

Canadian executives answer call

Salvation Army and other groups offering new kind of corporate mission

By Laura Severs
Business Edge

Canadian executives – and in some cases, employees – are boldly venturing out of their corner offices and cubicles into areas where few of them have gone before. For them, the bottom line is not just about dollars and cents anymore. It's now about real "corporate responsibility" – travelling to different parts of the world, volunteering their time to fight poverty, promote development and build economic capacity. "Rather than looking to climb the corporate ladder, it's time to use our skills to climb the (social) cause ladder," says Aine Curran.

Curran is president of Curran Events Media Inc., a Mississauga-based communications company that specializes in government and public relations. She's just one of the latest executives ready to leave the boardroom behind – temporarily. Curran will travel to Tanzania this month on a Salvation Army mission, making stops in Rung'unbure, Koleli, Kemange, Tarime, Moshi and Dar es Salaam. She will work on various projects, including a women's economic empowerment centre and HIV/AIDS orphans and vulnerable children programs.

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Happy Chinese New Year



Bayne Stanley, Business Edge

Diversity inspires creative businessman

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20 Questions



Bayne Stanley, Business Edge

Fairchild Group chairman and entrepreneur Thomas Fung likes to take a creative approach to both his media and real estate holdings.

CEO’S fertile imagination produces results

Fairchild Group boss is branching his business empire into new realms

By Monte Stewart
Business Edge

Thomas Fung likes to create things. The chairman and CEO of the Vancouver-based Fairchild Group of companies has built a Chinese-language media firm that operates two national TV stations, six radio stations (three in Toronto, two in Vancouver and one in Calgary), a magazine and an e-commerce firm, which have helped him generate a large part of his estimated net worth of \$400 million.

His fertile imagination has also produced North America’s first Asian shopping mall – the Aberdeen Centre in suburban Richmond – that he completely rebuilt, several retail businesses that are housed within that complex, numerous residential and commercial real estate developments and a movie, the critically acclaimed *Paper Moon Affair* – with another one in the works.

He has also served as an executive producer on Chinese- and English-language films – including the 1978 Hollywood flick *Wild Geese* starring Roger Moore – through a film company that he also launched under the Fairchild name.

He’s also just opened a flying school.

While developing these diverse businesses, Fung has become a champion of diversity as he strives to merge Far Eastern and Western cultures. For his efforts, the Vancouver Board of Trade recently named Thomas Fung as the first recipient of its new “Spirit of Vancouver” award.

Among his other accolades, *Time Magazine* has called him one of the most influential people in Canada.

Fung draws much inspiration from his late father, Fung King Hey, who founded Sun Hung Kai & Co., a real estate and securities firm that grew into the largest of its kind in Asia in the mid-1970s.

1. How did your father start his business from scratch?

“He got the trust of all his friends and his business associates. Then he started to use some common sense and basic instincts. Then he (made) some type of financial investments. It was a long time ago. There wasn’t any kind of trading of stocks . . . There was lots of trading of gold and silver and foreign (currency). And all of his friends trusted him. Companies trusted him. That’s how he was able to (obtain financing) with the bank. That’s why I call my company Fairchild. We were so young and he always told us: ‘In order to be successful in any centre of life,

you have to be fair to your friends and business clients, your wife and family members.’ That’s how we work.”

2. How did your grandparents earn their living?

“I never met my grandparents. I know nothing about them. I just know that my father was a refugee from mainland China to Hong Kong (while it was still under British rule). He moved from mainland China to Hong Kong without a visa. He had no documentation. He was an immigrant without (proper paperwork). He was in the hotel and restaurant business before, and kind of a banking business, in some sort of small financial institution. That’s how he had some basic knowledge before (he started his own business). It was when he was a young boy.”

3. When you were growing up in Hong Kong, what were some of your interests?

“My very early interest was in science. Then, later, I switched over to art – radio production and movie production . . . My father wanted me to do some business studies and to help out with the (family) business. That’s why I switched over.”

4. Why did you emigrate to Canada?

“In 1967, I came with my parents (and brother and three sisters). That was a time when there was a lot of

trouble in China. (My father felt) Canada – Vancouver – might be the best place to grow up. There were, for one week, riots. It was so intense in Hong Kong. There were bombs littering in the street. That was when the (Communists) were taking over Hong Kong.”

5. How did you adjust to moving here from Hong Kong?

“Well, to be frank, for the first year or so, I was quite homesick. There was no Chinese TV station or radio station or newspapers. That eventually led me to do something like Aberdeen Centre and to own and operate radio stations and TV stations and magazines. Our mission is to help the newcomers and also the old-time immigrants to understand local society – the rules of the game – and to assimilate into the community at large.”

6. How did you end up going to New York University?

“That was the time our family had the largest stake in Merrill Lynch. I was trading in there, as a Merrill Lynch investor, on Wall Street. I thought I might as well get my education.”

7. What is your outlook for the ethnic media market in Alberta and Ontario?

“Naturally, the B.C. and Ontario markets would be the largest among other provinces. Still, we are growing quite healthily in Calgary. Our TV broadcasts nationally, so we see subscribers going up steadily over the years. In B.C. and Calgary, we have about 70,000. For the rest (of Canada), we have probably about another 100,000.”

8. What adversity have you faced in your career?

“That’s a long story. Definitely, every project and business venture has ups and downs and some excitement. It’s hard to pinpoint any particular one. Whatever comes, I think I can manage to work it out – to resolve most of the problems. I had some very unhappy moments, but I can resolve most of the (personal) problems (and) business problems in a different way.”

9. How did you become so interested in media?

“I see myself as a creative person. In media and all the design, I put a lot of effort into the creative part as well, creating the programs and . . . a lot of things, (including) the material for some of our deejays for programs. The second reason for going into the media is the business potential. About 14 or 15 years ago, when I started (working in) media in Canada, that was a time when I saw more and more immigrants will be coming here from Asia – particularly from China, not just from Hong Kong in the early days, but more from Taiwan and from mainland China. That’s the market for us.”

10. You’ve told someone that you can accomplish in one day what others can accomplish in a week. How do you accomplish so much in one day?

“In meetings, we don’t chat. We just (are) direct and very precise on the problems or the target that we want to discuss. I can, more or less, make a very quick decision.”

11. What does your Vancouver Board of Trade award mean to you?

“That came as a surprise. I kept asking myself: What did I do to deserve that honour? Lying in the bed with the flu, I thought about what I had done in the last 20 years and, maybe, the things that I did contributed to the integration and assimilation of new immigrants into mainstream society.”

12. Why have you set out to merge Eastern and Western cultures?

“We both can learn and benefit from knowing more about the other side. Both are more in harmony and lifestyle and also (together) in business development”

13. What is your approach to real estate investment?

“We are not a huge player in the property market. We’re so diversified. We’ve been building shopping malls, residential apartments, single-families, commercial (buildings), office buildings and so forth. Whenever an opportunity arises and it makes sense, I just go into it.”

14. What kind of retail experimenting do you do in your stores?

“In the existing Aberdeen Centre, once 50 per cent is leased out, I basically can service the bank debts. Anything that’s over and above, I can use it to bring in new tenants or new products that we source ourselves. If it’s successful, we move on and we open more. We can franchise out. We can branch out, because the mall itself draws traffic from both Western and Asian clientele. So this is a very good testing ground for products or services. I think it’s something new. At the moment, we’re going into Phase 3 of Aberdeen Centre. In this phase, we have a new rapid-transit station (which is part of the Canada Line from the airport to downtown Vancouver) attached right to the mall.”

15. When you demolished the old Aberdeen Centre and built a new, larger version, why didn’t you renew any of the old tenants’ leases?

“It was a gap of three years before we built a new one. During that three years, the tenants couldn’t just sit there doing nothing, so they had to find a place somewhere to do business. Once they lock into a lease, they can’t move out that easily.”

16. How do your leases differ from conventional leases?

“Not now. They used to be different. When we first started, maybe 17 years ago, I tried to bring in special tenants. We had to be a partner with them and give them the option to take over when the business survives and prospers. That’s how all the tenants came in in the first place. When I first started up, nobody wanted to come in. For the first six months, there was not a response from any interested parties to come in as a tenant. I put my own stores in. I joint-ventured with the operators. After a few months, they saw this was doing well and they had the option to take me over – 95 per cent of them (have taken over).”

17. How are your companies going to celebrate Chinese New Year?

“We have an annual dinner. That’s it.”

18. Why did you decide to set up your flying school?

“Actually, that is also a viable business project. The airplanes we brought in . . . are relatively new Boeing planes compared to the other competitors. I would say all of the planes they use are over 20 or 35 years old. That’s why we attracted a lot of instructors and students right away. It makes business sense.”

19. Some people say writing is a cathartic experience. What is the experience of writing like for you?

“It’s good. I do write a lot. I used to write for newspapers. I had my own column and I do write a bit to help me express myself. A publisher asked me to write about how I deal with different problems in Canada in business. So I’m putting every bit of memory (on paper) and pasting it together. If everything goes smoothly, by October or November of this year, we’ll have another new movie project starting. It’s a love story about a young couple with some action – not violence. That’s an English movie as well. Basically, I’m writing (the book) in English and Chinese. But I need some people to help me polish up the final wording before we can publish. It won’t be within 10 years. I have to accumulate everything.”

20. If you weren’t running the Fairchild Group anymore, what would you do?

“I don’t mind having a third party to take over the business. I have my son – he’s working at Morgan Stanley – but I don’t push him to take the family business on his own. It’s up to him. It’s wide open. People who I know can run the business even better than myself, I would love to have them join me or to take over. For the time being, I don’t have that worry. I don’t have that plan in life – not until one day when I think I should retire or slow down.”

(Monte Stewart can be reached at monte@businessedge.ca)