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COVER STORY

Asian Trucker visits Dubai

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A photograph of Jimmy Nichi, a middle-aged man with dark hair, smiling. He is wearing a blue and white vertically striped button-down shirt and a wristwatch on his left arm. He is standing next to a large, dark, curved industrial component, possibly part of a cement mixer. The background is slightly blurred, showing more of the industrial setting.

Building on a concrete-solid foundation

The secret to Jimmy Nichi's success with his Buffalo Mixers is that there is no secret, just hard work and a lot of common sense that has helped him to become the address in South East Asia to go to for cement mixers.

If you haven't done so, we recommend you hook up with Jimmy Nichi to have a chat over a drink. He and his ex-staff, suppliers and customers meet every Friday in their clubhouse located in Nichi's premises just outside Klang. Besides producing some of the most durable cement mixers, "Jimmy" as everyone just calls him, whips up chicken curry that can compete with Masterchef's creations and the home-made curry puffs are something out of this world. Being the relaxed host today, Nichi has built a solid business using common sense and his secret ingredient: hard work. We stirred a bit to find out more about the success story behind Malaysia's Buffalo cement mixers.

Having worked for others, Nichi felt the desire to start "something for himself". Not specialised in anything in particular, he simply took the challenge and got on with it. In 1981, he simply loaded his hand tools and a welding apparatus into his trusted Datsun

and started looking for work. Going from one construction site to the next and visiting truck operators, he offered his services to help maintain and repair the vehicles on site. Initially, this paid very little and he had to chase for work every day. However, the concept worked and the best times were during the festive season as he explains "Companies would slow down their operation and give their vehicles a proper work-over. It were these times when I would show up at a transportation yard and secure work for several days." This soon led to him hiring a general hand. Soon the team was known in the industry and Nichi gained a reputation for solid work and being available at any time of the day or week. "I had to be smart. If others prefer to relax at home, that was the time when I would be out there, helping truckers with their breakdowns and services" he says, smiling.



Events took an interesting turn when he was buying parts in a shop one day and an Australian walked in, looking for specific parts to set up the first cement batching plant in Malaysia. The two enterprising gentlemen talked and at the end of the day, Nichi was hired to help building this plant. That time still on daily pay, he made RM 50 for a hard day's worth of work but soaked up everything that there was to know about batching plants. "It didn't matter that I earned little and that it was hard work as I was able to learn all about this type of machinery" he reasons. When the market crashed in 1987, it threw the Australian off the rails and it marked the end of operation for this batching plant. It was the moment when Nichi decided to create his own batching plant using his newly gained knowledge. With the support of new-found customers the business started to take off.

"And then I realised that there is a need for mixer trucks as well. I started to look into these next" Nichi says. At that time, only used, imported trucks from Japan were available. Learning again, the mixers saw a number of trials and errors before they turned into what is known today as "Buffalo Mixers", representing sturdy, durable and innovative mixers. According to Nichi, the difficult part is to design the barrel and blades in a manner that ensure a homogenous mix of the concrete inside. Said Nichi "What makes you successful is hard work, patience and making sacrifices. Unfortunately, the younger generation doesn't want to put in such efforts anymore." His daughter and sons also work for the business, but won't get any royal treatment. They have to report to more senior staff and not Daddy.

Having been in this industry for decades, he sees some very clear trends emerging. Firstly there is a need for innovation. Components need to be reliable. For instance the gearbox that manages the revolutions of the drum needs to be long lasting. The drum itself needs to be made lighter to allow more payload. To this extend, Nichi works closely with providers of parts and sub-assemblies. Also, the company is applying innovative production methods and materials. The latest drums are made of lightweight steel alloys. Wear resistance of the drum is another aspect Nichi looks into.

Secondly, there is a shift in market demand for trucks to be fitted with mixers. Earlier, the market saw a demand for new trucks, replacing the imported Japanese makes. Today, Chinese trucks are making inroads into the mixer market. Asked why, Nichi explains "These trucks don't need to have the comfort of the long distance haulage trucks. What you need is a basic machine that will perform in rugged and tough conditions. After some five years, these trucks have recovered their cost while being highly used. If you use a more expensive truck, you may not be able to recover your cost within the same time. So, unless the European makers come up with trucks specifically designed for this market segment, I believe the Chinese will be dominating this class of trucks. It is simply a matter of running the numbers and buying the truck", Nichi sums it up. Given the economic growth in the region, the need for mixers trucks will continually rise, and the company is gearing up to meet this trend.

Asked about his most memorable moment, Nichi remembers his first order to supply one batching plant and six mixer trucks. This order, according to him, was the defining moment as it signalled a new era for the business, whereby he was finally seeing the results of his hard work paying off.

When asked what he would change in Malaysia's trucking industry, Nichi says that "It may be time to revisit the regulations about vehicle inspections. As trucks have improved tremendously, we may not need to inspect them every six months, but maybe only once a year. This would improve the business performance of companies as they have less downtime and would therefore contribute more to the economy".

