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A weekly series

**HOME
GROUND**

Some families do not just live together, they work together. This series focuses on family-run businesses, the challenges they face, their management practices and the lessons they have learnt.

A good reason to smile

A corporate high-flyer gave up her job nine years ago to help her husband start a dental practice — and today, both are all smiles

By HUI JING

CONTEMPORARY cherrywood tones pervade the stylish reception area of Smile Inc. at Suntec City Mall.

It is obvious, even at a quick glance, that great pains have been taken to steer the decor away from the typical spartan look of a dental surgery.

Definitely the work of a professional interior designer, you reckon.

But no, the surgery's founder and director, Mrs Ernest Rex Tan, in her 30s, was responsible for the soothing design and space — despite not having a whit of design expertise herself.

This is just one facet of the business that the former Singapore Tourism Board (STB) executive took on when she embarked on a business venture with her husband, a trained cosmetic dental surgeon, to develop Smile Inc. as the premier dental practice in the region.

Business-wise, Mrs Tan offers valuable insights into the macro

strategies developed by her husband before executing the plans.

"We work on different areas of the business — he manages the clinical arena, and I take care of the management and administration aspects," she said.

Dr Tan, who is also in his 30s, said his wife's ability to see the big picture, her sharp eye for detail and perseverance to see projects through has helped the business to grow rapidly since it started in 1997.

He added that "her execution skills are legendary".

When Dr Tan decided to set up his own business, he knew he wanted his wife as his partner. He said: "I wanted to make my business a success, and with her, I knew it would be.

"I didn't even think about what would happen if she turned me down. I was going to cross the bridge when I came to it."

Her husband's confidence in her was flattering, but Mrs Tan admitted that the decision to leave her high-flying corporate position at the STB

was accompanied by apprehension. She recalled: "It was hard to say goodbye, but the challenge to start something new was appealing.

"We were about to get married at the time, and I re-evaluated my guiding principles. As a wife, how could I not support my husband and his vision?"

After much deliberation, she decided to bite the bullet and moved quickly to set the business wheels of Smile Inc. in motion. The rest, as they say, is history.

Today, the cosmetic dental practice has earned a reputation for impeccable service and blazing groundbreaking concepts, such as the Smile Inc. Makeover, which uses Laser Teeth Whitening technology to give patients that million-dollar smile.

Smile Inc.'s clients are a mix of Singaporeans and foreigners, ranging from middle-class families to professionals.

Having complementary mindsets is the secret of their success, said the dynamic couple, who have a five-



PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

NOT WITHOUT YOU: Even before starting his business, Dr Tan was confident that working with his wife would make it a success.

year-old son, Matthew.

"We share the same temperament, and we are both very driven," said Mrs Tan. Dr Tan added: "Yes, we share the same level of commitment, and we never procrastinate once we've made up our minds. Failure is not an option."

With two strong personalities, surely there must be some conflict?

"Sure, we don't always share the same perspective, but we engage in healthy discussions and always come to an agreement. We make it a point

to keep the business objectives in mind," said Dr Tan.

His wife agreed: "We recognise and acknowledge each other's strengths and expertise. Both of us have different and complementary roles in the company. Where decisions are made, we have very similar thought processes, as the objective is always what is best for the business.

"Hence, there is very little professional conflict. It is this like-minded intuition and level of commitment that has stood us in good stead in

bringing the company to a higher level."

Dr Tan shares a slightly different perspective — more succinct but no less eloquent: "Having my wife work with me is the X-factor. It's the best thing ever."

With a partnership like that, there is certainly a good reason for the couple to smile.

If you know of any family-run businesses, e-mail us at recruit3@sph.com.sg