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### Burning the flame of entrepreneurship

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# Burning the flame of entrepreneurship

30 Jun 2022

*From starting a business in a foreign land to adapting to the internet economy, Florence Fang is all about enhancing human lives*

**Florence Fang** started her first business, a post-production house, when she was 22 during the early 90s. At a time when most of her peers were still in school or just starting out on their first jobs, the young Singaporean learned to work with shareholders, crafting creative media output, and managed staff and clients who were often older than she was.

And she did it all in Thailand.

“People said to me, ‘Are you mad?!’” Fang recalls, alluding to Bangkok’s reputation of being a dangerous place at the time. “But I was doing animation and 3D modelling, which at that time in the broadcast industry was quite new. So I was able to create the special effects that the market thought was really new and exciting.

“Here’s the thing about being an entrepreneur: you learn everything. The language is just one aspect. You learn how to work with foreign teams and clients all in a foreign land. I started that way, diving in at the deep end.”

Speaking to Perspectives@SMU at the office of her current company based in her native Singapore, marketing consultancy Flame Communications, Fang singled out Thailand’s uniquely creative media industry as the reason for her sojourn to Bangkok. Malaysians and Singaporeans of a certain age would be familiar with her work without knowing it: she created Malaysian TV station TV3’s first flying logo that stayed on air until the late-1990s.

After Fang sold off her business in Bangkok she took on a globetrotting role with Japanese videogames maker Sega where she worked on the iconic Virtual Fighter videogame. She then returned to Singapore, first with I.T. data intelligence firm IDC and then payments giant Visa where the entrepreneurial bug bit once again.

“At Visa, I was hired as the director of technology communications, but I had a second portfolio in Visa doing basically smart cards, and also the mobile payments,” she recounts. “My job gave me a lot of insights about working with clients, about what companies were looking for in terms marketing and communications. So when I started Flame Communications, my first client was Visa.

“I know then I wanted to create something different. Right from the beginning, our mission statement has been, ‘We will promote projects or products or services that enrich or enhance human lives.’”

## EVOLVING WITH THE TIMES

That principle is exemplified by Flame's involvement in projects promoting arts and culture, such as a live streaming studio in Singapore's Chinatown to revitalise a key location in Singapore's history. Similar projects include those that promote sustainability or stewardship, which were themes that took on added significance during the prolonged pandemic.

"I think one of the things that the world can see is that we are all interconnected," muses Fang on the impact of COVID-19 and the numerous knock-on disruptions across healthcare, economics, finance, supply chains and everything else in between. Flame Communications, Fang notes, is currently in "Flame 4.0" where version 1.0 focused on finance and tech, and version 2.0 focused on arts and culture.

Fang also echoed widespread observations of reskilling to adapt to remote working during COVID-19, from replacing physical gatherings with hybrid events to pivoting to digital marketing services such as mobile phone apps and influencer marketing.

But the pandemic increased the concentration of power for companies such as Google, Apple, and Amazon as physical activities moved online where a few dominant companies control most of the revenue flow. Throw in developments such as Software as a Service (SaaS) and one has to ask: After 17 years of running a communications consultancy and seeing the media landscape undergo wholesale changes, what does one make of this new milieu?

"Those companies are very, very powerful but I have to say they also bring opportunities," says Fang. "Because they level the playing field for a lot of companies who may not have the money to invest in hardware and expensive software. Innovation is a very expensive business, and these companies have invested a lot in innovation. If they don't create the economies of scale, SMEs might not operate as they currently can online.

"It's true, they've become powerhouses in many, many ways. But at the same time, they've also given millions of people opportunities."

## GIVING BACK

Fang created Flame Communications as a response to the birth of her second child when childcare duties prompted the desire to work from home – a familiar arrangement in recent times but not a readily available option in the early-2000s.

As someone who took the entrepreneurial plunge not long past her teenage years, Fang is all for letting the young have a go at learning by doing even if it means making mistakes along the way.

"Age doesn't matter, ideas matter," she says. "My staff and interns know it's really about what you put on the table. In such an environment, young people can take a little bit of risk. As experienced businesspeople we know when to pull back. That gives them a platform to do a bit more, and we need to train our young people like that."