She makes having dream weddings easier

By TEH SHI NING

“Taking the plunge into self-employment was a crucial first step to starting my own business,” says 26-year-old Jeslyn Ang.

Entrepreneurial daring is not immediately evident in the soft-spoken founder of online portal Wedding Tweets. But after giving up the security of a full-time salaried job in marketing and consumer research for the more fluid business of financial planning, launching her own business was less of a leap.

Without the plunge into being self-employed with the financial planning firm, I would have never dreamt of setting up my own business. It’s not an easy step, to have a full-time job and then move into starting your own business. To be without pay – it’s a huge emotional step to take,” she says.

Having taken that first step, she soon found in herself a strong “drive and motivation to want to succeed.” “When I was doing just financial planning, I felt it wasn’t enough for me. I really wanted to be doing more,” the business graduate from Singapore Management University (SMU) says.

Opportunity knocked when a longtime friend started a blog on wedding planning in Singapore. “She was planning her own wedding, and she felt the current websites were not able to help adequately in the planning,” Jeslyn says.

Many of the local sites her friend encountered were forum-based and user-generated with outdated links, making online research tedious. So she began compiling her own material in a blog.

“When I saw it, I thought – there’s a lot of potential for this to be a business,” Jeslyn said. Wedding Tweets is now a joint venture between the two with Jeslyn holding a larger equity stake and managing the marketing of the portal while her friend generates content.

“We want to provide wedding couples with useful resources, all the things they might need – bands they may want, invitations, a checklist, garter ideas, checklists. And we wanted to offer it to them free,” she says.

These resources, disseminated via weekly newsletters and a Facebook page which has earned close to 13,000 “Likes”, serve to generate traffic to the site, which runs on advertising revenue. Traffic to the site has risen 50-60 per cent every month since March, after they launched their first online marketing campaign: a Facebook contest.

The advertising model really depends on how attractive it is for vendors across the gamut of businesses in Singapore’s booming wedding industry to pay subscription fees for a listing on Wedding Tweets’ directory.

That listing offers features such as the opportunity for photographers to showcase their portfolios, for hotels and restaurants to upload wedding packages, and a promotions tab for easy access to advertise discounts.

The owners are happy with the response so far, having received enquiries from a “number of big names” among wedding studios, videographers and photographers.

Today, Jeslyn effectively juggles two businesses. Thus is made easier by the fact that she has now settled into her role in the financial planning business, which is her boyfriend’s. Also an entrepreneur, he runs another general insurance business too.

Even so, “it’s kind of like two full-time jobs,” Jeslyn says. Both allow her flexibility to schedule her own time, but “without passion and discipline, it’s very hard to move forward”, she says.

A typical day at work for her involves switching back and forth between both businesses: Mornings are usually reserved for work on the website, fielding enquiries and emails. Lunchtime slots are filled with appointments with financial planning clients, followed by sales meetings in the afternoon with various wedding vendors. When evening comes, she often does her financial planner meetings, before heading home to work on Wedding Tweets.

Not that she’s complaining; it helps to keep income steady. “I’d always wanted to do business, but I didn’t come from a very privileged background where, say, my parents could give me seed funding to start off with,” she says.

Her business failed to qualify for government grants for young entrepreneurs – which has meant having to scale back on ambitious plans and progressing at a slower-than-desired pace.

Although overheads for an online business are relatively low, both Jeslyn and her partner lacked advanced IT savvy to design the site with the requisite features. “That was our main obstacle – our vision was that the site had to be very advanced, but we didn’t have the technical knowledge and the money to give us that head start as we were putting in our own money,” Jeslyn says. She has had to hire IT expertise on a project basis so far but intends to hire full-time staff soon.

With most of the 100 vendors on their directory so far still on an introductory plan, Jeslyn expects to break even only early next year, when their paying contracts kick in and the site is fully monetised.

She is also fully aware that the industry she has chosen is a competitive one with established players. Singaporebrides.com, for instance, has a 10-year edge over a fledgling site like hers.

But that does not faze her much – there is room for a portal like Wedding Tweets as they have a niche target audience in mind, Jeslyn says.

“The main motivation for them to come to us is to create a unique wedding, but without leaving it entirely to wedding planners. They’d want to have a part to play too,” she says.

Wedding Tweets is not targeted at those looking for budget weddings; it is aiming its content and directory listings at weddings in the mid to premium price range. It has also attempted to differentiate its product by holding events every two months – such as workshops or contests online – to keep visitors connected.

Among the benefits of starting Wedding Tweets is knowing all the best deals in town. “I’ve become an unofficial wedding planner. I just like to do it and can help my friends for free with theirs,” says Jeslyn, who has about five weddings under her belt now.

Given her line of business, she is frequently asked what her dream wedding is. “Honestly, I haven’t really thought of what my dream wedding would be. I don’t have one in mind. I just like weddings, to see people’s weddings,” she says.

But running Wedding Tweets has been another sort of dream fulfilled. “I never thought I could run my own business, but in my heart I wished I could. So it’s kind of like a dream come true,” she says.