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PROFILE: A PITCH TOO FAR

PROFILE

By: Contributed Content, Singapore

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There are indeed books that change lives, and it's exactly what happened to this biologist-by-training a few years ago. And no, it wasn't one of those *How to do whatever* self-help books. One day, after her post-graduation and a couple of months into her new job in IT sales and marketing Shufen Goh, the name now synonymous with R3, found herself reading David Ogilvy's book *Ogilvy On Advertising*. Reading the book inspired an almost instant and early career switch, as well as a 50% pay cut.

For Goh it required to her to start from scratch and hunt for creative agencies in Singapore, browsing through yellow pages and a few trade publications for their contacts, and then dropping her CV at nearly all of them and wondering "why do these agencies not practice what they preach and advertise for themselves?". After all it took for her to plunge in and wait for results, as fate would have it; her first advertising job was at Ogilvy & Mather.

Starting as a trainee, Goh went into account management and worked across all of O&M's key



Goh

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multinational accounts. In her third year at Ogilvy she was awarded the prestigious Giant award - an internal recognition for up and coming stars. By now the entrepreneurial side of her was rearing its head and in 1996, she joined new outfit M&C Saatchi Singapore as the first local hire and led the agency's new business development for the next six years. "Going from the largest agency to a start-up, people thought something was seriously wrong with me, but I wanted to know what it takes to build up a business," she says.

Under her leadership, M&C Saatchi won sought after brands such as Coca-Cola, SingTel and BMW, and in 2001 the agency was recognized as Global Advertising Agency of the Year by *AdAge*. "There couldn't have been a better time to move," Goh says. "There were many offers of senior management positions but I realized that if you're so driven, it's better off working for yourself."

She knew she wanted to be in this industry so the next thing to decide was doing what. The stakes in starting a creative agency in this ultra-competitive market, were very high plus the business model would not have been unique. Another former agency professional, Greg Paull from DraftFCB, came along with the idea of a consultancy but not on the lines of the usual ones. It would supposedly focus heavily on the pitch process, and aim to streamline it for clients with best practices at its core. Both the partners agreed to the idea, and R3 was born in 2002.

"I was used to leading pitches and simply loved the adrenaline rush it brought with itself. At the same time I knew I was always frustrated by the way it was carried out, so I got interested in the concept," she says. R3, standing for 'relationships, remuneration, reviews', sought to remove such discrepancy.

According to Goh, there were and still are a few pressing issues with companies here in Singapore that makes the selection process very inefficient. Most rampant among them is to have too many shortlists in the final round. The pitch merely becomes a series of power-point presentations at that stage, with usually one or two people speaking and the rest listening. To amend this flaw wherever possible, R3 makes the pitch workshop-oriented as in the recent case of BMW's Mini pitch. This, Goh believes, helps clients to judge agencies better and understand that it's not only about correct answers but an approach which needs to be judged.

"Merely sitting through presentations and making a judgment is like going on a blind date which can be disastrous for brands. Pitches are about finding a suitable agency keeping in mind clients' needs," she says. Having fewer agencies in the final round also helps communicate better with the agencies that do not win the business. "As an agency you will never hear back from the client on why you lost the pitch. This we feel is important given the low conversion

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rates in the market," Goh says.

Another impediment to a smooth pitch process, according to Goh, is the lack of internal alignment within the marketing teams of any company in areas like the brief and evaluation criteria. "It takes a lot of our time to align the internal management before kicking off the pitch process in order to ensure time and cost management and minimize discrepancy," Goh says. "At the same time we are strictly disciplined and committed to being fair. We'd rather not be involved in a pitch too late in the process as it's already messy."

Despite being in the pitching business, she agrees there are far too many pitches in Singapore than required, which translates into a loss of resources for both the client and the agency. Does she then advocate pitch fee? If the intention of a pitch fee is to deter the number of agencies involved in a pitch, the amount has to be significant in order for a client to seriously reconsider, she says.

"A significant amount has to be at least SG\$20 000 for it to be meaningful, but I think getting all agencies' alignment on this will be a challenge. In an open economy, the best is for the market to decide. And ultimately, it should be the agencies' call to decide whether to participate. Think about it, clients have to pitch for business too, and I don't think they get paid a pitch fee."

On what impact has the recession caused on the pitching ecosystem, Goh highlights that companies are still struggling to determine the value they get out of marketing, and marketing teams in turn have to justify their need by seeking value from the agencies. In terms of pure numbers, according to R3, the total number of creative pitches is down by 43% and net new business for all creative agencies is 64% less than the first half of 2008 in the region.

"The demand for accountability and KPIs created as a result of recession will not go down even during the upturn. It was always moving north but the crisis just accelerated it," she says.

Eight years after founding R3, Goh has run global assignments for brands such as Singapore Airlines, Coca-Cola, Visa and Johnson & Johnson, and boasts of an ever growing network of offices across countries like India, Malaysia, China and Japan. "Our focus will continue to be in Asia," she says. "We've proven our business model with multinational clients and our recent success with blue chip local clients such as Singapore Airlines, Lining (China) and Telkomsel (Indonesia) is something we are very proud of."

Integrity is a commodity that is often sparsely found in the marketing and advertising industry, and Goh believes: "One has to have integrity to remain true to who you are and what you do. It is not a principle until it hurts sometimes... We've had to walk away from clients that do not

share the same belief. Thankfully it doesn't happen too often".



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