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SPECIAL Superbrands 2005

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ON THE RIGHT TRACK: The Tan brothers, (from left) Elson, Roger and Randy, decided to focus on the lifestyle-conscious consumer group and it paid off, with the company doing well even in hard times.

Band of brothers

Image Creative Design

"WE WORK sincerely, and because of our working style, a lot of people like to work with us and trust us. We get a lot of referrals."

ELSON TAN, DIRECTOR,
IMAGE CREATIVE DESIGN

From a three-man renovation firm, Image Creative Design has become one of the biggest interior decorating firms in Singapore. **RAHITA ELIAS** finds out how it achieved Superbrand status

A FAMILY dinner conversation 10 years ago sparked the start of what has blossomed into a \$10 million company called Image Creative Design, run by a trio of brothers —

Roger, Elson and Randy Tan.

Said middle brother and director Elson: "Before we started this company, I used to sell safety gas devices. I was doing very well but the staff turnover of my salesmen was very high.

"During dinner at my parents' place one day, I asked Randy (the youngest brother) what he was doing and he told me he was doing renovations, and that the market and business were quite easy.

"So I asked him if we should start our own business, and he agreed. We then started doing our research and planning."

But first, said Elson, he insisted that Randy inform his boss that he planned to venture out on his own.

Randy said: "Before we started our research, I told my boss that I was leaving in three to six months."

Because of his honesty, he and his brothers have remained friends with his former boss.

After a few months of research, the Tan brothers set up their building contracting company on March 28, 1995. A year later, eldest brother Roger, then a designer with a "well-known" design company, officially joined them.

In the first few months, Image did not have its own office. However, as the business took off, it moved into a 50 sq ft office sub-let from a carpentry factory in Toa Payoh Industrial Park.

Business was brisk, and the company moved to Katong Shopping Centre in 1997. It was around this time that the brothers decided to change Image's direction.

Recalled Elson: "Roger was the one who came up with the idea for us to become an interior design company. We

hesitated, but when we moved to Katong Shopping Centre, we set up our showroom. That's when we actually decided to become a design company and target a different group of consumers. We knew that if people wanted to do the usual renovations, they would not want to come to us.

Fast facts

- Image Creative Design was started by three brothers, Elson, Roger and Randy Tan, over a dinner conversation a decade ago.

- Their first office was just over 50 sq ft in size. Its showroom in Ubi Crescent now covers 3,000 sq ft and it has a staff of 70 designers.

- The firm believes it is the only interior decorating firm with Superbrands status.

Business has been so good that the brothers decided to buy a 3,000 sq ft showroom at Ubi Crescent and consolidate Image's operations under one roof. To-

day, Image is one of the largest interior design (ID) companies in Singapore with a staff of some 70 designers. It is also touted as the first and only such firm to achieve the Superbrands accreditation.

The brothers are all directors. Roger is in charge of the design aspect of the business, Elson handles sales, while Randy liaises with the suppliers.

They have also adopted a very flat organisational structure for Image. Each of the 70 designers are responsible for a particular project from start to finish, even during the sales stage. If they face any major obstacles, they can ask any of the brothers for advice and help. This personalised approach, within the company and with its customers, has paid dividends.

Elson said: "The market has changed a lot. It is more competitive now. Consumers are very careful and they like to make comparisons. But such competition has allowed us to upgrade ourselves. It has inspired us to compete in the market at a very different level. That's how we became the first and only Superbrand ID company."

The company plans to expand in the commercial market which currently makes up 20 per cent of company sales, he said. Residential projects make up the rest. In about five years, Image's sales is expected to be equally split between residential and commercial jobs.

He adds that Image is also considering listing in the near future but no date has been set. It has also started scouting for overseas projects but plans are still in the embryonic stage.

Rahita Elias is a freelance writer.