



COMPANY | [AWARDS](#) | PROGRAMMES | SPONSORS | UP-AND-COMERS | PUBLICITY | CONTACT

[2010 Awards](#) | [2009 Awards](#) | [2008 Awards](#) | [2007 Awards](#) | [2006 Awards](#) | [2005 Awards](#) | [2004 Awards](#) | [Photo Gallery](#) | [Criteria for Candidates](#)



MR NG KEN LIONG

Nominee 2011

Mr Ken Liong has come a long way since his Junior College days where he took an interest in photography. He shares with us his experience in the photography industry and the challenges he had to face to start up his own company to pursue his interest.

Company: PIX ASIA PTE LTD

Address: 40c Hong Kong Street S059769

Website: <http://www.photographers.sg>

Interview with Mr Ng Ken Liong

by **Loh Wee Leong** on **06-Apr-2011**. Student can be reached at weeleong87@hotmail.com

Business Profile:

Pix Asia main business lies in corporate and industrial photography. With a mission to deliver the best end-to-end photography solutions for all global customers, Pix Asia is primed to succeed in the photography industry. Till date, it has served clients from over 15 countries worldwide.

Interviewer's Comments:

Mr Ken Liong is a person who values work life balance. To him, business is not his life and just an aspect of his life. He values his employees and wants to see them grow under his guidance. He hopes that the company will provide a platform for young photographers to chase their dreams. Other than photography, he is also interested in investing and reads regularly to gain the necessary knowledge and improve himself.

1. What is the nature of your business?

We do mainly corporate and industrial photography. Each of which can be segmented into different areas. For example, corporate photography can mean portraits of CEO, lifestyle shoots for editorials, corporate newsletters and annual reports. For industrial photography, we normally take photos for Marine, Oil & Gas, Solar and Aerospace industry. So at different times on the same day, we could be out in a posh penthouse office of a CEO, or sweating it out at sea on a ship. We also do architecture, food and commercial product photography. We are mainly B2B oriented and our corporate clients come from locally and overseas.

2. When and why did you decide to become an entrepreneur / take over your family business? NOTE: If it is not a family business, ask: **Do your parents have their own businesses too? Have they inspired you in one way or another? (Select appropriate question according to the entrepreneur being interviewed.)**

I started doing freelance photography assignments when I was in JC, throughout National Service and during my studies in NTU. The main aim was to earn extra pocket money. In fact when I was in NTU, I was so passionate about shooting that I only attended about 10% of all lectures during my three years in NTU. The bulk of my time was spent on photography and studies took secondary priority. It was not uncommon to see me stumbling into tutorials late with my heavy equipment, tripod and of course no homework. Back then, I was the NTU Photo-Videography Society photography chairman and that is where I got to know my wife who was studying Accountancy then. After I left NTU, I did not immediately start my business. I wanted to make sure two things. First is to have the necessary working experience. Second is to have sufficient savings. So I worked for 7 years in an MNC managing regional country websites and supporting the Marketing Department. While witnessing mismanagement, I became disillusioned with that company and figured that I should create my own company and have more satisfaction at the same time. I actually come from a family background where hardly any entrepreneurial blood exists - my dad and uncles were mostly contented salaried workers. This greatly contrasts with my wife's family background where many uncles ran their own successful businesses despite humble educational backgrounds. It left a strong impression in me to want to join the latter camp.

3. What are your reasons for choosing to do business in this particular industry?



When I first started photography during Junior College (JC), my parents actually refused to support my new hobby. Their rationale was that it was expensive and it was a passing teenage fad, something which I will outgrow and move on to other things. For the first year in photography club, I was the only one without a camera. Finally my parents relented and bought me the cheapest Yashica film camera around. It was a very humble camera compared to all the fanciful cameras that my club mates had. As if to prove something, I used that camera to take a lot of good pictures and eventually won numerous awards over the following years. By the time I considered turning professional in 2007, I already had 14 years of shooting experience under my belt. When it came to university and I needed to pick a course, I chose computer engineering, believing it will give me some life skills, technology wise. No regrets on hindsight. At that point in time, I foresee that I will be able to combine my computer knowledge and photography knowledge. However, I did not foresee that it will synergize and turn into a business. I just had a vague idea that it might just work out. And somehow it did.

4. How did you put together all the resources needed to start your business? For example: getting the start-up capital, hiring staff, doing sales and marketing, advertising, etc.

For the start-up capital, I utilized the 7 years of savings from my full-time MNC job and investment returns. This was deliberately planned. As for hiring staff, we like to pay a more for the right talent because having the right people will bring the company to a higher level. I look out for value in equipment and I try to extract the most value with minimum capital expenditure. I like to joke with my employees that even some hobbyists use better equipment than us. There is no need to spend extravagantly on the latest and greatest camera. Even with the best equipment, if you do not have the skills, the picture will turn out to be mediocre. As far as clients are concerned, they just want to see good pictures. An equipment that had stayed with me for years was the background stand. I bought it 2nd hand from this guy in town who was giving up his hobby. It has worked great for the past 5-6 years. In fact, I am still using it now. It only cost me \$180. I love the return on equity. I think the website helped in attracting new customers, with a good proportion becoming loyal return customers. At the beginning, it was quite a typical journey for any photographer. I would do freelance editorial assignments for a very modest pay. For years, I was helping SIA with their destination launches and other travel photo essays. About 2 years later, they came back to me asking for help in a corporate photo shoot of the new SilkAir cabin uniform. The seeds were planted during that freelance time.

5. What are some interesting stories you have about your first few customers/first few years in business?

There is one very interesting customer. When I first registered my company in 2007, there was this very rich man who called me up on a Saturday afternoon and said he wanted a nice picture of the construction of the MBS casino because he wanted to hang it in his living room. So he arranged special access to rooftops of certain key buildings in the CBD area. However, when we were ready to deliver the picture, he threw a temper and said that he is facing financial difficulties and wanted to cancel the job. I panicked as it was my first big job and I had invested a lot of time and effort into it. I decided to contact his father and explained the situation to him nicely. In the end, his father told me that his son has been like that since young and he wrote me a cheque on the spot. From that incident, I learnt about having proper risk management and should have asked him to sign on the quotation or place a deposit.

6. What are some of the challenges you faced when you first went into business?

I think building up the portfolio was the greatest challenge. At the beginning I was doing a lot of freelance editorial work. That was insufficient. If I wanted to go into industrial, corporate or architecture photography, I will need to show my clients that I will be able to shoot a ship, an airplane or a building. Another challenge is to find good customers; customers who gladly pay on time and will come back to us for more shoots.

7. How did you overcome these challenges? Please share some specific examples of the action you took to overcome the challenges.

For architecture photography, there are some ways to overcome the challenge of not having a seed portfolio. I went around Singapore to take photos of landmark buildings on my own. I will make sure that the shot is just like how I would take professionally for my imaginary client. For industrial photography, it was the same. I hunted around construction sites, ports, etc. As long as you have a portfolio, no matter how basic, you can grow from there like a snowball. There will always be customers who will be sufficiently comfortable just by looking at that portfolio and start giving you some works to do. How we go about finding good customers is do focus more on corporate customers rather than retail customers (not that we don't do any). From experience, it is usually the individual customer who will have more issues with the pricing and the photos. One common phrase is that the customers are always right but I feel that it may not necessary be true. I tend to drop nasty customers rather quickly since the time and effort can be better used to serve another nicer customer.

8. Can you remember your worst day in business or a time when you felt like giving up? What happened that made you feel that way and how did you triumph over it?

There were no defining moments for me but sometimes I do get discouraged or rather frustrated when I meet nasty customers. Some will keep changing their requirements and there will be customers who will deliberately extend the requirements beyond what was agreed and use that as an excuse to delay payment. With any delay in payment, it adds pressure to me, because cashflow is the lifeblood of any business. We now have strict terms in the quotations and we will only do the job if they sign off on the quotation. My worst day was when my bad debt record was broken. We had no bad debts ever since the company was established. In our line, having bad debts is very common especially for those dealing through middlemen, agencies, etc. There was this conman that convinced us to do an urgent 2 hour job for \$350 and he never paid us back. After which, we found out that this conman had been going around cheating numerous photographers, magicians and clowns. Luckily it is just a small immaterial sum but it was still upsetting.

9. When was the moment you realised the business would work and support you?

I realized that it would work when new sales leads were constantly coming in and at the same time, first time customers started turning into repeat customers. That was during the 1st year in 2007, about a year before the global financial crisis.

10. What are some of your proudest business achievements to date? And why are they so important and meaningful to you?

Maybe I can start with what I feel is the most important job I have ever done. During the APEC meeting held in Singapore in 2009, we were engaged by the US State Department and the US Embassy here to be Hillary Clinton's personal photographer during her one week visit here. I had close interaction with her and it was a once in a life time experience. We got to travel together with all her bodyguards and travel inside the vehicle convoy. In fact, we even got to follow her to the Paya Lebar Airbase and managed to see both the AIR Force 1 and AIR Force 2 planes because when Hillary was on her way back, Obama was coming in. So it was mind boggling.

11. How do you differentiate your business from your competitors? Please provide specific examples.

One unique aspect of our business is that we never tender for jobs. This is almost unheard of in the photography industry. Customers come directly to us through word of mouth or by looking at our portfolio. We mainly target the up market segment. That is why even for bread-and-butter events coverage, we only do shoots for premier ministerial events like the APEC meeting. Another interesting difference is that we don't go through middlemen like the marketing, PR or events companies. We deal directly with large international clients from all over the world. Currently, we have served clients from 15 countries mainly across Europe, USA and Australia. This helps in the diversification of our business. Lastly, our photographers are award-winning and highly experienced. All these set us apart from our competitors.

12. What are some business ideas you have implemented that created great results in your business?

I believe the most important thing is to have constant training for the employees. I make sure that all my employees constantly upgrade their skills. Our training here is not so formalized like in big companies. It is more like getting them photography books, videos and equipment whenever they need it. This will help keep them inspired and motivated in what they do. It is also to make them feel supported.

13. Where or who do you get your business ideas from?

Throughout my 7 years working in the MNC, I saw how big companies are managed or mismanaged, and learnt to apply the correct principles to my current business. I read widely and deeply about finance and economics (and some say horticulture) and it has helped me think up ideas as well. My study room at home is actually like a library, filled with hundreds of business books. My wife often jokes that I seem to be studying harder after leaving school.

14. What do you see for your business in the next 5 years, and does it include any plans for expansion?

I believe in organic sustainable growth. From my investment experience, it is never good to expand for the sake of expanding. A company can have huge revenue but still be loss making. It is better to be profitable in a sustainable manner. We may do more social marketing in the future and maybe have partnerships with other photographers with skills in areas that we do not have. Due to globalization, the business cycle is also shortening and getting very volatile. In fact during 2008, I was a bit surprised at the speed of the financial crisis because that was my first time running the business under a very big recession. But fortunately, we kept our overheads low and managed to coast through relatively unscathed. There were a lot of repeat customers who stuck with us even though margins shrunk a lot during the 1.5 years. Of course we are well positioned to ride that kind of cycle because our client base is now very diversified, and our value proposition is attractive.

15. What does entrepreneurship mean to you?

To me it means the freedom to create a legacy and represents my values and skills and most importantly it can provide employment to more people. I do not need to earn a lot of money to be happy nor do I need a corner office. I am more satisfied that I am making a difference to people's life - both customers and employees. Even though we do not do a lot of social enterprise at the moment, I am just as satisfied in making a difference to my employees' life by supporting them in their dreams.

16. What are some entrepreneurship qualities that you have which has helped you come this far?

I think I had an analytical mind from young so I got interested in investments which actually means wanting to know deeply about how businesses work. From investing, I learnt about the common mistakes such as growing too big and too fast, not watching the cash flows and not having enough diversifications. By nature, I am cautious and skeptical with an eye out for "Black Swans". "Black Swans" is a sudden event that surprises you and one that is totally unexpected. I think it is good to have the most comprehensive plans but you still have to be wary of black swans that can change everything in an instant.

17. What would you say are the top three skills needed to be a successful entrepreneur?

First of all you must have a vision and then the passion to see through the plan. Secondly, is to have enough working experience before embarking on this journey. Or find a mentor. By watching and learning, one can sidestep potentially fatal mistakes and shorten the learning curve. Lastly, it is important to do sufficient research on the business plans as well and choosing the correct business partners that share the same values and ethics.

18. What sacrifices have you had to make to be a successful entrepreneur?

First of all, I don't think I am successful yet. I think I can be much better. I guess sacrifices are having less time to do my readings and meet up with old friends. That could also be because I need to look after my kids and not just because of my business. I am very fortunate to have my dad and wife to support me in this venture else the sacrifices will be even more. My wife has a full time job to buffer the business volatility and my Dad retired early to help look after my son during the day.

19. How far are you willing to succeed?

For me, business is only a part of my life. There are other equally important areas like family, health, other passive sources of income (investments), etc. I know of a lot of entrepreneurs who equate their life with their business. I think that is a very dangerous path. For me, I believe in work life balance. You can have all the wealth, but if you wreck your relationships and health during that journey, it is just not worth it. That is one reason why I broke up with my earlier partner who did not care about his relationship with his family and his employees. He is just focused on the making ever more money, as fast as possible. That is not the value that I am comfortable with. If I miss out on all the fun growing years of my two boys, I would have failed as a father and as a person.

20. What is your management style like? Any school of thought?

If there is no major job for the day, I want everyone to go off at 5.30pm sharp. And if there is a shoot tonight, they can come in later next morning. I want my employees to have a work life balance. I come from a MNC that values and practices positive policies regarding this so I understand the importance of it. I am a very task focused person. I do not question employees as long as the task is completed within a reasonable time frame with minimal errors.

21. What are some of the things to motivate and inspires you to be better in this business?

I enjoy seeing the business profits and margin grow, which means I can give employment to more people. My satisfaction also increases when the clientele and testimonials grow from Singapore to serving clients all around the world. I want to leave behind a self running business that can work admirably without me around. Clients should hire Pix Asia as an entity and not just look for Ken Liong. So unlike colorful characters like Sir Richard Branson (Virgin) or Kenny Yap (Qian Hu), I prefer to be disassociated with the business. However, I do not want it to be too big but I want the growth to be organic and sustainable. It is also quite hard if you just do photography and you want to have 50 employees. The local and regional market cannot support it. So if you want to grow bigger, you will have to venture into other complementary areas other than still photography.

22. With the changes in the market today, do you think it has become harder or easier to succeed in business? Why do you say so?

It is definitely harder. I have this career page on my website. Every month there are over 20 people applying for jobs and majority of them come from the developing countries and they are willing to do it for much lesser pay. And regional photographers can conveniently fly in, do a shoot, and fly back on the same day. And also, almost everyone has a DSLR now. So they will be able to do event shoots and wedding shoots. The barriers are falling and so competition is more intense now. But we will not drop our rates because of that. We are confident of our uniqueness and long term strategies.

23. Do you ever regret going into this line?

In fact I am much happier. During my 7 years in MNC, I will drag my feet to work. It wasn't very well managed and I wasn't very happy even though the pay was good and colleagues were great. Being my own boss, I have the flexibility with my own schedule and I own the direction. Furthermore, if I encounter a nasty client, I can choose not to do any further work for him/her. Obviously you cannot do that with a colleague or superior.

24. Can you share some of the more significant events / incidents that affected or shaped your business philosophy and the way you conduct your business? I.e. SARS, new competition or shifts in market behaviour and trends, etc.

I started with another partner but the partner did not share the same values as me. For me, I want a company that treats people with respect. Initially, I needed a partner that is more outgoing and can interact well with clients. I am not that extrovert and more analytical. I am very good with working on the business and growing it. I have changed along the way. I was even more introvert last time. I realized I cannot continue to be like that. To grow the business, I must grow along with it even if it means being more outgoing.