



ASIA PACIFIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP AWARDS 2012

The power of women

Three top women entrepreneurs who won at this year's Asia Pacific Entrepreneurship Awards say they had to overcome challenges in finding business success

By Wong Sher Maine

WOMEN are not the weaker sex when it comes to being successful entrepreneurs.

"Being a woman puts me in a more advantageous position as I am able to empathise and understand the needs and preferences of my staff and colleagues, patients and the larger public," says Ms Grace Chong-Tan, the co-founder and managing director of Smile Inc Dental Surgeons.

Besides, when dealing with male entrepreneurs, Ms Chong-Tan says they tend to be "good-natured, gallant and chivalrous" because they are "both amused and bewildered by new-age women entrepreneurs who are not only capable of running their business but are also able to hold their own in the same playing field".

"This allows women to be able to take a step forward and excel in areas traditionally never perceived possible," adds Ms Chong-Tan. She co-founded the chain of dental clinics to provide high-quality specialist and general dental care and services in a patient-friendly setting.

She is among a group of women entrepreneurs who received awards at the Asia Pacific Entrepreneurship Awards (APEA) 2012.

Ms Florence Tan Sok Bee was motivated by a vision to start her company, CAD-IT, with her husband, Terence. "We founded CAD-IT Consultants (Asia) Pte Ltd with a mission to provide world-class solutions and services that enable companies and their supply chains to achieve greater product innovation, quality and productivity with drastically reduced time-to-market and costs," she says.

"As Terence and I came from poor families, all the savings we had amounted to \$6,000 when we started out. We rented an 800 sq ft HDB office in Bukit Merah, bought an eight-year-old van for transportation and delivery that was barely roadworthy and, as no bank would provide us with any loan due to our lack of collateral, we had to spend within our means from the very first day. We worked very hard, putting in long hours and even weekends in our business."



Ms Grace Chong-Tan co-founded her chain of dental clinics to provide high-quality specialist and general dental care and services in a patient-friendly setting. Photo: APF Group

Today, the leading ISO 9001:2008 certified PLM system integration, manufacturing and education group employs about 55 people with an annual sales turnover of \$17 million in the last financial year.

Similarly, Ms Flora Lee, managing director of Millennium 3 Building Products, built up the business from scratch in 2000. The company specialises in access flooring for commercial offices, data centres and cleanrooms.

Harder with kids

However, all three award winners agree: It is harder, particularly for women with children, to start and run a business. This could be why there are fewer women entrepreneurs than men.

Ms Chong-Tan, who has a 11-year-old son, says: "It is tougher for women to be business leaders because women traditionally wear many hats, as wives, mothers, daughters and daughters-in-law, in addition to running their businesses and ensuring they stay at the top of their game."

Ms Lee, who has two children aged 19 and 21, adds: "Despite the influx of career-driven women, the stereotype of women being the 'caretakers' of the home is still deeply ingrained into our society, and it would take many more years to completely get rid of it."

A very real situation which women entrepreneurs might face is what Ms Tan went through. The mother of two children aged 18 and 23 recalls: "Just after starting CAD-IT, I gave birth to my first child, Sarah. I remember

going back to work after just one month of maternity leave. In the early years of our business, when my daughter was about one to two years old, she would cry each time I left the home for the office. I would have to wrench my heart to leave her behind.

"I was often plagued with feelings of guilt and helplessness. This also led me to delay having our second child until Sarah was five years' old."

While Ms Tan agrees it is tougher for mothers to start and grow businesses or be corporate leaders of larger corporations, she observes that many choose to set up small-scale businesses over full-time employment. "It is actually easier for women to start and maintain small businesses that allow them to achieve better work-life balance as they are their own bosses," she adds.

She also suggests that women may find it more challenging to start a business in traditionally male-dominated industries like construction, transportation, engineering and manufacturing, which may be physically more demanding, dangerous or require frequent travelling. Industries like retail, food, health care, beauty, lifestyle, arts, music and education are more women-friendly.

Easier now

Ms Chong-Tan adds, however, that this may be changing: "Singapore is now a post-modernised society and the playing fields are increasingly being levelled, this assisted by the growing sophistication of our population and changing mindsets."

For women who are already entrepreneurs or

who are thinking of starting a business, Ms Lee, Ms Tan and Ms Chong-Tan say a positive mindset is integral.

Ms Chong-Tan says: "Make sure you have relevant skills and knowledge for the particular industry you intend to be in, always plan and prepare for contingencies."

"Most importantly, a leader and entrepreneur will always have the tenacity and perseverance to adapt to new situations, to always seek new trends, opportunities and groundbreaking applications and technologies and to constantly differentiate one's business from the rest, to constantly stay on top and ahead of the game."

Ms Lee adds: "Just do it without fear if you have the passion for it and want to be there."