

PRINTING A DIFFERENT CONTENT



The World's Green Printer

For a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who acknowledges that printing is a “dying trade which will not continue to the next generation”, *after* putting down a high six-figure sum for the sophisticated MGI Meteor DP8700 Se+ Digital Press in December 2017, Picasso Terrence Hong, 38, does not behave in predictable ways. But this contrarian will let you know that profit isn't the main reason he is keeping Asiawide Print Holdings (Asiawide) at the forefront of the printing business; instead, it is all about the stakeholders, some of whom have been with the company (including his father's printing company which later came under the Asiawide umbrella through an M&A) for more than 30 years. “We are like a family, so I have to take care of them,” he explains, simply.

Picasso Terrence founded Asiawide with his younger sister, Stephanie Fang, in 2007, a year after starting work at the family's printing company. It had been a trying time of “daily disagreements” with his father, shares the Master of Engineering (First Class Honours) holder. “When I was studying Satellite Communication in England, I had my mind set on joining an MNC, but family obligations came first, so I returned home.” That was in 2006. Bringing a fresh eye to the business, he tried to inject new ideas but was thwarted at every turn. “What I considered an investment was viewed as an expense”, which led to the inevitable quarrels. On hindsight, he recognised it for what it was – his father had “too much experience” while he had “too many ideas”; a hybrid “50-50 mix” might have worked.

When Picasso resigned from the family business to start Asiawide, he had his sister, who was then working for their father, to help him, and built his own team with fresh hires. The new company was not in competition with the family firm as they had different target markets. With the company tagline announcing Asiawide as “the world's corporate printer”, Picasso dove into establishing the firm's unique selling propositions (USPs), little knowing that he would soon be upsetting – and overturning – a few long-held industry norms.

Same-same but different; quality above quantity

“When you look at the name cards of people from the same company, do you notice that the colours are not always the same?” According to Picasso, this colour inconsistency was an “accepted practice” in the business when he first started out, and productivity was measured by the number of print copies but not the quality of the output. His mentor also told him that he would not be able to get same-industry clients as they were competitors.

The entrepreneur recounted that things were really tough in the first three years. “I had to wear many hats. I looked after the business structure and financial management, and was involved in production and operation. I worked very hard but we were not profitable.” As he was loathe to “lose face”, he had to prove that he could succeed on his own terms. Noting that sales and marketing was crucial to his business success, he threw himself wholeheartedly into networking, despite being an “introvert at heart”.

As well as expanding his business networks, Picasso invested in technology and introduced innovative business strategies. By 2010, Asiawide's fortunes had taken a turn for the better. In 2013, the family decided that merging the two firms would be more effective, and they could also retain the staff who wanted to continue working.

As for the naysayers who were adamant that colour consistency was unachievable and that productivity be measured in numbers, Picasso soon replaced such “old-school” notions with “new-school” reality, with a nod to technology. His clientele today includes the banks, top overseas creative agencies and MNCs. The MNCs number over 300 both in Singapore and overseas, and many of the clients are from the same industries.

Pressing on with technology

Two decades ago, printing was a labour-intensive business. Print colours were mixed by hand and colour consistencies throughout the process were visually determined; some processes required the manual transfer of pages from one medium to another, and errors had to be corrected on the relevant medium by hand. Some post-press procedures were completed by a group of people.

Printing is also capital-intensive as machines can cost upwards of six figures – something Picasso is fully aware of. Before he bought the MGI Meteor DP8700 Se+ Digital Press – the first commercial printer in Asia to do so – he had parted with more than a million dollars for a Heidelberg printing machine with the world’s latest technology for commercial prints. “As I am a trained engineer, I believe in using technology to enhance productivity”, was his explanation for the hefty investments. The equipment and technologies boosted Asiawide’s capabilities, and currently, it can provide a one-stop service spanning pre-press, on-press and post-press for a myriad of industries.

Leveraging on technology in the early stages proved to be a shrewd business decision for Picasso. Not only did he raise the standard and productivity of the print industry in Singapore and the region, the company attracted a bigger clientele for whom print consistency was a critical part of their brand identity; he could also meet the exacting specifications of clients who want a high degree of customisation in their print collateral. “We have the full spectrum of in-house capabilities in printing, powered by technology,” the CEO affirms. Technology also equipped them to transit smoothly into a new business landscape shaped by the Internet, and digital and social media. “We do digital printing, and the MGI allows for mass customisation; in layman’s terms, this means we can produce ‘special effects’ such as a 3D look and we can also print on different surfaces and offer unusual, one-of-a-kind finishes,” he elaborates.

Picasso is also a big believer in infrastructure as a service. “We used to have our own server but after doing the math and being hacked three times, we decided to move to an enterprise-grade cloud platform from Microsoft,” he says. The virtual network costs a small fraction of what he used to pay but delivers significantly more efficiency. Now, he has “zero problems” as the service provider takes care of system maintenance and security, giving the company three levels of assurance – physical security, system security and data security. When staff are on the move, work can continue uninterrupted as they can keep in touch via the cloud.



Invest wisely and... follow the government

Looking back, Picasso is gratified to see the returns on his decade-long investments. “I started the business with no experience. To overcome this shortcoming, I worked very hard to learn from the established players.” That was how he had picked up the essential tools of the trade. He also participated in the business study trips organised by the Singapore government. A self-professed admirer of the Singapore Inc. model, where the government runs the country “like a business”, his

advice to other companies, especially SMEs which do not have the resources to put into R&D, is that

there is “no need to be very creative or very clever; follow the government and you won’t go far wrong”. Asiawide is a prime example – it has expanded its business in Singapore as well as extended its footprint overseas by aligning itself with the government’s approach; it has also tapped on various government initiatives.

Running a business is not always about the profits, “we have to do our part in corporate social responsibility, such as looking after our people and taking care of the planet,” says the business owner. As an industry forerunner in ecological practices, with several awards under its belt, Asiawide’s vision is to be the world’s leading green corporate printer. To this end, it uses soy-based ink, 100 per cent vegetable-based spray powder, chemical-free printing plates and eco-friendly paper – all of which are less harmful to the staff who work with these materials daily, and to the environment. The company’s tagline has also been recrafted as “the world’s green printer”.

The print industry’s demise was preordained by the Internet and the explosive advancement of digital and social media, asserts Picasso, but with the right investments and strategies, SMEs in sunset industries, such as print, do not have to throw in the towel... yet. They do, however, have to be flexible, open their minds to new ideas and create opportunities for themselves. “There are a lot of people who want to go to heaven but don’t want to die,” he says with a laugh, pointing out the futility of holding on to traditional methods of doing things, despite knowing that they are doomed.

Business leaders, himself included, should embrace continuous learning and never stop being curious. “Keep in touch with trends, seek out opportunities, and if you are stumped by a question as I often am, search for answers online and you’d be surprised at what you might find.” Calling himself a “serial entrepreneur”, he reveals that he gets his inspiration from online research and talking to people, though his ideas are mostly “hybrids and not originals”. In addition to Asiawide, Picasso has started a food & beverage set-up which he proclaims “very scalable”, and a baby diaper business that is, in his own words, “run by technology”. Like the unremitting chugging from the printing presses, his mind is always on the go, churning out novel ideas for his yet-to-be-conceptualised new ventures.