

ThumbDrive inventor out to prove he is no one-hit wonder

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USB memory sticks developed by a South Korean company in 2005. Singapore entrepreneur Henn Tan said many thought the ThumbDrive -- which has become a generic name for memory devices that plug into computer USB slots -- was a one-hit wonder.

Henn Tan could have ruled the global market in what became the ubiquitous USB flash drive that helped consign the floppy disk to the dustbin of technological history.

But his grip on the ThumbDrive slipped and the market was flooded with a myriad of brands for the handy [memory device](#) which could be small enough to dangle on a key ring.

Now the Singaporean entrepreneur hopes to prove he was no one-hit

wonder.

Tan, who holds the patent for the compact data [storage device](#) in over 30 markets and the global trademark for the ThumbDrive brand, now has a firmer hold on another invention with a rather unusual name.

The FluCard -- a postage stamp-size storage device that can also transmit data wirelessly -- is Tan's new baby, and he hopes to see it used by millions of people; just like the USB drive.

Tan said many thought the ThumbDrive was a one-hit wonder.

"I told them no, but many refused to believe me," the 54-year-old told AFP.

"We are more than just about ThumbDrives and the power of this FluCard is going to be immense," insisted the chairman and chief executive of Trek 2000 International, which is listed on the Singapore Exchange.

Tan laments that he made a mistake with the ThumbDrive by going it alone instead of partnering with an established player in 2000, an admittedly "naive" move that allowed rivals to get big slices of the USB-based data storage pie.

This time around, he has teamed up with Japan's Toshiba Corp to promote the FluCard and ensure its patent is protected globally.

Why the name?

"It's contagious and easy to recall," says Tan, a marketing man who employs technical experts to flesh out his ideas.

"You go to Afghanistan, you say flu, and they understand."



USB drives displayed at the office of Trek 2000 International in Singapore. Henn Tan, who holds the patent for the compact data storage device in over 30 markets and the global trademark for the ThumbDrive brand, now has a firmer hold on another invention with a rather unusual name.

Marc Einstein, regional manager at technology consultancy Frost and Sullivan, said the FluCard is a sign of the convergence underway in consumer electronics and computer technology.

"I do think that this is where the future lies for technologies and consumer devices," he said, adding that securing Toshiba's support "is a good first step" for the Singapore firm.

Tan said his company and Toshiba, now the second largest shareholder in Trek 2000 International after him, formed a consortium of camera makers to adopt the FluCard as the industry standard.

Terence Wong, co-head of research at Singapore brokerage DMG and Partners, sees good commercial prospects for the FluCard and also feels partnering Toshiba is a right move for Tan.

"This FluCard can potentially kill off the dummy SD card if they get it right," Wong told AFP.

Shaped exactly like the Secure Digital (SD) memory cards now used widely in compact digital cameras, the FluCard comes embedded with WiFi to transmit data to other wireless-enabled devices such as mobile phones, laptops and tablet computers.

"It can do more than what an ordinary dumb, dumb SD card can do which is just to store data," Tan said.

"As long as you have a hardware embedded with WiFi, you can download anything from the FluCard."

Launched earlier this year, the FluCard works in any device that has an SD slot and the camera market is the most obvious target for Tan.



Henn Tan, chairman of Trek 2000 International, said many thought the ThumbDrive -- which has become a generic name for memory devices that plug into computer USB slots -- was a one-hit wonder.

SD cards are predominantly used in compact digital cameras, 100

million of which were sold in 2009 alone, according to industry estimates.

Using a FluCard in the digital camera the user has the option of uploading new photos directly to the Internet for sharing with friends on Facebook and other social networks.

It also functions as a data storage back-up since the content inside the FluCard can be instantly transferred to a private user account on a portal set up by Trek 2000 International.

Tan's idea for the FluCard came about after a holiday with his family in China five years ago was ruined when they lost their camera.

"You can't be going back to the places to retake the photos, and I felt lousy there wasn't any data backup," said Tan.

"The power of this FluCard is going to be immense if I get it right," he said, adding it could catapult his company from a fringe player into the major leagues of the data storage industry with Toshiba's support.

Tan's anguish was clear as he recalled how his company lost out to the "big boys" of [data storage](#) who came out with their own USB-based devices -- and to pirates who simply made ThumbDrive knockoffs.

"Right now we are still generating income (from royalties) but not much," said Tan.

"Size counts, and I learnt my lesson real hard."

In retrospect, Tan said it would have been better if he had partnered one of the big brands when the ThumbDrive was launched in March 2000, but his eagerness got the better of him at the time.

"I was naive, I was gullible and I decided to take this product all alone, believing that we can do it."

"Now I have Toshiba, I am riding on the coat-tails of Toshiba."

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