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33

THE LUNCH INTERVIEW



MEN IN BLACK Roger, Randy and Elson (from left) are so close that they not only work together, they even live in side-by-side homes in a condominium.

PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

Menu

Lei Garden Seafood Restaurant Orchard Plaza

- ▶ Dim sum platter
- ▶ Barbecued Peking duck
- ▶ Double-boiled superior shark's fin soup with sea whelk
- ▶ Live Star grouper done two ways
- ▶ Baked seafood fried rice served in young coconut with white sauce
- ▶ Chilled snow pear with osmanthus honey
- ▶ Freshly squeezed blackcurrant and lime juices

'We are familiar with the food here, and it is always good.'

— MR ROGER TAN

with an office in Kuala Lumpur next year.

To stay ahead of the game, they are also exploring the possibility of selling furniture and other decor items, like homegrown chain Barang Barang. It is a response to their clients' changing tastes.

Says Roger: "Before, they wanted custom-made furniture and elaborate feature walls with timber strips, lots of colour and design elements.

"Now, people want clean lines and soft furnishings they can buy from shops."

These decisions to take the business into new directions are debated on by all three brothers. They are in each other's lives 24/7 and do not mind it one bit.

They share the same office and live in side-by-side homes in a Yio Chu Kang condominium. Roger and Randy favour the classical decor style (think Roman columns), while Elson describes his home as modern-contemporary.

Their parents, who still live in Ang Mo Kio, visit them at the Ubi office every day.

They say their father's work ethic has been an inspiration. Their dad, now 78, was a fishmonger. He would start work at 2am by going to Jurong to buy fish, then work till 5pm at Tekka market.

Says Randy: "When we were coming back from having drinks out, he would just be going to work."

When they started their business, their parents lent them \$10,000 to get started and suggested they visit the Four Face Buddha in Bangkok for luck. It was their father's first trip abroad.

Today, the entire family — parents, the three brothers, their wives and five children — go back to Bangkok every year at Chinese New Year. They ask for better business and give thanks.

They have a lot to be thankful for, they say.

Roger says he used to look in awe at his boss' big car. Now, he drives a seven-series BMW.

Elson says selling vacuum cleaners door-to-door was not a walk in the park. "We really started off with a hard life," he says.

But just as they agree on most things, they are firm on this: "So far, no regrets," says Roger.

hsueh@sph.com.sg

Home improvement kings

Armed with a \$10,000 loan from their parents, the Tan brothers started an interior design company in 1995 in an office no bigger than a toilet in an HDB flat. Five thousand HDB flats later, their company employs more than 80 people and has a \$12 million turnover



▶ Tan Hsueh Yun

WHEN the three bosses of Image Creative Design say they started small, they are not joking.

Their interior design company's first office was in an industrial park in Toa Payoh, and it was the size of a standard toilet in an HDB flat.

Mr Elson Tan, one of two brothers who started the company in 1995 (another brother joined later), remembers those cramped conditions well.

He says: "We sublet the space and it was just nice for two small tables. Clients had to squeeze themselves in when they came."

Fast-forward 10 years, and the company has a bit more space.

Clients are ushered into a 3,000 sq ft showroom in Ubi Crescent filled with design concepts for every room in the home. The designers who create these looks work in a spacious 2,600 sq ft office in the same building.

Other things have changed too. The company has worked on the interiors of 5,000 HDB flats, has been asked by the Housing Board to do up three of its showflats, and has been awarded Superbrands status. Its clients also know this CaseTrust member will not short-change them.

From having no portfolio to

show potential clients, the brothers now have glossy brochures showcasing their work. The interiors they do are mostly sleek, the clean lines accented by vases filled with artfully arranged twigs.

And where the three brothers used to do everything themselves — from marketing to designing to project managing — the company now has 80 employees. Turnover was \$12 million last year.

Not bad for three brothers who spent their early years in a one-room rental flat in Toa Payoh.

The first sign you get that they are a close-knit trio is when all three turn up for lunch dressed in black.

Big brother Roger, 44, is the ideas man, the design guru who likes to dress in Harley Davidson brand clothes. Elson, 42, serious and understated in black shirt and tie, handles sales and is the designated spokesman. Smiley Randy, 36, works with the suppliers and is the materials experts.

Their personalities may be quite different but they share two qualities that successful businessmen have: chutzpah and business savvy.

And to think none of it would have happened if it were not for a casual dinner conversation among the brothers 10 years ago.

They were at their parents' three-room flat in Ang Mo Kio for a steamboat dinner.

Elson, who was then running a company selling safety devices for gas tanks, asked Randy casually what he was up to.

"Renovation," he said.

The more Elson talked to his brother, the more he wondered if

there was a business opportunity. He said he was frustrated with the high turnover of sales staff. Some jumped ship to other companies, others just could not take the rigours of hard selling.

Maybe, he thought, it was time to do something else.

"If we were committed and worked hard, we could make a go of it," said Elson, who started off selling vacuum cleaners door-to-door.

Randy was game, and the two of them decided to rope in Roger, who has design experience.

But should Roger, who was holding down a good job as a project manager in a commercial design firm and drawing a high salary, give up his job?

Randy, who used to sell mobile phones, says: "He was quite eager, but we said we should start first."

Without a lot of experience in the business, they made the smart decision to start their cold-calling odyssey in Chua Chu Kang, where lots of young couples were just getting the keys to their new HDB flats.

And here was where Elson put his years of selling door-to-door to good use. Besides blitzing the area with leaflets, the brothers were also there every day, talking to the homeowners who had turned up to look at their flats.

Like the determined salesman that he is, Elson says: "Once we had a chance to speak to potential customers, there was an opportunity to turn it into a sale."

But why would anybody trust two guys with no track record and no portfolio?

"We asked them to give us a

chance and we would prove it to them," Elson says. "We told them they didn't have to pay us anything if we didn't deliver what we'd promised."

It was the proverbial offer the clients could not refuse.

Some of Randy's friends hired them and so did others. Through word of mouth, business grew. Within six to nine months of starting, Roger had quit his job and joined them.

In 1997, they opened their first design showroom in Katong Shopping Centre. The brothers proudly say theirs was one of the few renovation company offices that did not display those very passe rows of floor tiles at the entrance.

That showroom attracted a good number of walk-in clients. The brothers knew it might alienate lower-end clients, but they knew it was time to move from merely renovating people's homes to providing a complete package, including interior design services.

The strategy worked and business boomed. In 1998, they opened another showroom in Tampines, followed by one in Ang Mo Kio. The three showrooms were brought under one roof in Ubi in 2001.

Interior design is hardly recession-proof, yet Image Creative Design managed to weather the Asian financial crisis, the Sept 11 attacks, Sars and the Iraq war with no dip in business.

"Honestly, we were not affected," Elson says. "In fact, we expanded."

They speak with satisfaction about the early clients whose chil-