

Fashion flair develops into passion for interior design

Cash flow concerns during start-up's early days give way to key deals with big clients

By LEONG CHAN TEIK

MS TERRI Tan waited anxiously at an ATM near her Chinatown office, glancing constantly at her watch, wishing that 2pm would arrive sooner so a client's cheque would clear.

She had only a few dollars left in her account so that cheque was vital.

It also meant she would be able to go for lunch with her father, who was waiting in her office.

"That incident still hurts inside. It was a low point. I learnt that cash flow is very important. Without it, you can't do anything," says Ms Tan, 36.

Those were the tough, early days of her interior design firm, Designworx Office, but the ambitious 36-year-old has achieved a lot in the intervening eight years.

She has bagged deals such as the design project for a Sentosa Cove bungalow, the River Place condominium show-flat and Orchard Parade Hotel's presidential suites.

As with many successful entrepreneurs, Ms Tan traces her pas-

sion for her job back to her school days.

She was not into interior design then but something close - fashion - and spent much of her free time poring over design magazines and watching catwalk videos.

Her budding talent earned her awards in fashion-design contests organised by schools such as the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

IMPRESSIVE SERVICE

"Some of them encouraged me to set up my own business, saying I could do very well as I was very personable. I was also hardworking and I had learnt customer service from SIA."

MS TAN, referring to clients at a store she worked at prior to setting up shop

Ms Tan went on to study architecture at the National University of Singapore because the course came closest to offering an opportunity to develop her design flair.

She graduated after three years with a Bachelor of Arts (architectural studies) but worked as a Singapore Airlines (SIA) stewardess for two years in order to see the world.

It was then that she met her husband, a former steward who is now a bank manager. They have a two-year-old son and live in a condominium on Mount Faber Road.

After she quit flying, she worked in sales for a Singapore store retailing Italian furniture before moving to the company's interior design arm - and discovering her niche.

She impressed clients. "Some of them encouraged me to set up my own business, saying I could do very well as I was very personable. I was also hardworking and I had learnt customer service from SIA."

Ms Tan also has looks on her side: She was a finalist in the Miss Singapore Tourism contest in 1995.

Good looks run in her family: One sister, Kristel, 38, won the Miss Singapore Tourism crown in 1993, while another sister Tricia, 33, was Miss Singapore Universe in 1997.

After two years working in the store, Ms Tan struck out on her own, initially operating from her engineer-father's office in Golden Mile Complex in Beach Road.

In the early days, she was on her own and did everything.

She recalls one project that she dropped in on at 9pm, expecting that the contractors would have finished the task and left the offices ready for the client to use the next morning.

"I was disappointed to find they had left a mess. I found a vacuum cleaner and got the place ready for handing over to the client the next morning," she says. "It was a humbling experience."

In her second year, she could afford two employees and a small office in Chinatown that cost \$1,000 a month in rent.

There were also tight deadlines to meet.

She remembers the day she and her colleagues worked until 4am, caught a few hours of sleep in the office before flying to Shanghai to pitch for another job. They did not clinch it and felt great disappointment.

Referrals played a big part in helping her firm clinch major contracts.

Her first big break came when a friend told her of cake chain Angie The Choice's search for an interior designer.

She pitched for the job and beat several competitors to win the contract to design its outlets.

Another breakthrough was a deal to design Samsung's flagship store in Sim Lim Square.

Over the years, she has had about 100 clients.



PHOTO: TERENCE TAN

PAYOFF: From working out of her father's office, Ms Tan now runs her interior design firm at a double-storey shophouse near Orchard Road.

Ms Tan now operates from a double-storey shophouse in Devonshire Road, off Orchard Road, paying about \$4,000 a month in rent and employing seven staff.

"What's different from working for someone else is that your mind is always thinking about your business - you can't switch off," she says.

So key is her work to her life that she would not watch a movie unless it offered glimpses of great interior design. The Devil Wears Prada fitted the bill, as did The Kid and I.

Holidays are rare, but she does not miss them as she saw a lot of the world with SIA.

What she wants to do next is to expand her business into Malaysia, offering her services to design condominium show-flats there.

And then there is a Lexus she is eyeing. She has a driving licence but does not want to drive after two minor accidents years ago.

"It'd be nice to own a Lexus one day and be chauffeured in it."

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