

Making The Right Choice To Save The Honey Business

Authors: Zakiyah Taharim, Nurul Faizah Halim

Prologue

It is a hazy day in December that scared Nur Izzatie, and she likes to weep at the pain and disturbance she is going through. Nur Izzatie came into her room and closed the door with a blast.

She thinks, 'I will lose everything I have been working for a year. Without kelulut beesⁱ and bee hives, I will be out of business.'

Nur Izzatie just discovered that numerous kelulut bees had perished on the ground, and the bee hives were empty. Hundreds of bees emerge in front of the bee hive's entrance and begin to circle. In the absence of bees and honey, undoubtedly, there will be no business. Nur Izzatie had difficulty dealing with the problem, so fewer bees would die or flee away. She needs to find the reason soon to resolve it. Otherwise, she will lose everything.

Nur Izzatie and Family

Nur Izzatie binti Zulkifli was born on November 24, 1995, to a family of farming entrepreneurs in a remote area in Ketereh, the southern half of Kelantan State, Malaysia. She has grown up helping her father, Zulkifli bin Mamat, run his agriculture-based business. Zulkili was planting various kinds of cash crops for a living. Growing up in a challenging environment has made Nur Izzaite stand on her own and be independent in her life. During her childhood, Nur Izzatie started a small business to self-support her needs without expecting pocket money from her father.

During high school, with the help of her mother, Nur Izzatie made and sold various flavoured jellies, such as strawberries, mango, and other products. Despite the business she ran and helping her father at the farm, Nur Izzatie wisely divided her time to study, leading her to continue to university successfully. Nur Izzatie pursued her first degree in Arabic at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu.

Throughout her three years of studying at UniSZA University, Nur Izzatie also understood and took advantage of the market opportunities within the university to run a business to cover her studies and daily expenses, especially to pay her tuition fees. Nur Izzatie has decided not to bear the debt by

THE AUTHORS

Zakiyah Taharim and Nurul Faizah Halim are a postgraduate researcher at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia.

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taking a PTPTN study loan at a young age. Therefore, she started exploring the possible opportunities to start a business and earn income. Looking at herself as an example, her friends and the need of other female students in the university, who were majority Muslim, to wear a versatile and up-to-date hijab and socks. Therefore, Nur Izzatie seized the opportunity by selling various types of hijab/headscarves and stockings. In addition, she realized that, as a resident of Kelantan state, she has the advantage of obtaining a supply of hijabs quickly, of various types of high quality, at reasonable prices. However, she still had an issue with her business and had to frequently travel from Terengganu and Kelantan to restock the product. She has used the available money to invest and bought a motorcycle as her business asset. Having the motorcycle, she has to pay for the motorcycle installments every month without hesitation. Therefore, Nur Izzatie added a new business proposal to increase her income by running a motorcycle rental business. Since then, almost every day, there have always been students who will rent the motorbike. Nur Izzatie's income and savings have increased, and her university life has been very smooth.

Early Entrepreneurial adventures

Until one day, she was approached by several businesswomen. Her involvement in entrepreneurship and creativity in running her business has attracted other business owner to take advantage of her hard work and talent to create more wealth for their business. So, Nur Izzatie was approached by a Multi-Level Marketing (MLM) agent who wanted her to join their system and generate more income faster. Deceived by their sweet words and persuasion of the opportunity to create more prosperity through MLM, Nur Izzatie joined and stuck with MLM business. However, after being in the world of MLM for some time, she lost her money and faced various challenges in generating more downline agents.

Meanwhile, her upline kept pushing her to invest more money and get more customers and new recruits. At that point, Nur Izzatie realized that the agents were using her and that the wealth she had dreamt of had never happened. Despite that, Nur Izzatie also started losing friends and relatives due to the business system, which created more harm. The MLM business taught her that she could never fulfill her wealth creation and that she struggled to make new agents and customers provide advantages to her superiors. Realizing that her time and investment had not yielded the expected results, she withdrew from the business. Since then, she only focused on her usual business and regained her passion and happiness.

During the semester break in 2017, Nur Izzatie returned to her village, and as usual, she helped her father on his farm. One day, his father invited Nur Izzatie to accompany him to meet his friend, who was a 'kelulut' breeder. During their discussion, he advised her father to produce more fruit and vegetable crops, and Nur Izzatie stated that:

"Keeping the 'kelulut' bee hive near the farm is good. The bees are a natural pollination agent; thus, it is called a farm's friend. The presence of 'kelulut' bees on the farm would increase crop yield. Moreover, the bee is stingless; thus, not dangerous".

That was the day Nur Izzati started to realize the opportunity to harvest 'kelulut' honey owned by her father's friend. Nur Izzatie was thrilled when she saw the honey from the bee hive. Considering the benefits and curiosity about the bees, Nur Izzatie took one bee hive home. That honey bee hive was placed in the yard near her house, so monitoring and preventing the honey from being stolen was easy. Starting that day, Nur Izzatie has equipped herself with knowledge about bee farms. Nur Izzatie obtained information about 'kelulut' honey farming from internet sources, especially YouTube, Facebook pages, agricultural websites, and research journals. However, she needed a clearer picture, so she asked the 'kelulut' farmers, who were always willing to share their expertise and experience. Having the thought that 'kelulut' needs a suitable environment to live and produce honey, Nur Izzatie plants various trees around the bee hive to encourage honey production, such as flower trees, limes, and other fruit trees. Then, the honey yield she harvested will be sold to local residents.

Nur Izzatie explained the experience: 'I was suddenly shocked that honey farming is a great and easy business opportunity for me. My father has the necessary farms to feed honey bees, and we can have a good family business offering a respectable income source.'

From that day, Nur Izzatie walked around the bee farm every morning to check on her honey colony and ensure it was in good condition. After a few months of raising honeybees, Nur Izzatie started harvesting honey bees for her family's daily usage. The leftover honey was sold to her relatives, close friends, and nearby residents. Over time, the demand for her natural and organic 'kelulut' honey increased when her kululut product became known to many from word of mouth. The benefits of natural 'kelulut' honey, which is known by many, and the sale of organic honey at a reasonable price add to the confidence of Nur Izzatie's business future. The high interest and marketability of 'kelulut' honey have made Nur Izzati feel more confident in increasing the number of logs or bee hives around her house to increase her production.

Exploiting the Opportunity

In 2019, Nur Izzatie finally graduated from university. After graduation, Nur Izzatie has ventured into various jobs to support her living. She once became a temporary teacher at a local kindergarten. Nur Izzatie used to drive a Grab car around her hometown to sell homemade bakery products. Her experience working directly with customers, from children to adults, across races, provides valuable insights into customer needs, preferences, and behaviours. Her struggles in life have given her the survival abilities, creativity, maturity, and resourcefulness to find solutions to challenges and constraints. She has faced challenges in her professional life that equipped her to anticipate better and mitigate risks when starting her new venture. She thinks she was a born entrepreneur with an agripreneur father and a modest business since high school, in university, and after graduation. Nur Izzatie started thinking of establishing and growing her honey business. Armed with her business experience and family support, Nur Izzatie has invested capital to increase the number of bee hive colonies to meet customer demand and expand her business. The experience she gains with customer service, production process, and marketing empowers Nur Izzatie to manage the business, develop

products or services that address real-world problems, and deliver value to their target customers. In addition, she has full support from the whole family, especially her father, to pursue her dream.

Nur Izzatie narrated her career decision as: *' I made many attempts to do different jobs to earn my living and help my family. However, ultimately, I understand that having my own business is the best thing in the world. Moreover, my family supported me in running the business of my dreams.'*



Figure 1: Honey Bee Farming

Nur Izzatie's father believed in her daughter's dreams, and he knew that Nur Izzatie was capable of handling a business with the help of the social network she had. Her father has put his trust in the 'kelulut' bees, as it has saved her father's life. Looking back, in 2018, Hj Zulkifli was severely sick. He had heart disease and needed to undergo two heart surgeries. After undergoing the first heart surgery (angiogram) for two heart vessels, his father began to control his diet at the same time that he started to take the original 'kelulut' honey daily. He knew that the 'kelulut' honey had been proven effective in recovering quickly, regaining energy, and overall wellness. When the time came for the second surgery, the whole family was surprised when the doctor said that Mr. Zulkifli no longer needed to undergo the remaining surgery as he had fully recovered and the system was already healing. Looking at the happiness of her father and the whole family, Nur Izzatie thought to herself,

"Why not start a business venture and prosper with the organic honey product?"

Nur Izzatie talks to her father about establishing the business on a commercial stage. Her father knows Nur Izzatie has the skills to establish her own business venture, but he advised her to do advanced business planning and preparation. He also asked Nur Izzatie to develop and leverage her technical understanding and knowledge from operating a bee hive on a bigger scale. Her father met some of his friends who were bee farmers, offering advice and feedback on improving their family honey farming business. As a senior farmer and agropreneur, her father realised that building networks of mentors, advisors, and experts would provide them with actual guidance, support, and valuable insights to navigate her business to survive and grow as these farmers have likely encountered similar situations, made mistakes, and learned valuable lessons along the way. By studying their journey, her father believed Nur Izzatie could gain insights into practical strategies, best practices, and pitfalls to avoid.



Figure 2: Nur Izzatie with her family

On top of that, her father has gathered all his children to ask them to help Nur Izzatie develop the bee farm and help her in her new business venture. With the family support, Nur Izzatie was assured that she had the resources to start a formal business on a larger scale. As a result, on 8 June 2019, Nur Izzati officially registered her business with the Malaysian Companies Commission. The business was not just for the honey product but also to market her father's farm products that had been produced over the past few years, such as cassava, sweet potato, bananas, lemongrass, vegetables, herbs, and pineapples.

Currently, Nur Izzatie holds the RZ Garden Enterprise's Manager position, while her father is the farm supervisor at RZ Garden Enterprise. RZ Garden products were registered under the 'Honeyzull Madu kelulut Asli' brand. The RZ Garden Enterprise aims to be known as a Bumiputera Islamic company that supplies and manufactures products based on natural 'kelulut' honey in particular and generally supplies other agricultural products. Now, the business registration qualifies her business to be registered under pertinent government agencies such as SMEcorp, the Department of Agriculture, RISDA, ECER, and others. Nur Izzati does not have a formal education in business, but Nur Izzati has attended various courses held by these government agencies. In addition, she also did her own research and followed the development of knowledge and scientific studies from MARDI, MAFI, UMT, UniSZA, and USM. As a result of her hard work, resilience, and entrepreneurial qualities, Nur Izzatie received several funds or grants from the Department of Agriculture, SME Corp, RISDA, and ECER, which helped her develop her honey enterprise. The financial support was partly used for bee garden facilities, honey processing equipment, storage buildings, office space, etc.

Now, the total amount of honey produced by Nur Izzati's garden is as much as 300kg per year. The number is enough to market in both domestic and foreign markets. Therefore, Nur Izzatie has set a vision to penetrate the international market, which is Saudi Arabia. In order to realize that goal, RZ Garden has improved the packaging and is trying to obtain specific certifications for the purpose. Among the certificates received are MyIPO approval for the brand, myGAP certification by the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry on 18 August 2020 for organic, food handling certificate, MESTI from the Ministry of Health Malaysia, and halal certificate.



Figure 3: Agencies RZ Garden working with

Furthermore, Nur Izzatie enhanced the market value by getting a Halal certificate from government agencies to secure a sustainable business. The Halal certificate improves customer trust, ensures food safety, increases transparency, enhances brand image, establishes product quality, and meets global standards. The certification boosts RZ Garden's business in domestic and international trades, particularly in markets with significant Muslim populations or where consumers prioritize halal products.

Nur Izzatie highlights the benefits as 'getting certification improves the internal process of working and builds consumer confidence in our system and products.'

In addition, she also wisely uses information technology to market and launch her business affairs. Users can order the products offered through the website or order through WhatsApp. Information related to the product can be easily obtained from the Facebook channel, TikTok, Instagram, and company website.

Nur Izzatie explains it: 'We live in the 21st century, and IT has become an integral part of our daily life. COVID-19 has also taught us how to use IT resources to survive. Social media is vital to our survival and brings new customers from near and far.'

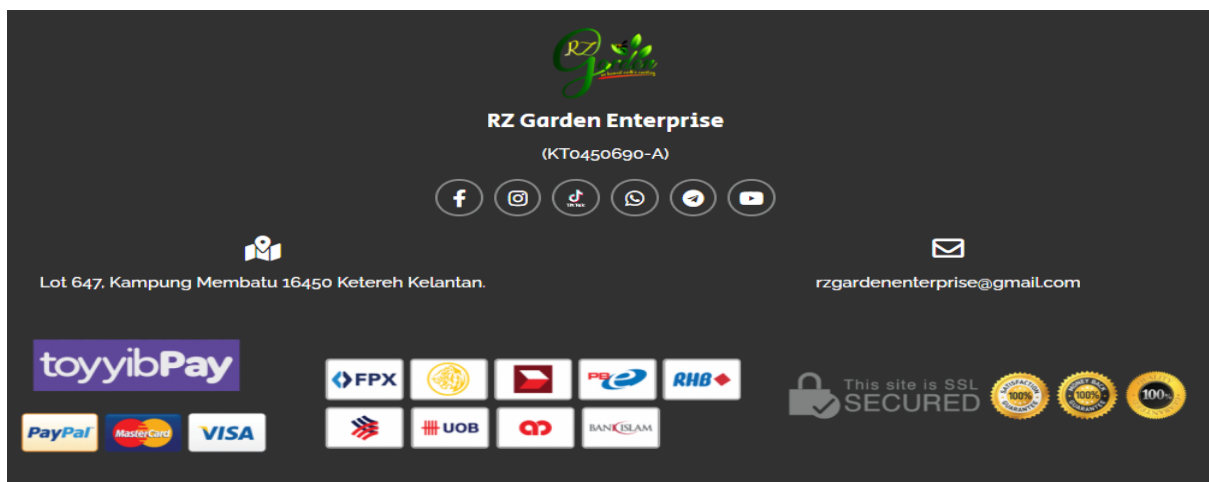


Figure 4: RZ Garden Website

One misty morning, the sun barely peeking over the horizon, Nur Izzatie stepped into her kelulut farm, ready to tend to her beloved bees. However, what she found shook her to the core. Some of the kelulut logs, usually bustling with activity, were eerily silent. Additionally, hovering in the air was a frenzied group of bees as if they were distressed. A chill ran down Nur Izzatie's spine as she noticed the lifeless bodies of bees scattered on the ground. Panic threatened to overwhelm her, but Nur Izzatie knew it was time to act and act fast. Racing to find her father working in the nearby garden, she poured out her fears and frustrations. Nur Izzatie's father, a source of wisdom and calm, reminded her to stay composed and not let fear cloud her judgment. However, for Nur Izzatie, the loss of her honey colony was devastating, and she was not sure she could recover from it. Feeling defeated, she retreated into herself, locking herself away for a month, drowning in frustration and despair.

'My father always remains a source of inspiration and wisdom for me. Whenever I need advice, I always turn to him. He is really my mentor.' Nur Izzatie expressed her opinion about her father.

Nevertheless, her father, ever the beacon of hope, refused to let her wallow in self-pity. He arranged a meeting with a friend who had faced similar challenges and could offer some help and advice to Nur Izzatie. Nur Izzatie thinks it will be a good idea to meet and listen carefully to the elders to learn the causes of issues and resolve them. Listening to an expert may help to gain the determination and encouragement to face the setbacks and prepare to correct them.

While it is a good idea to meet the expert to get advice, Nur Izzatie also thinks about using social media and YouTube to gain the right information and listen to people who are involved in the bee farming business. But, the issue with social media is that the information provided on social media and YouTube may be misleading and offer no incentives. The validity and authenticity of the information available are low, and Nur Izzatie thinks it is better to look for other opportunities.

Another option will be to visit the nearby honey farming stations and ask about the issues the Nur Izzatie faces. It also helps Nur Izzatie understand the cause of the problem and learn from peers to gain insight into the issue. The peer farm owners also utilized any corrective strategy that could facilitate the adoption of the same one for Nur Izzatie or offer the best possible option to reduce the adverse impact and take the necessary protection to correct the adverse situation.

Lastly, the Nur Izzaite is well aware of government agencies offering advice and support to build honey farms and taking the necessary actions to protect them. However, going to government agencies and getting the right advice is time-consuming. Government agencies work in bureaucratic styles and require time and effort to get the best possible advice.



Figure 5: Nur Izzatie with her products

Epilogue

Nur Izzatie has to decide early and has to act early. Nur Izzatie has multiple options at hand to get advice and take the necessary corrective actions to handle the death and migration of honey bees. Nur Izzatie understands that business problems are natural and that the problem requires understanding the business problem and creating the best possible option to correct the problem. Nur Izzatie understands that she needs to act fast and make the necessary decisions to protect the honey farms and save her business.

ⁱ Kelulut Honey is produced by tiny bees known as Trigona, or stingless bees, part of the large Meliponini tribe within the Apidae family. These bees are closely related to common honey bees, carpenter bees, orchid bees, and bumblebees. While they can still attack to protect their colonies and honey, stingless bees are more annoying than frightening. They might swarm around your ears, hair, and eyes, causing discomfort with their sticky legs. However, if the weather is cooler, the bees are calmer, making honey tasting a pleasant experience. Originally, Kelulut bees made cavities in forest trees, but villagers have since been trained to farm them near the wild due to the honey's numerous benefits.