Raina Ng

What motivated you to start Lunch Actually?

I took some time off to travel to Nepal back in 2000 to do some soul-searching and charity work. Just before I was due to set off, Kathmandu declared an emergency so I could not go there. I decided to go to Tokyo instead and visit a girlfriend. On my flight to Japan, I came across an article about lunch dating. It was an interesting concept which had not been done in this part of the world. So I took note of it and bookmarked the idea.

Back home, I noticed that a lot of my colleagues did not have time to socialise and meet new people. They were young and eligible but not dating. Then I looked at those who were getting married. Most of them had met their other halves at school or university. My colleagues at Citibank were working long hours and had no time to socialise. But we always had time for lunch. And that’s how the idea of lunch dating came about.

I was not always an entrepreneur. But by the end of 2003, I was getting increasingly disillusioned with my job because, although I was supposed to be in the HR department, a lot of my work was actually administrative. I looked at my bosses and decided that I did not want their job either. Not then. Not in 10 years’ time.

So I told my boyfriend (now husband) about my lunch dating idea and he went out and starting asking people on the street: Would they use such a service? They said they would. So at the end of the year, I quit my job and we started the business together.

What has it been like so far?

The first thing we did was to write a business plan. We needed to raise funds and we did not want to go to our respective families for money. The very first person we approached agreed to invest. I must say, we have been very blessed.

Of course, my parents and friends were worried. But I was only 24 at the time, still single, with no commitments. The minute I decided to do this, I stopped worrying about it. I just pushed on and figured out how to do it. For instance, although I had HR experience from the bank, I had never made any matches in my life. Was there a place I could learn to do it? I looked it up on the net and yes, there was. A matchmaking institute had actually been set up in New York just a few weeks before. I decided to attend as I thought it was always better to learn from someone with experience.

So I went to this institute and Time magazine did a story on them, which had a line that ran something like, ‘They have students from all over, even Singapore’. A Singaporean newspaper picked up on that and called the institute, which put it in contact with me. When they heard what I had in mind, they decided to do a story about Lunch Actually. It was our lucky break because before we opened our doors, we had landed ourselves a double-page spread.

We opened our doors in April 2004 with about S$150,000. But we had a few challenges along the way. We saw a place we liked, at quite a premium location, and at the time, because of the downturn, it was affordable. The landlord then did the routine questioning and when he found out the nature of our business, he told the agent that our business was too ‘advanced’. He recommended another of his buildings and we set up office there instead.

Then we started to put out ads. We wanted main page ads and not classifieds because we did not want to be associated with the traditional dating services. None of the newspapers agreed to put our ads in the main pages. We finally spoke to one which allowed us to put in a single ad. If they didn’t get complaints, we would be allowed to continue advertising with them. They didn’t get any complaints, so we did. And our business took off and grew. In fact, we have had a growth rate of about 20% a year since we started, and we are happy with it.

You seem to have expanded very quickly.

Yes, we opened our Malaysian branch in September 2005, and our Hong Kong one in April 2008. My husband and I knew from the beginning that we did not want to be just another ‘mom and pop’ company: comfortable and static with just one branch. It does not require huge capital to start up, so we could set up a new office pretty quickly. And we always had revenue coming from the moment we opened our doors. We have come close to packing up, but we never had a time when we had no money coming in at all.

Malaysia was quite tough. We had a partnership agreement then and we bought over the partnership later. We are very close friends with our business partners, but I guess it is tough starting up businesses with others. Also, at the time, the Malaysian market was not ready, I think, for us. We also had to adjust our pricing in Malaysia. We could not charge Singapore rates, but some of the costs, especially advertising, were the same if not more expensive than in Singapore. Our Malaysian branch, however, has grown to be one of our more successful branches.

Hong Kong is different in the sense that the female-to-male ratio is not as balanced as it is in Malaysia. In Hong Kong, I think there are about 800 males to 1,000 females, and that makes it difficult for us. We had a good start there, though. We ran a contest called the celebrity dream date where we sourced a date for a single celebrity, Ella Koon. Eligible bachelors could enter the contest to win a dream date with her. We went through the entries and picked an eligible bachelor who went on a lunch date with Ella. They eventually got together and are still together today. It was a nice success story for us and we got a lot of publicity.

We found we still had a gap and wanted to bring our services online. So, we started eteach, which is an online speed dating portal, and we started esynchrony, which is very successful because it’s a hybrid between Lunch Actually and online dating. It fills a gap in the market.

Where does most of your money come from?

Lunch Actually, which is our full-service dating agency. How it works is basically you sign up and come in for a full consultation and then we set you up on lunch dates. Clients can buy memberships and the prices vary with the number of dates they would like.

For esynchrony, clients fill an online questionnaire, which is free. Matches are proposed from that questionnaire and if clients decide to go on dates with suggested matches, they pay a membership.
What have been your challenges so far?
Pricing was one of the challenges. We had to go by trial and error, and we finally arrived at a comfortable rate that worked for us and our clients.

The other thing is staffing. It is difficult looking for staff, because we needed to build a reputation and track record to hire quality staff. Not many would want to work for a dating agency.

What is your business philosophy?
My husband and I have always had this thing where we want to work on the business and not in the business. We were hiring staff from the start, and took a pay cut ourselves just so we could do that. We needed to be able to see the whole picture. This gave us a lot more time to work on business development and oversee the business as a whole. I can then spend time training the staff and overseeing them, and work on training other matchmakers.

We also need to always keep current, I think. I do not want to be caught being stuck in the past. We need to constantly innovate.

Are you happy?
Yes, it has been a satisfying journey for me. In this business, I get constant feedback on both good and bad matches. I am happy with it because I believe we are helping people. I am invited to a lot of weddings and it feels good to know we had a hand in them. It is a fulfilling sort of business.

Violet Lim
CEO and co-founder, Lunch Actually Pte Ltd

Nature of business: Dating agency and online dating services
Offices: Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong
Total headcount: 25