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## Dutch Lady continues mission to spread the goodness of milk to M'sians

**PETALING JAYA:** Bas van den Berg is a man armed with a mission.

After succeeding former managing director (MD) Hans Laarakker last January, he aims to take homegrown dairy corporation Dutch Lady Milk Industries Bhd (Dutch Lady) to the next level by engaging it more to society.

"To be honest, it wasn't on the first day that I outlined the directions for the company. Prior to that, I'd been talking to distributors, retailers, consumers as well as to the employees. The first thing on my mind was that I was fairly impressed by the Dutch Lady brand, with its long tradition here in Malaysia for almost 50 years," he disclosed when met by The Borneo Post at the company's headquarters here recently.

"What struck me the most, in a positive way of course, was that despite the fact of the word 'Dutch' in Dutch Lady, it's truly perceived as a Malaysian

brand. As such, I felt the necessity to do a lot more for the brand. Of course, it helped that there was a wide portfolio of products."

Similarly, Van den Berg had the right credentials to do just that. Currently managing the company's businesses here as well as in Singapore and Hong Kong, he had been with the company's parent Royal Friesland-Campina Group (Friesland-Campina) close to 16 years prior to his Dutch Lady move.

Dutch-based Friesland-Campina, the world's largest dairy co-operative owned by some 16,000 member dairy farmers mainly from the Netherlands, was formed as a merger back in December 2008. Prior to the merger, Van den Berg was the managing director of the Campina part.

"I do see a lot of commonalities between operating a dairy business here and in Europe, in which both rely on two things: running on strong

brands and strong people. You have to invest in the right portfolio of products with the right innovations, at the same time creating strong people for the operations," he revealed.

At the same time, he also noted an obvious difference in the style of management, saying that the Asian system was rather 'top-down' where the boss would make all the decisions.

"I could've done it that way. However, my personal belief is that if we wanted to focus on strong brands and strong people, we should involve people in strategies and the day-to-day operations, a system that's quite common in Europe," he said, to which he added jokingly, "Sometimes too common, to be honest."

"In the Netherlands, there's a saying that states 'the decision of the managing director is the starting point of discussions among the rest of the organisation'. This doesn't happen here, though. But I believe in

developing the people the way we develop brands; through involvement."

On this, Dutch Lady had geared up on its consumer mission to raise awareness on the benefits of milk among Malaysians.

"Dairy consumption in Malaysia is still very low, only about 25 litres of dairy intake per person a year whereas in Europe, it's between 70 and 125 litres and in the US, it's around 100 litres.

"Our mission is to increase this consumption whereby we basically drafted a 'consumer vision' that would help Malaysians to move forward with their life in their choices for nutrition. Rather than be a multinational that sets up its operations in a country and sells its products, we really want to be a true Malaysian company that's engaged itself to be a part of the society. That makes us different from a lot of other dairy brands."

Alongside, Van den Berg said a lot other factors also

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contributed to that vision.

“The government has been putting in a lot of efforts. The people here are very optimistic. The combination of both actually endorses the drive towards a healthy and active lifestyle and we want to be a part of this, especially being in the dairy industry.”

Consumer trust would also be its key point, he continued.

“There’s a Dutch saying; ‘trust comes by foot and goes by horse’, which means that while you have to consistently build on trust, it can easily dissipate. Just look at the disastrous case of melamine poisoning that happened not too long ago to China’s food exports.

“In our terms, we have to earn the people’s trust day in and day out. It’s this strategy that we’re building on,” he stressed, pointing out that the company had increased its advertising allocation by 25 per cent for this year, over previous budgets.