

Next Gen

Finding actual love over lunch

She played the role of the dutiful daughter all the way until she completed her Masters degree, and then a little while more on the corporate scene. But then the matchmaker in her had to finally come out!

One of the last things you want to say to your tradition-orientated parents is that you want to be a matchmaker. That will undoubtedly lead into endless advice about ensuring the prosperity of three generations, the shame upon your ancestors, and how you would remain single for the rest of your life.

Thus, when 30-year-old Violet Lim decided to seek her parents blessing to start a matchmaking business six years ago, she was prepared for the barrage of objection from her family. Lim recalled: "While they did not exactly disown me when I started the business, they were of course not too encouraging when I shared with them my business plans. After all I had been meeting all their expectations up till then." Having grown up in Kepong as an obedient and respectful child, it was rather knotty for her to have to go against her parents' wishes. Groomed by her parents to excel academically, to enrol in a good school, and to secure a good job, Lim had achieved all that.

After completing her law degree programme at University of Manchester in 2001 which was immediately followed by a Masters in Industrial Relations and Personnel Management from the London School of Economics, UK a year later, Lim got her first - and only - employment with Citibank in Singapore at the age of 22 as a management associate.

"Things were going well. My starting salary was over S\$3,000 (RM7,100), and within a year with the bank, I was privileged enough to meet a lot of business people as well as had good exposure to the financial environment," she stated.

She explained: "Having to inform my parents of my decision to quit my job and start my own venture was perhaps one of the toughest obstacles as they thought I had lost it! They couldn't see the concept as they kept visualising the traditional concept of a matchmaker."

"But also perhaps since my parents were small business owners, they did not want their children to have to go through the struggles that they

an article in the magazine about dating businesses and was totally captivated. One month later, and after facing her parents, she established Lunch Actually in April 2004.

"I had always wanted to contribute something significant to the society around me, whether in my work or my personal time. Even while at Citibank, I was spearheading the recreation club in various community service ac-

service for busy working professionals and business professionals.

"Although lunch dating service not a unique concept as it was well established in Europe and it was new to many Asian countries especially Singapore," said the founder.

With nothing firmly in place point, her husband left his job at Deutsche Bank to work on Lim's venture. Meanwhile, being the intense reader, Lim's desire to learn more about the matchmaking industry led her to the Matchmaking Institute in New York. She spent S\$3,000 for a single weekend but acquired valuable insights in the business, and importantly, a code of ethics in the industry. She spent S\$4,000 for a single weekend but acquired valuable insights in the business, and importantly, a code of ethics in the industry. Starting at S\$4,000 per session, her business diversified into the Singapore market. Her familiarly in the country a primary reason for her target market founders turned to building their new services.

They allocated a substantial portion of their initial capital of S\$50,000 on marketing activities and advertising. From running advertisements in the newspaper, the pair went on to placement at bus-stands. They utilised the MRT stations to capture general public's attention.

"No one had done advertising in this form of business services before. It was great to see response and public awareness increasing tremendously not long after we started on the promotion drive," said Lim.

through."

The maternal entrepreneurial instinct inside her was already simmering. She remembered that she was curious on why many of her colleagues at the bank were single, working long hours, and practically married to the bank.

Soon after, while on the flight to visit a friend in Japan, Lim chanced upon

"But after almost two years, I realised that this was not really what I wanted to do with my life. I looked at my boss, and I did not want that kind of life," declared Lim.

Together with her husband Jamie Lee, 34, the couple started Lunch Actually, which was conceptualised to be a dating

clearly walks the talk on branding as testified by the violet corporate colour, violet dressing, and even violet-coloured email fonts.

She revealed that positioning their services correctly from the start was very important in order to create a professional image which explains why they refrained from using words such as romance, dating, cupid, and love in their business name.

"It was simply about two individuals going for a lunch date. It's a short, quick and simple way to meet a potential partner, and there was no pressure for both parties. This is an emotional business and we have to learn how to handle customer demand and the sensitive aspects of human interaction," remarked the avid reader of biographies and self-improvement books, as well as the occasional chick lit materials.

A short while later, her profile took another jump when she was invited to a radio programme talking about dating services, which she said was "timely exposure for the business and our services". It was also then that Lim met her mentor - a successful women entrepreneur in Singapore's business scene.

"She taught me to not try to reinvent the wheel, and to learn from what others have done wrongly and to avoid making them myself. It was also then that I realised that an entrepreneur cannot

the business. People management was another area I had to learn from the ground.

"Another challenge for me is to have to let staffs go. As the business grows, some may not be able to come along as they may not have the right attitude and capacity to go where we need them to be," stated Lim. The company started with only three personnel and has grown to 16 staffs across its three offices in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong.

As the demographics of its target market in Singapore were similar to ours here, the birth of the Kuala Lumpur branch in 2005 at Plaza Damas was only to be expected. Another reason for the certified matchmaker to think beyond the Singapore market was that it was fast becoming saturated.

She explained: "Because the government was encouraging more of such businesses mainly to boost up the population size, this was resulting in more players and thus more intense competition."

"Over in KL, there were more challenges as we had to not just compete with existing competitors including several speed-dating services and some who had been around in the matchmaking services for years, but also to manage the perception of a more diverse culture," she said, referring to the sensitivities of local people and governing authorities.

after we opened the Hong Kong office, the economic crisis hit the region. We relied on creative marketing and promotions to keep us afloat during those tough times."

The bubbly founder has more than kept the business afloat as they look to sail ahead towards regional expansion. The couple have set their sights on Taiwan (within the next five years) and China (in five years) as their new markets.

From only two enquiries when they first started in Singapore, to date the group now receives more than 100 enquiries a week. It boasts of more than 5,000 members - comprising primarily of ladies in their mid-20s to late 30s and men from late 20s to early 40s - and recorded annual growth of about 20 per cent since they started.

"Our clients are single and successful professionals who are seriously looking for that special someone but due to their hectic lives are unable to find them. They include managers, executives, directors, lawyers, accountants, doctors, and even entrepreneurs."

The agency came up with innovative programmes and activities to increase their market share including hosting the Celebrity Dream Date campaign which featured Miss World Malaysia 2009 finalist Leong Kuan May. Understandably it received huge responses in Malaysia and Hong Kong.

With the advent of technology and a younger market in mind, Lim and Lee introduced Eteract.com. Touted as Asia's first online speed dating site, the site allows multiple '5 minute' online dates from the comfort of your own home using instant messaging and live audio, webcam and with an Avatar.

"This is Jamie's baby. With this you can start meeting people right away and be introduced to as many as 12 other singles in just one hour. This is entirely catered for a different group of users; the younger market with lower disposable income," she said, revealing that it has close to 20,000 registered users with about 2,000 visitors to the site weekly.

An increasingly sought after public speaker, Lim always reminded her audience: "You must have passion for people, society, and human development to be in this business."



Violet Lim

The social entrepreneur's definitely walking the talk as she fervently extends her hand to the underprivileged and towards social causes around the world. Mother of a 4-year-old son and year-old daughter, she has committed sponsoring one child through the World Vision project for every one of her own.

In addition to currently sponsoring one child in Myanmar and another in the Philippines, her company donates S\$300 each month to World Vision Area Development Programme. World Vision is a relief, development and a advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and the communities worldwide to reach the full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice.

"I want to continue to make a difference in this world and in my life through the company and my own efforts, by bringing people together and for them to make a life together, I think I've played a small role in someone's future," said Lim, whose dream is to be one million couples around the world get married.



Recognised for their services.

expect to learn everything on your own. We have to ask and learn from others around us."

Thus far, the entrepreneurship journey has been a steep learning experience for the Malaysian. She stated that she had learned more in the first two years of running her business than she would have if she stayed for another ten years working for a corporate company.

"You need to have good fire-fighting skills as there's always a need to solve the problems and hurdles quickly, especially during the start-up stages of

"The KL office was also a good venture for us to learn about opening and managing an international branch (as they were based in Singapore). It was also a very important step towards our next move to Hong Kong."

After spending two years to research the market potential in Hong Kong, Lunch Actually commenced operations in Hong Kong two years ago. It quickly became their fastest growing branch as well as the highest growth among the three branches.

"It was quite a challenge as not long

Up close and personal

- In February 2004, Violet became the first Asian to be certified by the Matchmaking Institute (New York) in matchmaking services.
- Last year, she completed a 10-km marathon and raised S\$600 from friends to be donated to needy children in Bangladesh. This year she's hoping to complete the 21-km run.
- A Toastmasters International member since her university days in London, she recently joined a Chinese-speaking Toastmaster club in Singapore to brush up her mandarin language skills.
- As the in-coming president of her local Rotary Club, she's involved in building a new school for hill tribes' children in Chiang Mai, Thailand.