

# “Reflections”

A personal insight by Mark Phooi, founder and managing director of First Media Group of Companies, recollecting on his 15 years' of business experience in the design and communications industry.

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## Are You On the Right Trail?

“Sonny, if you are looking for a windfall, you are on the wrong band wagon.”

The design business is not for the faint hearted. This business is akin to a very demanding marathon race, which requires one's boundless energy, undying passion, absolute drive, perseverance and resourcefulness. As with any business, one should not aim for a quick kill, for those seeking instant riches, fame and a regular work projects, will be utterly disappointed.

Like a massive war lined with multiple battle fronts, marketing communications warfare is arduously fought — idea with idea, project with project, and account with account. It is rarely a win-all situation; you will end up winning and losing some battles, often without knowing the actual reason every time. As such the euphoria of success and the abject disappointment from losses are part and parcel of the business processes.

The design businesses infuses plenty of people dynamics and personalities, and meld them into a dynamic workforce pursuing a common goal — to creatively express their ideas through commercial art forms freely. According to American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, the pursuit of one's aspiration is driven purely by one's passion, as highlighted by Maslow's *A Theory of Human Motivation*.

Over the past few decades, I have seen enterprising designers and marketers-turned-design-entrepreneurs try their hands in this business. Many have ventured into the industry as there are no barriers set up within it to start up a business. Unfortunately, most have not been successful, and very few survive. As such, liquidation and partnership breakups are very common. Statistics have shown that 80 percent of businesses in Singapore do not survive within the first 5 years. Personally, I think a high percentage could be due to such failing businesses constituting a major proportion of this statistic.

## Design Business — Pushing the Limit

Of the multitude of business entrants, a large proportion of them are design trained. To this group of design practitioners, it is their only end with their means, so as to speak, driven by their labour of love. For the number of non-designers who jumped onto this bandwagon, they were misguided by the notion that the nature of the design industry is very lucrative. By assuming that there was a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, they became the group that suffered the biggest losses.



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Most design practitioners and owners of design firms, like myself, share similar goals: to perfect our craft and our practice, build a solid business reputation, enjoy the creative process, and push the boundaries of this business.

## **Design — The Evolution**

Growth within the design industry has been quite exponential, considering that there are increasing choices of communication channels available today, as compared to a decade ago. The emerging trend for a more sophisticated business community, with greater accessibility to information, and a presence of more affluent consumers fueled higher demands and expectations for better designed communications pieces.

The relatively short design history in Singapore also revealed crucial inadequacies encountered within the design industry practice. These include the absence of a definitive guideline for design and management practices that resulted in an industry operating on different standards. In addition, the lack of open communication among professionals and practitioners undermined cohesiveness within the industry. This problem is exacerbated by the guarded attitude adopted by design firm owners, which often result in poor employer-employee relationships. Consequently, such inadequacies stifle the vibrancy and impede the potential of creating a consistent local design identity in the world market. If there were no impetus to change for the better, the entire industry risks stagnancy or retardation of the overall growth in our design industry.

On the other hand, with strategic planning and policies put in place by our government, the once lowly regarded designing career has gained considerable recognition over the last two decades. This is because the government realised that the creative services sector is one of the key contributors towards the country's economy.

## **Building From Scratch**

I have three areas of interests — sports, fine arts, and management. As a design graduate from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (1989), an undergraduate in management studies from the Polytechnic of East London (1991), and a graduate in design management from the University of New South Wales (2002), I have learnt to combine elements from my educational pursuits and keen interest in sports to manage this practice. And, with some business acumen, I injected a competitive spirit into this design business. My design business started, literally, from ground zero. I had virtually no money, no design work experiences, no business managing skills and no business networks nor contacts! This was deemed to be an insurmountable task then, especially since a pool of established design firms, thriving in double-digit economic growth, already dominated the market.

I have always considered myself as a gritty fighter who adopts a "never give up" attitude in all of my endeavours. Often intrigued and curious to test my capability, I was always eager to challenge myself. My motivations went beyond financial rewards. From year one of my business, I aspired to build the biggest design group in Singapore; something which seemed unrealistic and totally out of reach then.





## **The Early Years**

My struggles started from day one. I was desperate to get out of my under-privileged family background; money was always hard to come by. Since I was nine, I have learnt to earn my own keep, working every school holiday. I knew exactly what I wanted in life and would dedicate my time and effort towards acquiring it. My early years as a scout patrol leader also helped me forge strong leadership skills. As a leader, I was always a sucker for discipline and commitment. No task was ever too tough, or too difficult to handle. Having experienced the dark younger days, I learnt to appreciate the light much better.

## **There is No Substitute for Hard Work**

In my business, I have never been content with being a market average. I have always aimed to excel in all mental faculties, and persistently honed my design and management expertise and execution techniques. To accomplish that, I self-imposed strict discipline to pursue my dreams; of building firsts in every aspect of the design business — first in size, first as an integrated marketing communications specialists, and first as a regional player. Nothing came before work. With such an impassioned drive, I was prepared to trade whatever that was conceivable to accomplishing it. Now, work has become play and it still remains one of my key indulgences today.

## **The Journey So Far — From Prey to Predator**

Today, the First Media Group of Companies and its overseas subsidiaries compose a total staff strength exceeding 100, making it one of the largest design groups in Singapore. With this, size, it has propelled us to a different plane and paradigm shift in our business focus. As such, business goals are constantly revisited and strategies refined.

As a strategic thinker, I was revitalised and re-energised once again.

## **People and Ideas**

The catalyst for disaster is perpetual ignorance and being complacent. As a people-person, I have learnt to understand and “read” people’s individual qualities. In the company of dreamers with lofty ideas, and stimulating conversations with talented and high-calibred individuals, I have encountered my fair share of opinionated cynics, hypocrites who professed to be wise, and some who were quick to pass judgement. Nonetheless, their opinions had a profound impact on me as I strove to prove that they were either right or wrong. However, feedback and comments from clients, staff, and partners have taught me to be more critical of myself and increased my self-imposed standards. Through a consultative management approach, I have directly been taught how to do my job better through my employees.





## **People — Key Assets**

My business is largely energised by a sizable group of working designers who subscribe to the virtues of passion, hard work, and discipline. To me, it has become a personal challenge to provide meaningful employment to my staff. Like the saying goes: “There are a lot of willing people, some willing to work and some willing to let others”. As my design business strives to expand regionally, exporting our design talents overseas has become a priority. While I must admit that there is no shortage of opportunities and talents, there is certainly a shortage of willing talents who are prepared to move out from the creative zone and take up new challenges.

I count myself fortunate to have been able to recruit and groom many trusting working partners and colleagues. As a staunch believer in acquiring talent and ideas, I have learnt to put trust in people and ideas, rather than circumstances. Personally, I would never have been able to make it this far without the consistent support of my loyal and committed partners and staff who have repeatedly delivered on their commitment.

## **Change and Adapting — Keys to Survival**

On the home front, promoting the importance of design has become my priority. With the first goal securely in place, the task to elevate respectability of this trade is paramount. It seems like an insurmountable challenge. However, with adequate support and in good time, I am confident that this can be achieved.

The advancement of new communication technologies, in terms of wireless mobile communications capabilities, have revolutionised the way we work and think. The creation of multiple trading blocks in the global trading business arena has also established a different business dimension. As such, it is very important that business owners realize the dynamics and results of vis-à-vis small businesses’ performances.

From preceding cut-and-paste execution methods, design has dramatically evolved into a high-tech functionality, which relies on little time and fewer resources. The Internet explosion has also generated new means of communications, and how research work is conducted. Such advancements have inevitably accelerated the pace by which newer design standards have been developed.

## **Creative Rejuvenation**

As the changes continue to unfold in the global communications landscape, they trigger the need to roll out new communications strategies and implementation. Design will continue to play an integrated role, even as the design community continuously searches for more innovative, more strategic, and more creative directives.

## **Design Community Needs a Common Voice**

Generally speaking, the design community at large has never been well represented. Neither has it been able to command broad-based industry support from the design community. The lack of management is clearly evident from its passive involvement in mobilising ground support, especially since a small membership base does not give them the clout to command respect and exert control within the industry. The failure to attract sufficient members is largely due to lack of strategic planning and poor vision.



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The current designers' association needs to reassert its position and reassess its role with the community at large. It desperately needs to revisit its hackneyed strategies and policies to rejuvenate the vibrancy of the designers' community. This would eventually draw out the best talents and boost the design industry standard and business practices. In doing so, the design industry might be able to find its niche in crafting our local design identity. The association also needs enhance its role as a conduit to eliminate all possible communication discrepancies among designers, education institutions, design business owners, design buyers and users, and the relevant government ministries.

Personally, I think it's about time that the association rejuvenates itself by infusing new blood. The constitutions and obsolete policies have outgrown their purposes and do not match the current needs of practising designers and business owners. The community is craving for an active, progressive, and action packed designers' association whose priority is to propagate the interest of the design. It is about time the association wakes up from its slumber to re-champion its cause and re-demonstrate its worthiness.

Here are some pointers that practitioners in the new economy should take note of. They include, but are not limited to the following:

- Re-evaluate the guarded mental attitude of business owners that is inhibiting the vibrancy of the creative industry
- Introduce new design management initiatives to improve the survival of all design businesses
- Address career prospects of practising designers
- Reshape and relearn design management skills to counteract the poor management standard in the industry
- Rethink speculative design. Should it be abolished totally?
- The inception of an arbitration centre for design-related disputes

## **Conclusion**

Life is short, we need to diligently pursue what we deem is worthwhile, and pursue it single-mindedly. As a practical manager, I usually try not let my learning lead only to head knowledge, but to also incorporate this knowledge into practical business strategies and solutions. As I step forth into my 16th year of my design business, I journey with renewed zeal, passion, and energy. I know that I must act now — at a more furious pace — lest my energy and passion dissipate.

To remain relevant in this competitive business arena, I need to be armed with a sharp mind and a competitive spirit; with the goal to ultimately outwit, out beat, and outlast all competitors in the arena.

In my opinion, destiny is not a matter of chance, but a matter of choice. It is something I will continue to fight fervently, to achieve. Although very few of my fellow competitors have succeeded over the years, I am much more determined to excel and perform better than they did.

That's my spirit of achievement.



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