



Ambassador Bienvenido Tantoco is turning 100 years young on 7th April 2021.

His anniversary is the occasion to highlight the incredible journey of a visionary leader who started a small retail business with his wife 69 years ago, to build a retail diversified group now managed successfully by his family's 2nd and 3rd generations.

Learnings from the Founder of Luxury Retail in The Philippines

Creating a Business

Born in Bulacan, Amb. Tantoco was acquainted with hard work as a boy. The sudden loss of his father made the 16-year-old the man of the family: his mother, sister, and six brothers. He found work at one of the theatres run by the prominent Rufino family of Manila. Along the way, he became a scholar of the Fabella family and the Jose Rizal College, now the Jose Rizal University, earning his bachelor's degree in commerce during the day and managing the theatre at night.

A tour abroad to production companies that the Rufinos' theatres represented became the catalyst for the business that would bear his and his late wife's names. Rather than splurging on treats and souvenirs for herself, his wife Gliceria Rustia-Tantoco packed her suitcases full of goods to sell and her mind full of retailing concepts to try back home. These suitcases subsequently took up the front room of the couple's house on San Marcelino Street in Manila, where eager shoppers snapped up Mrs. Tantoco's finds.

With his wife, they pioneered the upscale department store concept in the Philippines in 1952, beginning with novelty goods sold out of suitcases, ladies' accessories, blouses, handbags, and other items that could not be found anywhere in the country. When the front room of their house in Manila grew too small to accommodate their goods, the enterprising couple took another risk by setting up shop in Makati. In those days, Manila was the premiere business district, so for the Tantocos to move away from their customer base seemed foolhardy by convention. There on Ayala Avenue, they established the brand of customer service that has become part of the DNA of every Rustan's venture. They also built up the concept of aspirational shopping: that after making a purchase, the customer came away not only with a product but also with a piece of a lifestyle dream. By then, Rustan's had also brought many of the world's top luxury brands onto its department store shelves. The company had become Christian Dior's first export partner.



Building a Diversified Retail Group

In 1970, Rustan's expanded into the supermarket business, this time bringing then unheard-of products like Kikkoman soy sauce, Chupa Chups lollipops, and Lay's potato chips to grocery store shelves. The company was also the first to put up an in-store cafe and bakery, offer appliances and home items in the dry goods section, offer organic products, imported lamb meat, wine and chocolate, hold a midnight sale, offer gift certificates, and create a customer loyalty program.

In 1988, however, the Tantocos came out with a plan to offer even more high-end goodies. Store Specialists Inc. was thus set up to acquire, manage, and develop the group's franchises of these upscale brands through individual boutiques. The new subsidiary's success over the years has defied the general belief that no high-end market exists in the Philippines. Mrs. Tantoco's eye for potential bestsellers has also been inherited by succeeding generations. Nearly 10 years later, Rustan's made another hit, when Rustan's Coffee Corporation received the license to establish and propagate the Starbucks chain of coffee shops in the country. It has since been credited with the rise of a new coffee culture and specialty industry in the Philippines.

In 1998, Amb. Tantoco brought in the concept of big box retail, finding inspiration in two large-scale international grocery chains: Target in the US and France's Carrefour, whose breadth of in-store offerings appealed to a new demographic of working moms on a time crunch.



A Family Business with Values

With an approach less constricting and more conducive to learning, Amb. Tantoco helped the business grow out of his wife's suitcases into the retail group that it is today. Within that structure, he lets people be who they are: entrepreneurial and human. "People who work with us become members of the family. You cannot rule by fear. You have to gain the love of your people. That is what we've done from the first day of Rustan's", he said.

For all his leadership savvy, Rustan's Chairman Emeritus is foremost a good listener. He would diligently take down notes in every conference he attends. He is also a great teacher, but also a perpetual student. A pioneering visionary, he leads and innovates. He hates boring, mediocre, and sameness. Retail is about passion, and how can you be passionate about something that's mediocre!

He has brought up his family in the business as early as he could. He and his wife would bring their children along with them on their travels, teaching them how to do paperwork and choose merchandise along the way. As young as 10 years old, the children wrapped gifts, managed the package claim counters, and helped sell items at the store. His values are based on integrity, excellence, and empathy; he believes that the prize for which the company competes is the loyalty of both customer and employee.

Amb. Tantoco has entrusted his businesses to his children and grandchildren, who will see to the company's future while preserving key points in his legacy. Today, the Rustan's Group is having interests in department store retail, luxury boutiques, duty free, real estate, and coffee.



An Outstanding Personality

Amb. Tantoco has received various decorations for his achievements in business and diplomacy. While serving as the Philippine Ambassador to the Vatican in the 1980s, he was knighted under several orders of chivalry: Grand Cross, Order of Pius IX; Order of St. Gregory the Great; Grand Cross, Sovereign Military Order of Malta; Republic of Portugal Order of Merit, Commander rank; and Republic of Italy Order of Merit, Commander rank. Back home, Amb. Tantoco received an honorary doctorate in the humanities from his Alma Mater, Jose Rizal University, in 2002. The National Mother's Day and Father's Day Foundation recognized his patriarchal appeal by naming him Ulirang Ama (Model Father) in 2003, while his home province gave him its Ama ng Bulacan (Father of Bulacan) award in 2005. The award is given to a person who is native born or has roots in Bulacan, and who best represents what a true blooded Bulakeno is – industrious, chivalrous, patriotic and one who is proud of his Bulacan heritage and believes in giving back to his native province. Most recently, He was honored by the Philippine Retailers Association and the Department of Trade and Industry, with their 6th President's Award, for being the 'Father of Luxury Retailing.'

Asked recently about what he was most proud of, he said two things: "I'm proudest of all the people I've helped get a better education than they could have received on their own, and a home better than what they could have done on their own".

A Dedicated IGDS Member

In 1993, under Amb. Tantoco's leadership, Rustan's joined IGDS and since then has been representing The Philippines exclusively in our association. Taking part in many events, hosting IGDS CEO meetings in Manila as well as supporting our organization with passion and friendship, Rustan's epitomizes the spirit of IGDS of togetherness and helping each other.



1. IGDS Executive Seminar 2001 in Hua Hin (Thailand): Ambassador Tantoco (4th from left - front row). His motto 'You are never too old to learn!'

2. The 57th IGDS General Assembly and Convention 2005 in Manila

3. WDSF 2011 in Shanghai - Ambassador Tantoco with Former IGDS President Simon Susman, Woolworths



10 Life Commandments by Ambassador Bienvenido Tantoco

1. Have a Sense of Purpose

Many old people stop dreaming after they retire. While I am in this world, God has given me something to do. For me, it is giving back in whatever way I can to a life and world that has been good to me.

2. Surround yourself with People you Love

Nothing gives me greater joy than seeing and spending time with my family. My great grand children keep me young at heart.

3. Feed your Spirituality

The only way to nourish your soul is through your faith. Talk daily to God.

4. Exercise

The only tried and true way to look and feel young is by being physically active.

5. Get enough Sleep

Our body needs time to recharge. The only way to do that is to get sound sleep.

6. Eat well

I don't eat much nowadays. But in my younger years, I tried to watch what I ate. I tried to eat a balanced diet.

7. Have an occasional Indulgence

We all deserve a treat. It can be food; it can be shopping; it can be travel. For me, it is traveling with my entire Tantoco clan once a year (over 100 of us). It gives me something to look forward to each year.

8. Never stop Learning

An idle mind is prone to senility. It doesn't have to be a very hard, cerebral thing. It can be something as simple as learning a new song or learning something new about somebody.

9. Have a Sense of Humour

Who says old people can't joke or fool around. A hearty laugh does so much wonder for the spirits.

10. Share your Stories

Maybe I am just lucky to have people around me who are interested to listen to things I've learned, things I did, and what not. But it gives me so much joy to tell over and over again the many stories and experiences of my youth. Retelling them makes me feel like it was just yesterday.

WDSF 2011 in Shanghai

1. Ambassador Tantoco with BS Nagesh, Shoppers Stop, IGDS VP Asia, and his grandson Donnie Tantoco, President of Rustan Commercial Corp., IGDS Board Member

2. Ambassador Tantoco with Vittorio Radice, former IGDS President & CEO of Central Group Europe, and his daughter Nedy Tantoco, Chairman & CEO of Rustan's