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Serendipitous stylings

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SERENDIPITOUS STYLINGS



Multihyphenate Yi Lian Ng reflects on her seemingly radical career change and life as a florist, freelance writer and stylist, and accidental entrepreneur.



Yi Lian Ng is an award-winning, former journalist who has picked the brains of some of the world's leading fashion designers. With over a decade of experience in fashion journalism — including a stint as Fashion Editor of a leading international title and Associate Editor of the world's leading trend forecast agency — Yi Lian counts herself lucky for knowing what she wanted to do from an early age.



"As a teenager I knew I loved fashion and writing, so I didn't waste my time trying to find my footing. I started interning when I was only 17 for titles like Cleo and Harper's BAZAAR. I dreamt of being a features writer at Cleo, and at 21 years old, I was offered that job. At that time I thought, 'wow, I've gotten my dream job! What's next? Is this it?'"

It is this hunger that seems to drive Yi Lian to pursue the various creative endeavours in her life — with styling, writing,



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and now, floral arrangement as a full-time job. Passionate and exuberant, Yi Lian talks at length about life's serendipity with surprising candour. She habitually prefaces answers with "maybe this is too much information..." and segues into anecdotes from her personal life. As we chat, it becomes apparent that Yi Lian's approach to business is less about her perspective on work and more about her ethos in life.

Yi Lian Ng Floral Atelier started as a side business while you were still at your day job. Why the decision to run it full-time?

Yes, it wasn't easy to make that leap. I had been running the flower business part-time for two years and started to consistently

make more with the flowers than I was with my full-time job each month.

I'm not being cynical, but I believe no one is indispensable. You're just a number to corporations. If you romanticise your role, that's your downfall. It's all about the bottom-line for corporations, and it's really difficult to be a creative person if you're not given the time to clear your mind. I burnt out, and even though I loved my job, it got to a point where I realised I wasn't getting any younger and I wanted to start saving money.

How was the transition like?

To be honest, I was depressed for the first six months after I quit. It sounds like such a first-world problem because even though

I had more time and money, I felt like I had lost a huge part of my adult identity. I felt isolated because I missed my colleagues! Creatively I felt a sense of emptiness.

A lot of people associate being busy with being useful and feeling worthy. At the magazine I was always busy thinking about things, but when that was taken away, I didn't know how to derive my self-worth.

And how has entrepreneurship been so far?

I've actually never aspired to be an entrepreneur! I've always wanted to work for what I love, and I don't value money the same way I value experiences.

It's a blessing if the money comes, but the most important thing to me is customer satisfaction. I'm ambitious and I want to fulfill my customers' requests all the time. Unlike many florists, I continue to take personalised orders even during busy periods. It's incredibly stressful because sometimes I only have 10 minutes to customise a bouquet!

But it's worth it when I hear how my flowers are involved in my customers' personal lives. I've done the flowers of couples from their first date to their engagement to their wedding day. I get so involved with customers that I know what she likes; I know their dates; I know where to deliver the flowers even without an address when he texts me. It feels good to know I am so trusted.

One of my favourite parts of the job is having my flowers used in a proposal. I know they're just flowers, but the fact someone has chosen me and my flowers to be a part of something so important... they can't pay you enough money to get that satisfaction of being a part of someone's life.

You work with corporate clients too, right? Is there a difference in the working relationships?

It's not much different. At the end of the day, you're still working with people whether it's in a corporate or non-corporate relationship, and their needs are the same. They want to feel that their needs are being taken care of, so I provide that service for them.

How would you describe your brand of service then?

I'm more personal and engaged. Besides emails or orders through the e-shop, many customers just call or text me to place an order. My e-shop's order forms don't come with a long list of terms and conditions and honestly, as a consumer, I never read those words anyway. I basically shape my brand of service delivery as how I would like to receive it as a consumer.

But how do you deal with challenging clients? Do you have a service recovery procedure?

The thing is, I don't avoid complaints from customers — if they have the right attitude, I actually really appreciate the feedback because I want to be able to learn where my mistakes and flaws are and grow from them.

I believe in managing customer expectations when it comes to creative products like floral arrangements. Depending on the nature of the complaint and the customer's attitude, I sometimes provide a discount code or even send them a brand new arrangement. If they complain about the immediate state of the flowers when they are delivered, then sure, I'll look into that. But I don't entertain complaints about aesthetic opinions or the nature of some flowers which have short lifespans. I can't be compensating for people's lack of education or differing sense of aesthetics.

I don't think service providers should fear customers nor categorise them as a group of annoying, demanding people. Just approach them as you would like to be approached. Remember they are just fellow human beings like you who have needs to be taken care of. Engage in small talk but also provide some personal space. Good service is really just kindness taken to a service-providing context. It costs nothing and is a way of paying it forward.

That's a great perspective.

I think there's an increasing number of people who enjoy helping smaller businesses grow because they see personal touches and experience more interpersonal relationships with smaller businesses. I enjoy that as a consumer too. A lot of heart, time, and effort is put into small businesses and I love the idea that something I purchase from a small business has every bit of the business owner's passion and soul in it. ✦

