

KEY ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR - MEDIA AND ENTERTAINMENT: RON TAN

A business that almost wasn't

FRI, OCT 04, 2019 - 5:50 AM

LYNETTE TAN tanlyn@sph.com.sg @LynetteTanBT



"After all these years of R&D and learning experiences from working with global studios, we are getting close to the date where we can introduce and launch our own IP to the public," says Mr Tan.

"CITYNEON Holdings executive chairman and group CEO Ron Tan now runs a company worth some S\$700 million but it might have never been."

With "limited capital, limited experience, and limited trust" from their studio partners years ago, Mr Tan and two friends had tried to put on an exhibition about The Avengers in New York. "We were delayed for the opening and the fault laid squarely with us, and with me as a leader," Mr Tan recalled.

Executives from Marvel and Disney checked in on the project 17 times before they approved the opening. "In a litigious society such as the US, imagine the consequences of a delayed opening and imagine again an overblown budget - we underestimated the required finances by close to 250 per cent."

But the Avengers Station went on to debut in New York in 2013 and has since travelled across the world, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors.

The company formed by Mr Tan and his friends back then, Victory Hill Exhibitions, would also eventually be bought over by then Singapore-listed experience entertainment firm Cityneon.

The firm was delisted in February this year following a buyout offer led by Mr Tan and Hong Kong entrepreneur and investor Johnson Ko Chun Shun.

Referring to his earlier challenges in New York, Mr Tan said: "I don't know how I managed to cross that stage. There was nothing much to think about, but to just keep going, and going, and going."

That never-say-die attitude continues to drive him today. "Most entrepreneurs, I would say, probably are or need to be equipped with a forgetful mind - not remembering all the past failures," he said.

"The thrills of winning, engaging in some random meetings, toying with random ideas and seeing all the randomness end up in a true investment, true partnership and true business - they keep me going."

This is also the example Mr Tan sets for his over 400 full-time employees as well, so as to motivate them.

"Employees see you, hear you and follow you. No one likes to follow failures; thus it is important to keep winning and celebrate the wins with everyone."

Going forward, the 48-year-old honcho seeks greater global reach for the business, even if it is still a "very small" company in the global arena.

Today, 90 per cent of Cityneon's profits come from outside of Singapore.

"We are set to continue to ride on our momentum with the sign up of new intellectual properties (IPs) and tour our IPs to close to 50 cities globally," said Mr Tan.

"China and the US, in particular, are two countries that we have aggressive expansion plans for."

Cityneon in May announced that Citic Capital, the investment arm of Chinese state-owned financial conglomerate Citic Group, has invested an approximate 10 per cent stake in the company.

The consideration was not disclosed, but the move is expected to ramp up its growth in North Asia. Mr Tan had told The Business Times in an earlier interview that he expects the region to contribute 35 to 40 per cent of the company's bottom line, from the current single-digit percentage, by FY2020.

Mr Tan also has plans to create Cityneon's own asset-based IP, which could come as soon as next year.

"After all these years of R&D and learning experiences from working with global studios, we are getting close to the date where we can introduce and launch our own IP to the public," he said.

"We believe that this can happen as early as 2020 and we are very excited with the development of it."

Ron Tan, Executive Chairman and Group CEO, Cityneon Holdings

On receiving the category award:

"This is not a personal achievement. It is only made possible by the support from our past and present shareholders, global studio partners, clients, bankers, management and all team members of Cityneon. I am receiving the award on behalf of the company, and all who kept the faith with Cityneon from the onset. I am thankful and honoured to be this year's Singapore recipient in the Media and Entertainment category."

On learnings as an entrepreneur:

"Firstly, decisions. One must be willing and daring to make decisions - and at the most timely and critical moments. Never fear making wrong decisions. The true test of a leader is in handling the consequences of decisions made, especially the wrong ones.

"Secondly, listening. Entrepreneurs are bad listeners. We must be more willing to listen and admit mistakes. We must let go of pride and stubbornness, and make the necessary U-turn to make things right.

"Next, rise above the noise. Entrepreneurs see possibilities few can. We must be wary of the noise around us. Noise that can come in the form of an expert opinion, the well-intended advice, or a friendly caution.

"Finally, fundamentals. It is crucial to focus and stick to the fundamentals of the business. Do not get distracted by quick wins, new opportunities, or shortcuts. Press on till you reach (exceed) your target. It is closer than you think!"