

PUTTING OLD WAYS TO REST

BY MINDY TAN

Jenny Tay, managing director of Direct Funeral Services, is forthright about educating people about advance preparation and systematically professionalising not just the family business, but the entire industry

WALK into an event organised by Direct Funeral Services and no one will fault you for being slightly confused. Tables draped in white linen are surrounded by similarly fitted chairs. In the middle of each table is a small pot of flowers. Off to the corner there are live cooking stations offering a range of local delicacies – laksa, roast duck, popiah. Visitors have access to WiFi, and a photographer or even videographer quietly makes his rounds documenting the occasion.

There is nothing ostentatious about the event. But it will nevertheless raise a few eyebrows, given that it is, after all, a wake.

LOOKING BEYOND THE PLOT

“We’ve been very perplexed: Why is it, that for the last 10 years, the set-up for religious wakes is always the same jarring yellow coloured cloth? Why is it not elegant?” says Jenny Tay, managing director of Direct Funeral Services.

Ms Tay is the second generation towkay of Direct Funeral Services, which might be better known for its colourful founder, Roland Tay, known for helping the poor and families of murder victims by providing pro bono funeral arrangements.

But while she is in the business of death, ask Ms Tay to define her industry and she says, without irony, that hers is squarely in the events space. “Like wedding companies, we are an event company, but it’s for more solemn events. Similarly to how a wedding company deals with wedding events, we deal with a funeral event in the same manner.”

There is nothing flippant in this description. While she was not involved in the business during her growing years, Ms Tay is familiar with the industry. She in fact wanted to become a licensed embalmer when she was 18, but her father convinced her to pursue her studies first. She is well aware that putting the dead to rest is never an easy undertaking.

Instead, Ms Tay, who was previously in advertising and has experience running large-scale events, credits this experience with allowing her to view the whole funeral process from a different angle. “It is an event of sorts with a deeper layer of tradition and religion. I try to see how I can make the event space more beautiful as well as allow my customers the most hospitable experience they can get,” she says.

It is not just about updating the aesthetics. The surprisingly crowded industry – there are about 60 or so funeral service providers in Singapore – is mired in tradition and antiquated practices.

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Since joining the family business in 2013 and subsequently taking over from her father last year, Ms Tay has embarked on the ambitious task of systematically professionalising not just the family business, but the entire industry.

She has, for instance, as assistant secretary at the Association of Funeral Directors, been pushing for players to get their CaseTrust accreditation. CaseTrust is the accreditation arm of the Consumers Association of Singapore (Case), and is Singapore’s de facto standard for companies that wish to demonstrate their commitment to fair trading and transparency to consumers. In addition to their CaseTrust accreditation, Direct Funeral Services is the only company in Singapore that is ISO 9001 certified for funeral services.

“In Singapore, I think there are about four to five companies that have CaseTrust,” says Ms Tay. “We are in the works of trying to ensure that all our committee members have CaseTrust so that it helps to give customers more assurance when they come to our companies.”

Work doesn’t stop there – she intends to take this rallying cry to the wider community. According to Ms Tay, the association has spoken to a few of their members about its interest in leveraging the cost savings and partnerships that could potentially be worked out by applying for the accreditation as an industry.

Says Ms Tay: “When I joined my father’s business, the first thing we wanted to do was professionalise the company. But at the same time because we’re in the association, I think professionalising the industry as a whole brings a very different dimension to the whole industry . . . That’s why we wanted to push for change from an industry level and not just the company level.”

It is a tremendous undertaking given that the industry is not highly regulated. Companies simply need to have the requisite business registration before they are able to operate – there are no official checks into whether they have the facilities required for embalming for instance.

“The fly-by-nights are mainly coordinators – so when they receive a case from the family, they will engage different vendors to help set up everything . . . It’s still a similar way of conducting a funeral. For us, when we have a case, our case manager will go down and attend to the family while we coordinate with our own partners and vendors. The difference is in terms of the standard of service provided and the kind of facilities they use, which may not be entirely appropriate.”

Having the requisite accreditation helps set these companies apart, and it is one reason that Ms Tay is so aggressively pursuing it. “It helps to professionalise the image of our company and it also gives customers a sense of trustworthiness; and when they approach us, they know we are a reliable company to start with. The last thing you want is a bereaving family to worry about whether the company they approach is reliable,” she says.

BACK TO BASICS

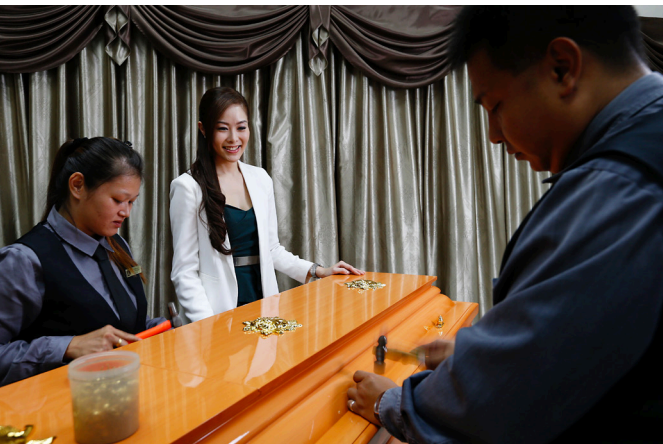
It is not just a paper chase for the company, however. Having accreditation translates into higher standards that the firm and its staff need to adhere to, and training is something that the firm takes seriously.

“When we came in, we saw a problem – the problem is that no one is willing to train. People don’t share their techniques and practices. So (for) all the companies, people do things their own way. Everybody has their own school of thought, and there’s no synergy in the way things are done,” says Ms Tay.

Together with her husband, Darren Cheng, who is the business development director and grief counsellor at Direct Funeral, Ms Tay decided to turn to their Taiwan

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“IT IS AN EVENT OF SORTS WITH A DEEPER LAYER OF TRADITION AND RELIGION. I TRY TO SEE HOW I CAN MAKE THE EVENT SPACE MORE BEAUTIFUL AS WELL AS ALLOW MY CUSTOMERS THE MOST HOSPITABLE EXPERIENCE THEY CAN GET.” – Ms Tay



partners for help and subsequently hired a training and development manager who was previously from one of the largest funeral companies in Taiwan. As part of the pioneer batch, he helped corporatise and ensure that the relevant standard operating procedure (SOP) practices were in place. He was also one of the head trainers in Taiwan, after it began issuing its first funeral director licences in 2014. In Taiwan, those without a licence can still provide funeral services, but cannot identify themselves as a funeral director.

“So he knows exactly how to set SOPs for the company, how to train a group of people who do not know any SOPs, how to set out a series of standards for them to follow and train them. That was a great help for us,” says Ms Tay. “We’re the only company in Singapore to bring in such talent to help us with the whole restructuring of our service standards.”

Staff at Direct Funeral undergo fortnightly training on a variety of training modules varying from service standards to religious setups. “We are very focused on the customer service experience. We make sure they know, at every customer touchpoint, how things need to be done,” says Ms Tay.

The company also sends staff for overseas attachments to learn best practices. In June, two staff members went to Taiwan to shadow a partner firm and bring the best practices back to Singapore. “Telling them – it is very difficult for them to understand. But by putting them there to experience it . . . it’s easier for them to accept and understand why it’s more beneficial to do things a certain way.”

Not that the transition has been without its road bumps. Trying to implement change in a traditional industry, especially change suggested by two young people new to the field, was an uphill struggle. “When we came in, we really wanted to step up and change the way things are run. So we did a lot of research. But as a second generation taking over the business, it’s not advisable to immediately want to change the way things are done,” says Ms Tay.

The first nine months on the job was hence spent familiarising herself with the company’s practices and staff. “There was definitely a lot of resistance – even things like changing the uniform to make it more corporate, that was very difficult also. Everyone was very resistant . . . But now, it’s been three years already, and my father is very very happy about the progression of the company because everyone is very proud of their company. They are proud that Direct Funeral Services is very different from other companies. Our standard is the best.”

ATTAINING NIRVANA

Ask Ms Tay what the game plan for Direct Funeral is, and she says that they want to be the de facto company



DEATH BECOMES HER

Ms Tay is not one to shy away from the topic of death, and is all for educating people about what to expect and how to deal with it. (The coffin is a showpiece and not for sale.)

PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIIN

that people approach in Singapore. But her aspirations for the company lies beyond funeral services. In fact, she hopes to turn Direct Funeral into a hub for all end-of-life planning arrangements.

“We have partners in all areas, like will writing, estate planning . . . so we want to be a hub for the silver age. When they need help, even (if it is) charity, they can approach us and we can assist,” says Ms Tay.

The company has already taken steps to achieve this dream with the establishment of Direct Life Services, which aims to improve the quality of lives of people through education, activities and charitable efforts.

Mr Cheng, who is the lead educator at Direct Life, in September published a children’s book *Where did Grandpa Go?* as part of efforts to open the discussion about death. A second book was launched October, in collaboration with SingCapital. The book, *Last*

Wishes, talks about estate planning and seeks to educate people on the things that they need to bear in mind to prepare for death.

Mr Cheng is also in the midst of talks with the National University of Singapore to provide information for their death and dying module, and subsequently take part in the lectures.

Says Ms Tay: “We’re very big on education. We really think a lot of people in Singapore are not sufficiently educated about death. Whereas in overseas countries, even Asian countries, people are more open. When they are educated, they can prepare in advance. If they are not, they shy away from the topic – then when it happens, they really don’t know how to deal with it.”

She adds: “We don’t want to just be stagnant and just be a funeral company that just does funeral services. We want to do more for the community and the people. That’s the plan.” ■