

More Sense than Dollars

Balancing between costs and design demands deft skill in the interior design, space-planning arena. Embattled economies, changing trends, shrewd customers, vicious competition and of course – a market that needs to be constantly updated are just some of the many hurdles to cross before ideas turn into reality and designs, into wonders. Few design firms have made it to that coveted level of market acceptance and this Report is about one of them.

Twenty years of a single lifetime is a long time to spend in any profession, however lucrative. But then again, had the depths of entrepreneurship been that easy to fathom the business world would have had more leaders than followers. This is a fact.

Since no crusade is about to change the scheme of things, when not pondering upon our poverty of leadership it might be more uplifting to toast the few visionaries we do have and draw inspiration from their indomitable spirit.

Among the many industries that comprise our kaleidoscopic business world is the interior design industry. Anchored as it is to that subjective element we call creativity, we wonder (often aloud) if there are in fact ways and means to sort the professionals from the pretenders. This we must do if we are to entrust the design of our office to people whose work could make or mar the future of our businesses. This is not easy when sifting through countless glossy brochures and an endless stream of increasingly tall claims to achievement.



Standard & Poor's - 1090sm -
Edinburg Tower, HK.



MSC - 970sm -
Marine Tower, Shanghai



Infineon Technologies - 3200sm -
Zhang Jiang, Shanghai

And when economies squeeze budgets it's even more difficult to make that decision. From the industry's point of view, the famed "budgetary constraints" is nothing new. How often do interior designers get carte blanche to spend as much as it takes. So, as rule of thumb they prepare to present a proposal (to every client) that purports to provide more sense than dollars and this for many a design house is the only frontier.

Making a Mark

P L Choi, managing director of Artlink Design Associates Ltd shies from any claim of market dominance or leadership. He's that type. He'd rather blame his firm's success on 'service' one of the founding rocks on which his company's reputation rests and he has the portfolio and client referrals (presumably) to prove it.

Zest notwithstanding, Choi's pet passion is 'credibility' – that elusive trait in a margins driven industry. The sole driver of his vision, this 'focus on credibility' has resulted in an admirable amount of repeat business for Artlink Design.

Even competitors will readily admit that repeat business or referral business is the coveted reward for quality service and market trends well aside the Artlink team has carved a niche out for the Artlink Design brand of professionalism.

Agreed, Artlink Design is in a class apart. But, it too has competitors and some very aggressive ones. The design firm bids for most projects, however small, but so do the competitors. And of course this is an industry like most – you win some, you lose some. But, one suspects that if clients were to list Hong Kong's most reliable and quality-conscious interior design firms, Artlink Design would have little competition. Why? Because the solidly anchored Choi and his team know the market far too well to suspect its intelligence. Artlink has that uncanny knack of striking that balance between what clients want to achieve and what they can afford to. Long years spent amidst the toil of bidding and building has helped build an impressive base of valuable supplier contacts. This helps. And perhaps the single most important of all business tools is – reputation. Known for never over promising, Artlink delivers on time. It approaches every project with a view to converting each new, satisfied client into advertisers and lastly, the company's references are sound.

Budgets Versus Dreams

"It's more than a margins business for some," says Choi. "Since inception (1988) we have remained steadfast on service

rather than merely completion of projects. The onus has been on viewing every potential assignment as a challenge whereby we deliver the best possible solution that exceeds the client's expectations. This slow though sure approach has helped build a unique loyalty, increase our ability to design a varying range of projects and earn repeat business."

Artlink has succeeded in netting business with some of the most discerning multinationals. This is a feat considering the growing competition – all keen on the lucrative Hong Kong pie. Adept at designing for small and large spaces alike, the company's designers bid for most prospective projects selling, design talent, speed, commitment and viability, with enviable zeal.

Attracting a bevy of awards, Artlink has built a remarkable reputation for working on fitted space and bare shell with equal ease. As Terry Finch, director at Artlink's Shanghai office puts it, "every job is a challenge and we view it as a showcase of our firm's capabilities and creativity. Our ethos is

to offer a true 'concept-to-completion' service, enabling our clients to work alongside one point of contact for the duration of their project."

Commenting on market trends she says: "Today, clients want less of the flashy and more of the functional, clean and airy look. They want ergonomic designs that are conducive to changing traffic flows. The trends are very much in favour of 'bright and simple' rather than 'loud and impressive'."

On the market's response toward the recent economic slump Finch notes that these crests and troughs only serve to "toughen up the better amongst us." She adds: "Tough market conditions are part

of the cycle. Clients' tighter budgets mean we have to be flexible enough to deal with the situation and improvise. This presents a challenge for our whole design and marketing teams and makes us more creative."

Credit for success is also due to associate Chester Choi who has been instrumental in guiding Artlink's design team. Contract manager Sandy Ng's expertise on pricing, cost control and profitability remains equally crucial to Artlink's success.

Dealing With Change

Consultancy forms a fair part of responsibility in the interior design field. More precisely, space analysis services. Especially in Hong Kong, we prefer designers who are experienced at working within the confines of small spaces and use design to get the best value from these spaces.

Finch notes that office space is at a premium in Hong

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**Epson - 740sm -
Dawn Building, Shenzhen**



**Greenfields - 360sm -
Prudential Tower, HK**



**POAD - 345sm -
Sino Plaza, HK**

Kong and the onus on designers is to evaluate this space considering factors like working practice, storage requirements, IT implications, employee expectations, furniture, maintenance and safety requirements.

Aside from this Finch says, clients want a designer that can provide that quality reassurance – that single point of responsibility – someone they can work with from start to finish and ensure the smooth completion way past that point of satisfaction.

"It's more than design flair that clients, especially multinational customers, are looking for. Customers want a whole turnkey package with of course design being the large element. They want more of less, of course. This is the eternal challenge. More importantly, they want a designer they can rely on," observes Finch.

This must be true. Many multinationals want all their regional offices to sport either the same theme or a similar look. Naturally, the same designer is the obvious choice. Not if the first experience was not a pleasant one. Artlink Design has won over quite a few big names resulting in work for other regional offices of these companies.

Success Formula

Choi admits that his approach has worked and hence the repeat business and the trust from some of the largest corporate regional and multinational names. "This is a faster moving industry than many give us credit for. Every day the scenario changes with clients from various business sectors and back grounds entering the markets and for equal measure, there are new companies some good and some not, entering the industry," notes Choi.

The battle for market share is an unending quest. Main competing factors are; referrals, completed projects, clients testimonials, portfolio of designers, time-honoured (attested) completions and of course – price.

If you're looking for a magic formula, there is none,


says Choi. "Like most businesses your client can make or mar you. It's as simple as that. Give a client less-than-perfect service and you'll get the less-than-perfect referral. This is especially true in closely connected Hong Kong where everyone knows everyone. Treat every client alike. Big or small – give them the full royal treatment. Treat clients like you would like them to treat you. Today, even the smallest client is being wooed by the largest interior design house.

As a designer if you would like to be judged on merit rather than size, then treat a small client as you would, a large one. In this industry you get back what you dish out."

Building Blocks

Artlink Shanghai recently completed 3,200 sq m. of corporate office space for German semi-conductor company Infineon Technologies and have an additional 3,200 sq m. under construction for the same company in Beijing and Xi'An. Other projects include offices for Fosroc, International SOS, Danisco and Adisseo, among others in Shanghai and an office for Cochlear in Beijing. Artlink's Guangzhou office has completed a project for Unitech in Guangzhou and Wing Hang Bank in Shenzhen. A project for Epson is underway in Shenzhen.

The company's Hong Kong client list has continued to expand with projects completed for Greenfields and Scholastic. The team is working on a showroom and repair centre for Epson and corporate offices for Air New Zealand and Adidas Hong Kong.

Terry Finch oversees the operations in Shanghai and North China, P L Choi looks after Hong Kong and South China. 

For further inquiries please contact Artlink Design Associates Ltd directly. All contacts are available on the company's web page www.artlinkdesign.com.

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