

HOW DID PAPER CARPENTER GET STARTED AND WHAT WERE YOU DOING BEFORE THAT?

Mr Chua: I was a prop maker for the events industry, and we've conventionally been making props out of timber until we found a method of making them out of cardboard. For events and weddings that take a couple of hours, it doesn't make sense to make props entirely out of wood. Besides, cardboard is lightweight so it's very portable and easily disposed. And of course, it's environmentally friendly and 100 per cent recyclable.

For close to 10 years, I worked in an advertising agency. I started off as a digital imaging artist, before heading to advertising where I eventually became production director. That's where I'm always the last person to leave the office.

Ms Ng: Paper Carpenter started out in 2013 to be exact. Before this, I was doing consumer marketing, helping businesses identify the gaps between the markets they want to enter, and what they are executing. My last job was with Western Union where I managed a regional portfolio.

Mr Chua: And I shouted for help.

Ms Ng: And I rejected him for one year. He actually shouted for help when they were doing events, before Paper Carpenter started.

Mr Chua: Yeah I'm bad in paperwork (the irony).

Ms Ng: But he had that vision. So it was a very typical SME from a business point of view. You know what you want to sell, you know you like this product very much. But the way you want to bring the product to the market is different from how consumers want to see it. So there was that gap.

In that sense, I guess it worked out because he had the creative ideas which I didn't have, and I knew how to execute better. He would take care of meeting clients and my role was to look after the business, manage production and my cardboard architects.

GROWING UP, WERE YOU ALWAYS THIS CREATIVE OR NIMBLE WITH YOUR HANDS?

Ms Ng: I took art as an elective, but not because I'm good at art. It was because at that time I didn't like home economics – I didn't like the washing and the cooking, so I ended up in art class. I did pretty well, but didn't continue pursuing my interest in art then because I was really more interested in business and how business models work.

Mr Chua: I'm a direct contrast to her. Basically I can be quite a dreamer. I like to challenge myself by exploring and creating things out of paper in a different art form where paper can be used for many means. Recently we've even delved into the logistics industry by creating paper pallets, and found a way to sustain up to a load of three tonnes (3,000 kg).

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE CURRENTLY IN YOUR TEAM, AND WHAT DO YOU LOOK OUT FOR IN YOUR CARDBOARD ARCHITECTS?

Mr Chua: There're eight of us and most of us are designers, so for the first time a production company doesn't require as many production workers.

PAPER TRAIL

AS TOLD TO RACHEL MUI

He's the dreamer. She's the go-getter. And together they form the dynamic duo that started Paper Carpenter – a local company that turns everyday cardboard into beautiful three-dimensional (3D) works of art. According to founders Adrian Chua (below left) and Irene Ng (below right), the company has plans to undertake more international projects and expand into the consumer market as well.



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN

WORKING TOGETHER

Mr Chua (left) takes care of meeting clients while Ms Ng looks after the business, manages production and their cardboard architects

Ms Ng: Basically the two of us do account servicing and sales. We also have two workers on production and the rest of them designers. It's quite difficult to find cardboard designers, because no tertiary institution actually teaches them that, so the first thing we look for are product design students. They have to understand products in terms of 3D, because to a certain extent, cardboard carpentry is 3D. So once you understand how it formed, how it should be flattened, the rest we can teach you. Thereafter, it's the right attitude.

WHAT IS THE MOST FUN ASPECT OF YOUR JOB?

Ms Ng: To see the outcome.

Mr Chua: We're having fun in whatever we do, which is quite rare for many. It's also a challenge to feed yourself with your passion.

Ms Ng: People often tell you not to mix your business and passion together because passion is supposed to feed your soul, but business is supposed to feed your pocket. But I

guess for him it was not so much about the business being very profitable, enough is good enough.

WHO ARE YOUR CLIENTS, AND HOW DID YOU GET IN TOUCH WITH THEM?

Ms Ng: We've actually done quite a few international projects. One example is an exhibition in Shanghai. When they came to us, the brief was that there are many competitors out there showcasing the same product. And they said, "Why don't you just do cardboard tables and chairs?" And we said we could do that, but it was not going to let them shout loud enough. So we did a three-metre wall that was faceted, with LED lights just to make it interactive. In the end, we created a lot of attention for them, which was exactly what they needed, because they needed a lot of walk-ins.

Mr Chua: It was a big head turner, and everyone in the whole exhibition hall was talking about it. That's how we got our name across and of course through referrals. With projects, we definitely do a good job in retaining our old customers so that's how we got the word out.

Another client is the Standard Chartered bank in Seoul where we replicated a food street entirely out of

cardboard because it's just a two-day event. And the good thing about social media is that everyone's on Instagram, and they hashtag us. So that's how we got our name spread out quite organically. Other clients include Archifest, Changi Airport Group and Google.

Ms Ng: Our business can mainly be spread out into two broad categories of clients. The first group of clients that come to us is for the creative works. These are those where you need artistic or architectural stuff like the Changi Airport Group project.

The second group of customers come to us because they want to replace wood with cardboard for the event. Although it's a business, whatever we create also helps to reduce the carbon footprint and we help advocate out there that cardboard is an alternative material to wood. In Singapore especially, although we're quite modern, we're still not so environmentally friendly compared to people in Australia, Seoul, Japan.

For example in Australia, if items for an event are constructed in wood, companies will need to pay a certain surcharge as the material is not recycled. But in Singapore, there is no difference. So here, even when we do production, we're very cautious of the materials that we use – 90 per cent of our materials are made from cardboard, and we sort out our bags for recycling.

AT THE END OF THE DAY, WHY DO YOU DO WHAT YOU DO?

Ms Ng: I love what we do and I love my team. And it's quite different from the corporate world. When I was in corporate, it was at a middle management level; and sometimes to a certain extent, it's not about how good you are at your job but how well you play politics. That's not something I hope to do although in terms of pay, it does pay well.

Here, the good thing is that I get to do what I like and still get paid quite similarly. I guess the biggest satisfaction is to build this business and to see how far we can go. So I think to me that's the main reason why I joined him. Some people ask, "Oh husband and wife, can you guys work together?" It's a lot about personality, and I guess we complement each other.

Mr Chua: As a designer, what I enjoy doing is getting to create almost anything I want. Basically I just have to find that gap to create a product that make people's lives happier. Most designers in firms are limited to briefs by their clients or bosses. But as a designer here, I have a lot of free play and that's what kept me going. ■

