

MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS *entrepreneur's guide*

When image change is good

A career woman taps into a childhood fantasy and refashions her life, writes *Michael Taylor*

CHRISTINA ONG seemed to have it all. She had worked hard, broken through the glass ceiling and reached the highest ranks of a leading firm. Friends and colleagues admired her and she was widely regarded as a role model for career-minded women.

However, success came at a price. Ms Ong's job carried a heavy travelling schedule in the region that kept her away from her children, who were growing up as comparative strangers. The realisation then dawned that there was more to life than having a successful career.

"My friends would say I had an iron rice bowl," Ms Ong said. "My response was that even iron can rust. At some point in your career one of two things is likely to happen. Either you will be pushed out or you will want to leave for personal reasons."

The key moment for Ms Ong came when she was on a business trip in Bangkok in the early 1990s.

"My husband used a videocam to show me my second child taking his first steps," she said. "It made me feel really guilty that I wasn't there to share such a special moment with my family. That's when I decided it was time to move."

Ms Ong had no clear plan, and becoming an entrepreneur was probably the furthest thing from her mind. Up to that point she had always thought of herself as the archetypal employee, loyal and dedicated.

But she wanted a job that would allow her to do something creative and artistic, while giving her the flexibility to spend more time with her family.

"I always wanted to do something I was passionate about," she said. "My life had become one long round of corporate meetings. I couldn't see myself doing that any more."

Initially, the search for that new role was an exercise in frustration. Time and again she heard the same three words from recruitment consultants and potential employers: "You are overqualified."

"My level of experience meant that no one would hire me for more junior positions, even though I was willing to accept a lower salary," Ms Ong said.

"I finally accepted a job but quit after one day and ended up doing volunteer work for three years because I couldn't imagine going back to the old routine."

In due course, Ms Ong's thoughts turned to setting up her own company, and she finally decided to take the plunge. Calling herself a reluctant entrepreneur, she still had to figure out what kind of business to go into.

"I had always been good at art and at the age of seven I was already into my mother's closet, dressing dolls, classmates and friends," she said. "This continued into my teens."

Thinking back to this early interest, Ms Ong decided to build a second career by putting her fashion savvy and artistic bent to practical use. After exploring the options, she decided to go into image consulting, something that had gained prominence in the United States in the 1980s but was a relatively new concept in Asia.

"I started out by doing the safe thing," Ms Ong said. "I went to the most established image consultant in Singapore and trained with her for a year."

In 1995, she attended the annual conference of the Association of Image

Consultants International in the United States and, soon afterwards, decided to throw caution to the wind.

"Things in Singapore seemed limited, but when I looked at the industry from a global perspective, I realised the sky was the limit."

A decade on, Ms Ong is running ImageWorks Asia, a successful enterprise with a growing list of

satisfied clients, many of them multinationals. She has also reached the point where the business is ready to expand again and diversify.

"In terms of image consulting, we are still at the threshold in Asia," she said. "It will take another two to five years before people look upon it in the same way they now regard something like personal training as a profession."

10 THINGS I KNOW

1 Change your mentality.

Stop thinking like an employee and start thinking like a boss. As a boss, you have to realise that everything begins and ends with you. You have to learn how to be proactive, not reactive, and take responsibility for everything. It is no good waiting for someone to tell you what to do.

2 Expand your horizons.

Have a vision that goes well beyond your self-interest. Map out your plans in writing; this will help to clarify them. Set targets to measure progress and find ways to stay motivated and accountable. Remember that you can motivate people by either pushing or pulling them.

3 Do everything with zeal.

Drive the business by tapping into your interests, personal conviction and passion. Be your own best spokesman. Take a hands-on approach to public relations and advertising. In short, do everything whole-heartedly with energy and confidence. Word of mouth can often be the best form of advertising.

4 Stay flexible.

Adapt as you go, and try to learn from each experience. Review and adjust your plans periodically. If you find that plans are not working, be prepared to change them. A year after setting up, I was doing mainly individual consultations when a multinational asked me to help with its customer service training. This resulted in a two-year contract and lots of free publicity. I had not planned to do training but I learned to improvise and offer what the market wanted. Always keep your eyes and ears open.

5 Learn from others.

Find mentors who inspire you and seek their advice and input. Surround yourself with positive people who are successful in their own right. Avoid doubters and negative influences. I found out about



IMAGE CONSULTANT

Christina Ong, head of ImageWorks Asia.
Photo: Jonathan Wong

the best trainers in the field and invested US\$20,000 for an intensive two-month customised programme in the United States. I was willing to take a risk and it has paid off.

6 Seek balance in your life.

Running your own business is a long-distance race, not a sprint. So keep acquiring relevant information and take good care of your health.

7 Be prepared to make sacrifices.

It takes commitment and a massive amount of work to get any business off the ground. To survive the first few years, you must keep your operation lean. This can be done by outsourcing rather than hiring permanent staff who will cause higher overheads. Outsourcing specific tasks helps to keep costs under control in the early stages.

8 Seek win-win outcomes.

Learn to ask for support when necessary and be prepared to give as much as you receive. The real purpose of business is an exchange of value-added services.

9 Think creatively.

I decided to barter for some things I needed. For example, I had no experience as a presenter, so I found someone to coach me. In return, I acted as her image consultant. Some of my clients are men, so to learn more about men's wear I asked a tailor to teach me the finer points about fit and fabric. In exchange, I introduced some of my first clients to him.

10 Be grateful.

Trust and acknowledge God for every milestone on your journey to success. An attitude of gratitude makes all the difference.