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MS HANNAH CHONG

Nominee 2009

Although it was a childhood dream years ago, Hannah Chong never thought of venturing into the wedding planning business. She had a comfortable job as an account director of Raytheon Professional Services - an International firm and she traveled frequently. A conversation with her friend who was getting married, coupled with her desire to "settle down because I miss home" took her in that direction and after much thought, she left the company to setup Heaven's Gift in 2004.

Company: HEAVEN'S GIFT - THE WEDDING CONSULTANTS

Address: 42 Hoot Kiam Road

Website: <http://www.heavens-gift.com>

Interview with Ms Hannah Chong

by **Tran Song Thuong Thuong** on **06-May-2009**. Student can be reached at songthuongtran@nus.edu.sg

Business Profile:

Heaven's Gift is the leading wedding designs and consulting firm in Singapore. Heaven's Gift prides themselves in creating personalized weddings and parties that are unique to one's dream and fantasy. Hannah Chong, director and executive wedding specialist of Heaven's Gift has fulfilled many dream weddings and parties by integrating the various aspect of event planning from concept to design and deliverables. The passion to add a modern twist to stereotyped parties and celebrations has enabled Hannah and team to be known for their elegant and intricate wedding creations. One can witness her works through the way she understands her clients, and how she designs and personalizes each event to make her client's very own. Her clients consist mainly of inter-racial couples, expatriates, and Singaporeans living overseas who desire to have weddings held in Singapore, as well as couples who seek for destination weddings.

Interviewer's Comments:

It is a great experience for me to have this chance to talk with Hannah. More than just what happen in the wedding industry, Hannah also expressed her strong (and sweet) passion and motivation for being a wedding consultant. From the stories Hannah shared with me, the best thing I have learned is that, to do business you need to be practical; but on top of that, having faith in what you are doing is the most important factor to be successful!

1. What is the nature of your business?

Heaven's Gift is a wedding design and planning consultancy firm that was birthed in 2004 with one vision: Every celebration, every event should be unique, intricate, and most importantly a true reflection of the host, more than of the planner. We take our time to create every detail that shows who the hosts are, how they think and the way they want to share their moments with their guests. We are proud that in the past few years, we have been creating events such as weddings, parties, etc... that are personalized and meaningful to one's dream and fantasy. We have done quite few crazy events like creating "Under the Sea" wedding for couple who fell in love through diving trips, The "Masquerade Magic" for a flamboyant crowd who loves to try something different, or the unexpected birthday celebrations one can dream of. Our philosophy is to inspire our couples to share their fantasy, customize it and make it reality for them. Ultimately, we believe wedding is all about personalization and skilled orchestration of the entire experience. With the current team of four members, Heaven's Gift has serviced many local and international clients who are looking for a modern twist to the stereotyped parties and celebrations.

2. When and why did you decide to become an entrepreneur / take over your family business? NOTE: If it is not a family business, ask: Do your parents have their own businesses too? Have they inspired you in one way or another? (Select appropriate question according to the entrepreneur being interviewed.)

I never thought of becoming an entrepreneur. However, in my previous vocation, I traveled



a lot, to the extent that hotels had become my second home and a part of me really missed my family. That became one main reason for me to rethink about my career life in 2003. In addition, in all my past work roles, I was always involved in managing the company's P&L and growing the business, and I wanted to create a business that reflects who I am and something I am proud to own, so Heaven's Gift was birthed.



3. What are your reasons for choosing to do business in this particular industry?

I was a group account director for an international company prior to setting up the business and frequent travels were a major part of my work schedule. Occasionally, my friends asked me to assist them in their weddings, since I took up floral skills as my leisure pastime. In one occasion in 2003, I was assisting a friend for her wedding with the floral decorations in a church. Instead of discussing about the decorations, she started opening up to me about her dreams, fears, and fantasy of her wedding. The entire conversation fascinated me, allowed me to realize that being a bride in her wedding is a wonderful experience. And being a creative fanatic, to be able to be a part of turning brides' dreams/fantasy into reality would be a great achievement to me.

4. How did you put together all the resources needed to start your business? For example: getting the start-up capital, hiring staff, doing sales and marketing, advertising, etc.

One of the first few things I did was to seriously take time to work on my business plan: putting my thoughts from vision and goals to the final setup details on paper. I told myself: if I want to really excel in the industry, I have to know the ins and outs of the industry; I need to be professional trained to be competitive. Hence I did a lot of research about this industry; I took up a one-year course in wedding planning before I decided to do this full time. I setup aside initially an estimate of \$30,000 SGD of my savings and told myself: "I am ready to take this plunge and if I have to lose this \$30,000 to make this work, I will.", and I am so glad that I took that first bold step. The rest of hiring and marketing came easily; as it was something I am familiar to work around with.

5. What are some interesting stories you have about your first few customers/first few years in business?

Majority of our clients are not based in Singapore, or they are hardly able to see me. So it is very interesting how much they trusted you for the job. I have one South African couple who did not even get to meet us face to face. Simply through couple of emails and phone calls, they hired us. They wanted to get married here because the wife used to be a student in Singapore. After my reply to her first email, she said "No one has answered my email except you." Then we just contacted through phone and emails. He transferred the money and everything was left to me to create their dream wedding. We met one day before the wedding to collect her gown and his suit. They wanted a sacred wedding in a monastery, to have a monk giving them the blessing. Hence we had a wedding in Shuanglin Temple. It was one intimate and unique wedding. One other interesting encounter was we were hired to plan a wedding within a week from scratch, and everything seemed a rush. I personally did the floral setup, the table settings but the final overall was great. I was in Bangkok and got a call from Singapore; the client said she had friends who were going to engage. The groom was in Canada and the bride was in China; and she was their maid of honour. They wanted to fly to Singapore in a week for their engagement and wedding, but nothing has been done. She asked me whether I could do it in a week. I was very surprised and we started conceptualized right after I got back two days later. I discussed with the maid of honour instead of talking to the couple. Two days before the wedding, the couple came and we rushed the gown and the suit for them. When they marched in to the lawn that day, they teared. And that was one first wedding I teared along; I know I have made their dream come true even in the impossible timeline.

6. What are some of the challenges you faced when you first went into business?

Interestingly, my first challenge was not to convince my clients what I can do but to convince my vendors and venue owners that I am qualified to do the job. It was not our clients who questioned our abilities, but rather players in the industry. I suppose when you are new, people around you wonder about your existence: "Who is Hannah Chong? Who is Heaven's Gift?" Despite the fact I was trained, well equipped in both creative and business arena, but one of the first things I have had to prove of was our capabilities to the industry players. They only started trusting us after our first encounter. In your first event in any place, everybody will open their eyes to see what you can do. The other challenge was to educate couples that wedding planners are not just a fad, but a professional job. Since this industry is pretty new, the roles of wedding planners are not properly defined, some couples see you as runners, some see you as emergency butlers, and others see you as consultants. However others see our roles are, we are all of the above and beyond. It is definitely not a fly by night job; it is a professional occupation that requires precision and skilled discipline.

7. How did you overcome these challenges? Please share some specific examples of the action you took to overcome the challenges.

I believe having perseverance and being excellent in your roles are the key elements to overcome all challenges. We would always have the first encounter with any contractor or any couple, but once they witnessed how you conduct yourself and manage the events, the mutual trust would be established. As a boss, I have to network. On the other hand, I have

to train my team. In fact I believe my vendors all realize that it's not just Hannah, but it's a team. Now my team talks directly to the vendors and they have the confidence that we really know what we are doing: not just how to plan the events but also how the hotels work, how the services should be... Because of that, from what used to be a challenge it has turned around: most of the referrals came from our contractors, hotels, photographers and of course from our couples and their friends. Another challenge is to form a core team. We had a lot of people who are very interested, who fantasized about wedding but very few persevere because what they imagine about wedding planning is very different from the actual day-to-day job. So it took me two years to form my current core team.

8. Can you remember your worst day in business or a time when you felt like giving up? What happened that made you feel that way and how did you triumph over it?

I remember one of my worst experiences I have had was when we (and especially our couple) knew that we have created a very beautiful wedding, and yet because of the inefficiency of the venue owner, for example: they could not provide the service we wanted, the food was not served warm, the room service is bad... or the uncalled expectations the bridal party had had on the wedding, caused the unnecessary stress and unhappiness on our couple, and indirectly had an effect on our overall planning. Often as a wedding planner, our success is dependable on any players and factors, and when one fails to do the job, the entire team suffers. As much as our client knew it was not our role to make the system perfect, but being a planner, the feeling of not able to take control is not great, and it's no longer about earning money, it's about our codes of excellence we believe in this industry. As a result, our team continues to push ourselves to be efficient in all areas to the extent we could cover all the overlook that the venue owners or any contractors may even commit.

9. Can you share some of the lessons you learnt from overcoming your own business challenges that you think will help other businesses?

One of the key lessons I learnt in business is to build your core team wisely. Many come in with dreams and fantasy, but few stay with perseverance and passion. I remembered in my first year, one of the key challenges was to recruit people who are here to stay. Wedding planning was such a new industry then, many applicants came in with many "Hollywood fantasy" that they have seen in movies, but few were willing to really serve the brides and their fellow mates. So, do not haste to recruit anyone with dreams, but recruit those who are willing to serve and persevere. It took me two years to finally find my core team. We are a small firm so we need people who are flexible both in discipline skills, like accounting, and also in customer service skills. On the other hand, you may also want to look out for talents that are not just like you. I am a wedding designer and planner, but I will also need to have someone who has strong operational skill to balance me. So the lesson is you have to continue to build this team to make yourself and your team competitive in the marketplace.

10. When was the moment you realised the business would work and support you?

I think for me, it was about nine months after I had my first client, when I finally could stop worrying about profits and losses. Being trained to handle company profit and loss before, my core concern is meeting the targets and generating revenues. When I first started, I worried almost every month about when the next client would come. For six months, I could not sleep in peace, but eventually I reminded myself: "If I have called my company "Heaven's Gift" I should believe it is a gift to me". I had to learn to let go my anxiety, did my best and believed in myself and my team. By the ninth month, we had a deal that could cover almost the previous six months. We saw a change on our business and we broke even on the tenth month. To me, that was a breakthrough. It taught me that in business, you have to have a passion to do the impossible, and a perseverance to complete the race, and finally to learn to let go and trust. You will find yourself a step closer to where you envision yourself to be.

11. What are some of your proudest business achievements to date? And why are they so important and meaningful to you?

We have been known as the creative wedding planner in the industry and most of our weddings have been featured in Singapore Talter, all local magazines namely Her World Brides, Style Weddings, Female Brides, The Monty, Bride Du Jour. We are also privileged to have designed and created weddings in Bali or as far as Tokyo. During the first six months when we were still struggling, one TV Channel invited us to be the wedding planner for their last episode. Few months later, the radio station 938 invited us to a talk show about wedding planners. So, in the first one and half year, we had a lot of publicity for a new comer without having to spend any money for advertising. All these give us another level of platform to make Heaven's Gift enter the regional arena.

12. How do you differentiate your business from your competitors? Please provide specific examples.

Most wedding planners in Singapore are coordinators rather than designers. In Heaven's Gift, we pride ourselves in creating and designing personalized theme weddings where guests can witness from wedding stationary, to floral arrangements, to stage and lighting sets and to final details such as menu concept and wedding favours. We own our own design team, and we constantly strive to create events that are aesthetically unique and tasteful. However, we do not just design anything. A lot of what we design really show who

the couples are. It's good to know that a wedding is created by Heaven's Gift, but it will be even better when people say "This wedding tells me about Joelle and Jos, about the bride and the groom."

13. What are some business ideas you have implemented that created great results in your business?

We have built some of the un-thought concepts in weddings or social events: having palm trees in ballroom igniting the Maldives fantasy, building physically challenging sets such floating dance floor and stage on the pool where guests could not wait to step onto. Every concept is unique, and every execution must be precise. I remembered when we brought in five-meter tall palm trees in St Regis, everyone was panicking, but when all the landscaping and lightings were completed, it was truly magical that even hotel guests peeked in to take pictures. The Enchanted Tree is another example. We wanted to create a cherry blossom tree. Everybody was worried that it would look like a man-made tree usually seen in Chinese New Year. But we promised and delivered, we made it look so real that guests marvelled at how we did it.

14. Where or who do you get your business ideas from?

Everywhere, from books to the web, to the day to day shopping windows on the streets. Ideas are not static, they are dynamic. Everything you see on the streets or in the stores can be inspiring ideas for something you could not have thought of. I always tell myself never stop exploring, always look out to be inspired, and I will find inspiration through my observation. Our philosophy is to create personalized weddings, and often our inspirations derive from our couple's love story and journey. For example, when the couple said they both like diving and they wanted to have "Under the sea" theme, we decided to use their photo taken under the sea as the sets for the wedding.

15. How much have your business grown since you have started? In terms of \$ revenue, customers base, number of employees and number of branches? (rate of growth in percentage or numbers) What do you see for your business in the next 2 to 5 years amid the current market condition in 2009, and does it include any plans for expansion?

Over the past 5 years, Heaven's Gift has become a team of 4 members from a one man business. With our current team, we have designed for every of my clients from theme concepts to delivering details such as wedding stationery, overall stage design and lightings, wedding floral and intricate details such as wedding favours, packaging etc. The team has planned weddings in Singapore, Bali and as far as cities such as Tokyo. With an approximately 2 to 3 social events a month, Heaven's Gift has planned to date approximately 100 weddings - both big and small events. In five years, we see ourselves venturing into the regions, continue striving to become one of the sought after social event planners in Asia. We love details and retail, and I do believe one day, we will own our own range of products and stores in the region.

16. What does entrepreneurship mean to you?

An entrepreneur is a pace setter, one who sees an opportunity, believes in himself and his vision to be bold to venture into the unknown and make the unknown a certainty. An entrepreneur is also likened to the sailor on the surfing boat: you trained yourself to be equipped to handle your boat, and then you constantly steer the boat in accordance to the winds directions. You have to be flexible but focus, always look forward. The winds and the waters are like our circumstances and challenges, they build you to be better, so that when the same winds come again, you will know how to manoeuvre within and make it to your advantage. You do not know what the future holds, but in some ways you know who take control of the future, and a part of that is you.

17. What are some entrepreneurship qualities that you have which has helped you come this far?

1. I am a romancer, a dreamer and some called me a visionary. I never stop dreaming, and each time I dream, I strive to step into these dreams. Now looking back, who and where I am today is a consolidation of many dreams I have had from the time I was a child. 2. I believe in passion and perseverance, they both have to co-exist concurrently. Entering into entrepreneurship is likened to stepping into the unknown world, and the only way to survive the uncertainty is to be certain of the passion you hold, never giving up, never turning back. I am a strong believer that all things are possible when you believe. 3. Possessing business acumen and creativity is essential for any entrepreneur. I am fortunate that in my past vocations, I have many mentors that have nurtured these attributes in my life, especially about business acumen. You can learn them from other people or from your own experience. Creative is a self-inbuilt talent. You learnt from others but you have to constantly challenge yourself. Sometimes in my life, I will meet obstacles and challenges. They will stretch me to think out of the box, and the gut instinct and experiences within me often enable me to take one step further: today I may only know how to arrange a vase of rose, tomorrow I will try to create a bush of rose, and the next day will be a landscape of rose garden.

18. In your opinion, what other qualities does a person need in order to be successful in business? And why? (eg. Educational qualification, work experience,

family influence, attitude, etc)

I believe education sets the base for any equipping. Allowing myself to be trained and certified positions me to know what I am in for. My past work experience further enhances that certification, putting the skills I have acquired into good use. At the end of the day, I can only say, a disciplined skill with good fundamental attributes allows me to be where I am today.

19. In your opinion, what does it mean to have the 'spirit of enterprise'?

I like the word "Spirit", having the spirit of enterprise is like having a soul to be an entrepreneur. We need a spirit and life in us to become who we want to be. So as entrepreneurs, having a spirit of enterprise is to be alive within, always creating, always enterprising.

20. Who or what motivates and inspires you?

My faith in God makes me who I am today. The name Heaven's Gift was an inspiring name; it reminded me that the company is not only a gift to other people but also a gift to me. Every step I make in the company is a divine experience that enables me to discover more about myself and the world around me.

21. What are some of your business values and what would you like to pass down to others, particularly the younger generation?

I believe in sharing and building the community you are in. Wedding industry is still quite a close up industry: you don't see many florists, bridal designers come together to share their learnings together. Everyone is busy on their own but few are willing to combine resources unlike industry such as IT or medical. One of the values I hope to pass down is to train the next generation to build and grow the community. Instead of backbiting or stealing ideas from one company to another, learn to be creative and innovative. Stop copying ideas from one source to another, create your own branding and unique positioning, and then share your talents, share your ideas with other players to create the best wedding. We not only build ourselves, we build the industry, and the community will be properly educated and be blessed with the cohesive efforts.

22. Can you share some of the more significant events / incidents that affected or shaped your business philosophy and the way you conduct your business? i.e. SARS, new competition or shifts in market behaviour and trends, etc.

For me it is not much about the market shift that affected my business philosophy. The reason is personal instead. I am workaholic; I used to pack myself with a lot of projects. I had been working very hard to ensure the company was always financially healthy, and often time with loved ones got compromise. One of the greatest change took place when my granny was hospitalised in 2007 and became less mobile. Being the eldest granddaughter I wanted to do my best to take care of her, and my work schedule and priorities took a great change. I asked myself "Do I want to work like other companies, or do I want to make money wisely: take few projects but earn sufficient?" Time with my family becomes more important than meeting targets. I wanted to spend as much time with my granny as possible, and intentionally I took fewer projects in that one year. Instead of taking twenty or thirty weddings, I took fifteen. I thought my business would suffer but interestingly, the more time I had with my family, the more my emotional being is refreshed, my creative juices are enhanced. Some of my best works were created when my time with my granny was the most fulfilled. Though she has just passed on in last December, that one year of change experience prepared me for today. My team reminded me despite my granny was no longer around, the past five months weddings were some of the most spectacular creations I have created. I learn to give myself time and space, I learn to cherish those memories of her, and I learn to pass on her legacy of excellence in my generation.

23. With the changes in the market today, do you think it has become harder or easier to succeed in business? Why do you say so?

I would say today, it is easier to be an entrepreneur than before as more and more people are open to the term entrepreneur. With the government and media support, to kick start a business is not as difficult, as we have more facilities and support system to aid us. In the past, it will be difficult to get funds to start a business, but today the government has opened the concept of entrepreneurship, and provided funds for new players. And on the client's perspective, entrepreneurship is a well-respected journey; clients now appreciate enterprising artists and individuals much better than before. We are no longer just a free lancer, we are regarded as professionals.

24. What advice would you give young people who want to start their own business?

Just make sure that you have a sum of money and you are prepared to lose it. If you can, go and work for someone or for a company first. If the money is from your parents, make sure that you pay them the interest as you would have paid the bank. Why? Because if everything is not difficult, you will not treasure it. Secondly, when you start doing something, don't think short term. Give yourself five years. Any entrepreneurship is not short term; it requires a lot of skills that you need to acquire. So have a realistic timeline, and stay focus!

25. Before becoming a wedding planner, you were a marketing executive. How did the experience of your previous job help you in being a wedding consultant? (professional and personal experience)

Since I was always involved in corporate marketing and growing the company's business in my past job, it gave me a very good platform to begin my own business: how to grow the business, how to do marketing and branding, etc. My previous job also allowed me to travel extensively; it was easy for me to understand the various cultures and traditions in countries across borders. It was not surprising that most of our clients are expatriates, interracial couples, and Singaporeans who traveled extensively.

26. Did you attend a lot of weddings before deciding to become a wedding planner?

Not really. In fact, I would say I did help up about twenty weddings either in the coordination or the floral arrangement role. I am very interested in decoration so a lot of my friends came and asked me to decorate the places for them. The last wedding I assisted was the one that intrigued me to consider this for a lifetime career, before that I thought I would just have a floral shop.

27. From where do you know what is involved in planning a wedding? From the training you have taken or from the wedding you have attended?

I think from both. To be a good business person you really need to study and do a lot of research. One of the things I have been doing until today is to read a lot and research about the industry, not just locally but internationally. I always ask "Who are the best wedding planners in the world?" and that is my benchmark. You need to know the ropes involved as well as the players in the field. Besides the analysis of your market, the one year certification process was a good platform for me to know the business well.

28. How did your first customer reach you? How did you feel about this?

In terms of floral arrangements, I have had the exposure for at least 2 years, but in terms of planning a wedding, my first paid customer found me through the web. It was a strange encounter; my couple was not based in Singapore. They are an Australian-Indonesian couple and wanted to hold their wedding in Singapore which eventually became their home after the work transfer. She said: "We found you on the website and we want to meet up with you." They flew here and since then we had met up few times. I asked them: "How do you know that I am the one who could help you?" , they said: "We just feel that you can do the job." So, I got a place for them, signed the contracts for them because they were not in Singapore. They did not even tell me how they wanted the floral arrangement to be; I just followed the theme and created the wedding for them. I realized that all it takes is have someone believe in you. With your faith, combined with theirs, the wonders will happen.

29. How did you get and gather all vendors' contacts at the very first time? Did you contact them long before you planned the first wedding, or did you contact them only until you were asked to plan the first wedding?

We studied and connected to the players well before we were asked to plan the first wedding. In the first three months, we studied very carefully who the players were. They are our first contact points so we do not want to know them only when we have a project with them. Although in the first time, they were usually doubtful "Who is this person?" But once you build the relationship, everything will be more efficient. We need to build the network, as our success is dependable on the partners, vendors we work with. You cannot take any chance to have your first wedding to be the "guinea pig" experience.

30. Related to wedding industry, most of the wedding planners choose this job after they already had other working experiences (marketing, fashion designer, makeup artist...), do you think it is necessary to have such prior experience before becoming a wedding planner? If you could choose again, would you choose to be a wedding planner right from the start?

I believe my success today is a combination of my training in wedding planning as well as the initial twelve years of working experiences, making me understanding my clients better and meeting their needs creatively and effectively. There is no right or wrong rule to become a wedding planner. It really boils down to how you would walk that journey. I have seen planners who have no past working experiences and do well, but I have also witnessed planners who are very successful because of their other working experiences prior to becoming a wedding planner.

31. Personal question: How will your wedding be? Will it have all the best things you have done for other weddings, or will it be very simple?

Honestly I have never thought much about how my wedding would be. Before I became a wedding planner, I wanted a cruise wedding so I could bring all my family and friends out on a cruise for a trip. Now, being a wedding planner, I decide I would not plan my wedding. I want to enjoy every minute of my event, not having to worry what to do, and what will happen. I leave my wedding to a team of professionals whom I believe in. And ultimately, to be able to find the one you could spend your life with - that is what matters most.

