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### Getting personal

Ching Yann HO

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# Getting *Personal*

*Ho Ching Yann of Triceratops shares how being candid and sincere with customers sets her apart from the competition.*



Ho Ching Yann, or Ching, as she prefers to be called, is a busy woman. “Is it okay if I do this while talking to you?”, she asks as we sit down to chat, before proceeding to quickly trim stems for a condolence display.

As the founder of Triceratops, a boutique florist studio, Ching designs all the arrangements that leave her showroom — something she has done since 1999 — which explains why she has perfected the art of multi-tasking. An essential skill, considering Triceratops doesn’t offer premade floral arrangements. Every order is tailored to the recipient’s preferences.

In an age where it has become comparatively easy to start and scale a business, Ching is adamant about keeping Triceratops lean and local. She now has a team of six to help manage the studio, but when asked if she wants to further grow the business, Ching vehemently shakes her

head: “Don’t want! I want to remain like this. Because if we grow big, I cannot jaga [supervise] every order”.

Much has changed in floristry since 1999. Instagram, in particular, has fuelled a supercharged growth in boutique florist studios — an alternative to established names and premade bouquets. These days customisable arrangements are the norm, but it is Ching’s unapologetic candour that continues to set her apart from the competition. Peppering her answers with Hokkien, Mandarin, and Singlish, Ching regales stories of long-time clients and how she has pushed them to give better bouquets with her tough love, no-nonsense approach. While she has no dreams of expansion, this approach to customer service has become her accidental way of becoming one of Singapore’s oldest and thriving boutique florists.





***Ching, tell us about how you started your journey.***

I graduated and worked as an electrical engineer for about nine years, but I was always interested in the arts. The day before my wedding in 1999, I saw the floral arrangements. They were so awful! So I asked if I could redo them myself. After that, my friends asked me to work on their weddings.

Flowers and nature have existed long before humans. Our arrangements are inspired by how flowers grow outside in the wild. Triceratops is about going back to a dinosaur age of flowers in nature, not flowers in one straight line.

***Triceratops has quite an unusual approach to ordering. Can you tell us more?***

I don't like standardised things because I believe in giving flowers based on what the recipient really likes and dislikes. Before we did our website, we used to take personalised orders on the phone by asking questions.

Now we have a personalised quiz on our website where people answer questions about the recipient's personality, favourite colours, and style. From there we design a combination to the person's liking. Sometimes people don't answer all the questions but they give us pictures of the person and say, "I don't know what colour she likes but this is how she normally dresses." From there I read the picture and understand what they like. It's never about what I like.

But I have also rejected customers! Sometimes some husbands order for their wives and don't even know what their favourite colour is. I will counsel them, "Can you do some homework? It will also benefit your married life." I am very straightforward because to me it's all about sincerity; even though it's their wives, they also need to be sincere!

I find that if I'm a bit kaypoh [nosy], the world will be a better place. I have customers who give their wives a bouquet of red roses every year. After getting to know the wife, I call her to find out if she actually likes roses and why her husband keeps giving her flowers she doesn't like. Turns out she doesn't even like red; her favourite colour is purple! So I call the husband and ask him for a chance to try something I know his wife will like. I believe in doing these extra things to make our work better.





***Fun! Tell us more about how you work with your team.***

Because I'm not very organised, I can't be a corporate company, so everyone here is like family. We look after each other — we buy snacks for each other and always have lunch and dinner together. Sometimes we scold each other; my oldest colleague, Esther, and I are like husband and wife because we're always fighting.

But I've never regarded myself as a boss because I'm still a coolie. Nobody else needs to come back on weekends to work because they all have their families. As for me, I know that if I can help my customers with last-minute orders, then I will try my best to help.

I want everybody here to be happy; I don't want to stress my admin or my delivery guy. I don't think the theory of "the customer is always right" applies here. Sometimes there are customers who bully us by asking us to remake orders over and over again. When they next come to us, I will apologise and decline the order by referring them to other people.

***Is that how you define your service vision?***

I believe in being sincere and doing things from the heart. I follow the sequence of CPF: consistency, persistence, and focus. We are consistent in our service, persistent about our quality, and focused on our work. For example, if the flowers are not fresh I always tell my clients, even if it makes an order late. Your service must be consistent that way, if not clients won't trust you. With everyday things I tell the team they have to focus on what they're doing, like giving different flowers different treatments.

It's the same with how we work with our suppliers. We maintain good rapport with them so we will have the latest, freshest products — that way, our clients also benefit. Suppliers are very important. I believe everyone likes to be cared for, so we try not to unreasonably reject things and always pay on time. After busy periods, we enjoy pizza together. Service is a two-way relationship.





***That's a good point. Since your arrangements are all personalised, what do you do when people don't like what you've created? Do you have an exchange policy?***

I'll just change the arrangement. We're very flexible and I've never felt it necessary to formalise my policies.

I have been doing this for almost twenty years now so to be honest, business last time was much tougher. Now with social media, it's easier for clients to trust you because they can see what you've done. These days my clients are younger and there's a real difference in attitude! The older generation is more old-fashioned but the younger ones are more open.

***Ok, final question. What advice do you have for people who want to start their own business?***

You need to have a lot of time and passion, and you really need to like what you do. I never hesitate to come to work at all because every day presents a different challenge. 🌱

***"...I believe in being sincere and doing things from the heart."***