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According to plan

Leticia Hsu and Loh Tjun Hong overcame the odds when they started their now successful event company during a time of great economic uncertainty. >58&59

Successful: Events Wizard owners Leticia Hsu (left) and Loh Tjun Hong sitting amid the props used in events they had organised.



Dynamic duo: Hsu and Loh (left) started Events Wizard years ago despite not having much industry experience.

Wizards of planning

Despite being a challenging job, event planning can bring home the bacon

By CHOONG MEK ZHIN
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PEOPLE often say that many opportunities are available during hard times and one just needs to be able to recognise them.

This is exactly the story for two struggling young adults some 11 years ago during a financial recession that forced them to sink or swim.

"We were studying full time when the depression hit our families. We went from having an easy life and secure futures to an uncertain one where we had to find jobs to support our education," Leticia Hsu said.

Both she and partner Loh Tjun Hong were 21-year-olds then and were studying international business and operations management respectively, full-time under an American degree programme.

"The exchange rate for the US dollar shot from RM2.50 per dollar to RM3.80 and it made all the difference. Little choice was left to us, but to switch to a part-time professional programme so we could work the other half of the time," Loh said.

They eventually ended up doing marketing for an extreme sports company and handling events became a part of their lives from then on.

"It was a natural progression for us to start our own events management company after that. So in 2001, without much experience or even money, we formed

Events Wizard Sdn Bhd's average revenue in the last five years:

RM800k to RM1.4mil

Start-up capital **RM15k**

Average number of events per year **30 to 50**

Events Wizard Sdn Bhd," he said.

Hsu added that, at that time, there were only one or two event companies and wedding planners were still a very new thing in the market, making them one of the pioneers of the industry.

With the help of their families, they raised RM15,000 to start and based themselves in a rented office space only 10 ft by 14 ft in size.

"The first three years was a struggle for us. Whatever money we earned from jobs

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Unique: A candy bar is not uncommon at events and weddings these days.



Much needed help: Having an event planner manage a wedding ensures peace of mind.



Dream comes to life: The 'magic' of an event planner at work, creating a romantic and whimsical garden-inspired setting for a wedding.



On a big scale: A traditional dance performance takes on a majestic atmosphere at the Bayon Temple in Cambodia.



Classy: An event done by Events Wizard where an elegant chandelier provided a focus under a brightly coloured tent.



Detailed: A table centrepiece at an event by Events Wizard.



Interesting: The various props sometimes used to liven up events.

Managing events is no walk in the park

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had to be put back into the company so it could continue operating," Loh said, adding that, at times, they didn't even have the luxury of drinking a simple teh tarik at the mamak.

Event planning is a challenging job and very often, clients can be fickle-minded and demanding, making last minute changes that the planner will have to rush to accommodate.

However, the thing that proves to be the biggest problem for an event planner is entirely due to natural causes.

"We always have contingency plans on standby and plan ahead of problems, to ensure a smooth event. A successful event is one where the guests enjoy themselves without noticing the planner.

"So, it is unpredictable things like the weather or natural disasters that prove to be the bane of this job," Hsu said.

Events Wizard's first big break came after three years of being in business when they landed one of their most memorable jobs to date with The Curve, Mutiara Damansara.

"We were asked to plan their seasonal events and campaigns.

"It was the first time we were part of a project from the conceptualisation stage and dealing with events

that had to attract different people," Loh said, adding that they broke even after accepting the job that they went on to do for 10 years.

Since then, the company has also spread out and is now also involved in T+C, a decorating company specialising in custom linens, The Olive Branch, that markets eco venues and The Wedding Planners, a wedding planning company specialising in weddings held in Indochina region.

Loh said logistics, something not quite as romantic or interesting, is a crucial aspect of event planning.

Hsu added that the optimum time needed to plan a wedding is about a year, while for corporate events it is a month.

"But we have had experience doing weddings in two months. Sometimes when a client wants something specific like a certain popular emcee or location, bookings may need to be done a year in advance, which is why we advise people to plan ahead," she said.

These days, clients' tastes are changing and the market is becoming increasingly demanding.

"This actually makes our job more interesting as we challenge ourselves to meet new standards.

"It refreshes our passion for this type of work," Loh said, adding that in a typical year they do between 30

and 50 events.

Unusual or unique events will also cost about 10% to 30% more in terms of cost according to Loh. Among the items that can be personalised in any event are furniture fittings, launch props and decorative items.

He said that for the past five years, the company's revenue has been between RM800,000 and RM1.4mil.

Their clients' list boasts of large corporations including Petronas Carigali Sdn Bhd, Dijaya CorpBhd, Malaysia Airlines Bhd and Securities Commission Malaysia.

"As for weddings, our clientele are those who are usually based overseas. We believe the reason is such people are more exposed to the value of having a wedding planner and are therefore more likely to hire one," Hsu said.

Locally, the idea of having an event or wedding planner is slowly gaining momentum.

For the both of them, one of the most rewarding aspects of the business is personal satisfaction in seeing a job well done.

"Sometimes, we even get thanked personally by the bridal couple and at one time, their parent whom we only got to know three days prior to the big day.

"It is not much but it makes everything we do worth it," Hsu said.

