

Is creative entrepreneurship in Singapore dead or alive?



BY MARK PHOOI

An entrepreneurial spirit in our design communication business is sorely lacking in both depth and width. Where are the old pioneers who first ventured into the business with a vengeance to pit themselves against and stem the infiltration of the foreign agencies? Sadly, they have either downsized, kow-towed or sold out to these foreign powers.

You will see there are more opportunists than 'true-blue' entrepreneurs in the creative industry today. Armed with a

'copycat' business model (borrowed from their previous employment) and a 'hungry shark' mentality (going after their previous employer's clients), they look for an opportune time to launch an attack. Some moonlight as freelancers before venturing into the business full time, others depend on sleeping business partners supporting them from behind with business leads.

These 'run of the mill' agencies have only one key strategy — that of using low fees to attract clients. This multitude of opportunists sorely lack the business innovativeness, right mentality and tenacity to withstand bad times. This kind of partnership that forms out of convenience does not augur well when put to the test. When there is nothing to share, there is no problem. The first sign of trouble comes when money is concerned.

The sheer lack of common business vision inevitably creates a lack of motivation for the partnership to pull through when met with a crisis. Without astute business foresight, it is difficult to apply the correct know-how when overcoming obstacles. These are the usual reasons 80% of businesses do not last more than 10 years.

Another primary reason for business failure among entrepreneurs is the lack of management knowledge and expertise. Since most owners were merely practitioners before



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turning 'bosses', they are usually equipped with only expertise in their creative fields. Their lack of leadership knowledge and managerial skills are key reasons why many local agencies cannot survive, let alone grow or expand overseas.

The recession periods taught me one valuable lesson — when we hit a bad patch, foreign agencies would be the first to pack their bags and move to greener pastures. The locals were paying the price, stuck with job redundancy and low employability.

Place greater emphasis on nurturing local agencies — the government should invest and assist local creative enterprises, particularly those that have a proven business track record, encouraging them to grow and expand into regional markets. Develop a strong national pride in buying the Singapore brand of creatives when overseas: do what the Japanese have done in cultivating a 'Buy Singapore Brands' mentality.

Train more design managers among the existing pool of designers — to support the creative industry, we should focus on nurturing managerial qualities among design practitioners. These managers will provide the badly-needed managerial expertise required by the local agencies for business sustainability and expansion.

Export creative managers — designers need to move up the knowledge chain with acquired design management knowledge. Singapore can export such managers to many of our regional markets, where they would be highly sought after. Exporting these trained managers regionally will help put them in the forefront of potential business opportunities as well as establish Singapore as a hub for creativity.

Nurture 'true-blue' entrepreneurs in the creative business — to overcome high business failure rates and to reduce our dependence on foreign agencies for employment and creativity, we should start a curriculum that teaches design entrepreneurial studies for enterprising designers. Newcomers to the business would benefit greatly if they gain knowledge on what makes the trade tick before setting up themselves.

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What part of the ad industry needs fixing most? E-mail editor@marketing-interactive.com