Giving philanthropy a reality cheque

Benson Tan and Tabatha Maitland help firms make more informed decisions about charity, reports TEH SHI NING

THEY believed that the best way to "do something meaningful" was not to run off to join the Peace Corps but to direct companies to act responsibly and use their money to make a real difference.

Starting their own consultancy to do just that, however, turned out to be more challenging than Benson Tan, 30, and Tabatha Maitland, 28, had imagined.

The original idea was simple, "We always read reports of this company giving a million dollars to charity, that company giving a million dollars to charity. But what happens to that money?" The critical moment is the photo-taking and one-time report -- that's it," says Mr Tan.

So the initial aim of Global Causeways (GC), which the duo founded in 2009, was to assess corporate philanthropy projects more than effectively and efficiently than the non-governmental organisations typically could.

But then we realised companies here are not ready for that. They were happy to sign cheques, but were very stressed when told that the cheques they were signing were actually not doing any good," says Ma Maitland.

In the part of the business that grew instead was consultancy and training: educating companies on how to exercise authentic corporate social responsibility.

After all, a photo of a cheque being handed over by a star player is worth little more.

CSR has to be conceptual for more than just charity, says Mr Tan, who has been looking at the environmental and human rights records of companies since his early days as an undergraduate and acts on that information as a consumer too.

How a company's operations impact the environment, how it manages its supply chain, how it engages its employees and how its philanthropy is done all add up to CSR, says Mr Tan. The bulk of GC's business today comes from helping workshops and providing recommendations on how companies can engage employees better to see CSR efforts.

Global Causeways now turns a decent profit and its founders are getting paid -- which was not the case for its first two years.

As fresh social science graduates from the Singapore Management University in 2009, when the economy was battered by the global financial crisis, the opportunity costs of starting a business seemed fairly low. But it was still a weighty decision.

Mr Maitland recalls how, when the banks gave a year's reprieve on student loan repayments, many of their peers threw as much of their monthly incomes towards paying off the loans as possible. "For me and I, it was just, we need to pay these loans for now. It's frightening to think of the real world in your problem and not someone else's," he says.

The entire venture was funded by their own savings. They had decided against applying for grants as many of these available came with strings attached, such as a seat on the company's board and a say in affairs. "We knew we had to find our feet and required more flexibility," says Mr Tan.

"Also we had a lot of free advice from the SME facility and a very supportive environment. The only thing that was missing was the money. And I've never believed that's a reason not to do something," says Ms Maitland.

The early days proved tough also because of the nature of the business. "The consultancy business is very unique. It's about how you get people to cooperate with you, how you're playing golf with Bill Gates who you usually work in the background, so it can seem a little bit out of order without that network was a major challenge," says Ms Maitland.

As a business service, GC's revenue was also very much constrained by how much the firm of the two of them were able to work. "That in itself, no matter how much we may think that it's possible, we simply cannot work 24/7. You get to a point where you can't take on more business," she says.

Draining was a problem too, Mr Tan says cautiously, "It was a very unshapely student. And so as long as you are working outside of business, the disorganisation between work and personal life is not really obvious," he says.

Remaining optimistic took effort too. "After the 15th "no" for the day, you really ask yourself, do you still want to call the next five numbers?" he asks of any cold calls they had to make when starting out.

What always helps, they say, is to visit Laos to see the villagers who are benefiting from projects GC has helped its clients to roll out so far.

After all, it was a backpacking trip to Laos back in 2006 that first set the stage for their current partnership. "The idea was to go through a few countries, but we loved Laos so much that we spent the whole trip there," says Ms Maitland.

They befriended locals and visited the backwaters' projects -- villages they have since returned to several times. "These connections have since formed a network that they have been able to tap on when suggesting development projects in the region in interested clients," she says.

That first trip also helped shape their respective roles in Global Causeways. "I'm the one taking the trip. I want to hold a school, help these children," says Mr Tan.

"I turn away," he says. "They're in sufficient, and I want to bring more efficient ways of doing things in," says Ms Maitland. "In the work they do today, Mr Tan takes a more active role in planning and monitoring the impact of development interventions on the ground, while Ms Maitland makes sure the project is suited to each client.

"We can't ask an assessment book publishing company to come in to a medical intervention. If it doesn't work with what they're doing, they'll just do something else," says Mr Maitland.

They are now working with a football company to help farmers in Laos improve their agricultural yield. "We think it makes sense for a football-related company to go into an agricultural project, as opposed to education, which is not their core business," Mr Tan says.

Medium-sized multinational companies still make up the bulk of GC's customer base, but local firms are on their radar this year.

"We're hoping to roll out introductory talks and seminars to the associations level. People are willing to give, but they don't really understand the need to be strategic about it. They feel to give good," says Ms Maitland. Already, Ms Maitland says, more companies are bringing in larger CSR investments.