits has no intention of forsaking leotards and is now honing strategies that should keep it ahead of the pack. To make sure Bodynits is not squeezed at the lower end of the market, there will be a budget range of leotards. 'We need to do something for those with limited budgets and for the first time user,' said Lynn. A more ambitious gambit is the impending move upmarket with a designer-label range aimed at upper crust locals and the foreign market. The new label will compete head on with name brand imports.

But perhaps the most serious challenges will be internal rather than external. Bodynits has yet to come to terms with its own success. The sisters are contemplating a restructuring that would include a graduation from the current partnership format to limited liability status. Part of that restructuring would mean a firm delineation of lines of responsibility and of the profit sharing arrangement. Just how well the present sisterly relationship will stand up to the trials and tribulations of consolidation remains to be seen. **A3**

Fashion in Leotards

What is plain and simple can sometimes be transformed into something very attractive and fashionable — which is exactly what Body-Nits did with leotards.

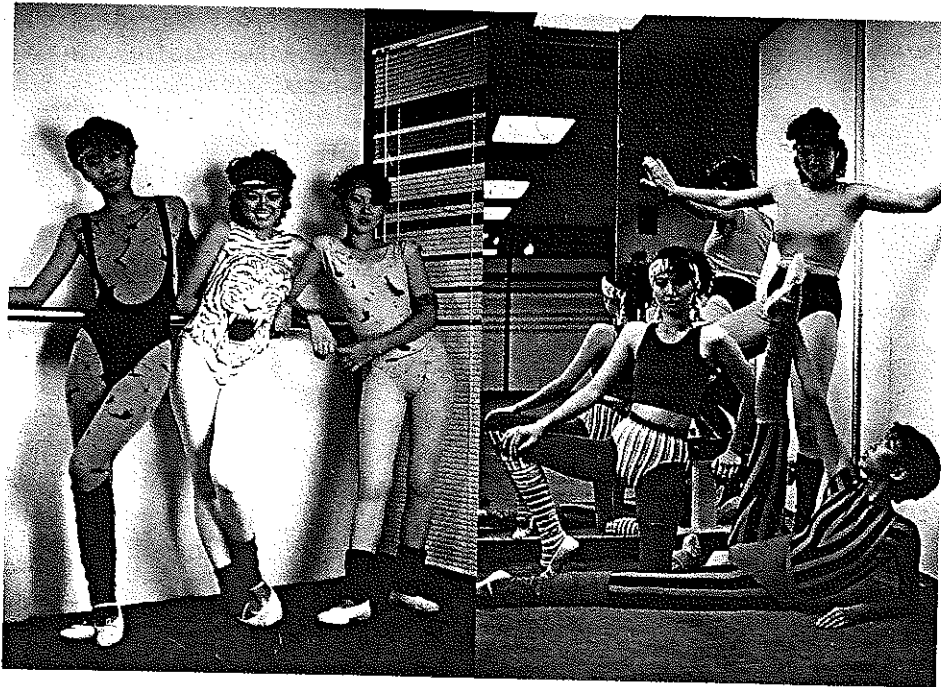
A family manufacturing concern, Body-Nits set about producing leotards and tights in print (as depicted) and introduced the idea successfully not only in Singapore but to the neighbouring countries as well.

Bold and different, the leotards are made from basic materials such as

nylon and cotton lycra for their stretch and elastic properties.

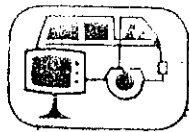
In keeping with the world trend in leotards, Body-Nits also market cotton and lycra blended TC for the loss baggy look which is most suitable for ladies who want to look fashionable during aerobic or dance lessons.

Plain leotards and tights are naturally also marketed although another range - of luminous materials - has just been introduced as well. □



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Body Nits' switch to leotard-making pays off



Small business

By MARA FERNANDEZ

FOR Miss Lynn Tan of Body Nits, switching from selling clothes to making leotards three years ago was a move in the right direction.

Today Body Nits leotards and accessories are found in just about every major department store here, competing with European brands and more established American names such as Danskin.

Among the outlets that sell Body Nits leotards are Isetan, Robinson's, John Little, Oriental Kimisawa, Klasse, Galeries Lafayette and sports boutiques in Lucky Plaza, Bukit Timah Plaza and Holland Village Shopping Centre. They are also sold in West Malaysia.

Of the estimated 250 dozen leotards sold each month in Singapore, about 25 per cent come from Body Nits.

Boutique experience

Miss Tan, a trained draughtsman, is a newcomer to the business but she has her mother and four sisters to help her in running the business.

Her older sister and mother have more than 10 years' experience running a boutique in Katong. The others are trained in accounting, marketing and advertising.

The company started as an importer of leotards but it soon found that these were not quite up to standard and decided to make its own. It also makes shorts, tights, pull-overs, headbands, loose tops and other accessories for a total, put-together look.

Miss Tan said she and her sisters were extremely lucky in that, by chance, they met a leotard designer who had worked in a well-known American boutique for many years and who taught them all there was to know.

Latest fashion

Miss Tan said her company employs 15 part-time designers who are all dancers and, hence, users of leotards.

They bring with them not only the latest in leotard fashions but also practical considerations in the designing of leotards.

The company changes its designs every three months and, for each change, 10 to 15 different designs are produced. These are captured in glossy catalogues sent to customers.

The added advantage in this is that it helps to keep the inventory moving as changing designs frequently means that the company has to put a



Body Nits leotards ... stretching in the right direction.

limit to the number per design, said Miss Tan.

The large number of freelancers frees Body Nits from monotonous designs which may come from relying totally on a full-time designer.

But good design needs to be marketed too. The company spent about \$10,000 last year on advertising and promotions. For instance, aerobic dancers wear Body Nits when promoting their health clubs in hotels and at shopping centres.

Being right in the marketplace means that leotards are sold at almost half the price of imported designs, a huge plus factor for Body Nits leotards, which are specially made

for the Asian body.

But though all this indicates a growing company, Miss Tan said for the time being they were quite happy with their market

share in Singapore as expanding too fast has its pitfalls. She will only think of expansion when the retail business picks up.