ToTT: a place for the family – and more

By JOSHUA TAN

MERITOCRACY rules in today’s competitive corporate world, and the traditional view that family businesses would naturally be run by one’s children is not true, says Grace Tan, marketing manager of Sia Huat Pte Ltd as well as store manager of Tools Of The Trade Store (ToTT).

Sia Huat, a distributor of food-service products and equipment, is a business that was started by her grandfather in 1959 and subsequently managed by her father.

"My father has always said he doesn’t want to pass on the business just for the sake of passing it on to family; he wants us to prove ourselves as well," she said.

Furthermore, as part of a large extended family with six aunts and uncles, Ms Tan says there are many cousins who would be equally competent in running the business, given the opportunity.

And this is perceived positively, as "the company is large enough that it is necessary to have more brains to help make things work. We have different areas of specialty that will complement each other," she said.

"For example, my sister is quite specialised in sourcing products, and doing corporate sales. I am handling marketing and managing ToTT. My brother has been studying operations management in Singapore Management University (SMU). So if he decides to join the company, perhaps he could go towards managing our logistics."

Upon graduating from the University of San Francisco in 2002, Ms Tan was almost immediately re-called back to Singapore to work at Sia Huat.

"My Dad called me and said, ‘you’re coming back because I’m not going to support you in the US anymore. I need you to join the company right now’.

However, after working for two-and-a-half years, she returned to the University of San Francisco to pursue her MBA in marketing. She married an American and continued to live in San Francisco, working as associate director of MBA admissions at the University of San Francisco.

Ms Tan summarily relates an agreement she made with her husband: that "I’ll move to the US for him, and he’ll move to Asia for me."

So in March 2009 her husband secured a job in Singapore and they relocated back to Singapore – and she rejoined Sia Huat.

Interestingly, 2009 was a year of new beginnings for Sia Huat, spent largely on preparing for a new project, ToTT – a store that sells renowned cookware brands, as well as rents cooking studios for various purposes.

"It’s a concept that my father had been thinking about for five years, and he decided to open it because he had done a lot of careful analysis. There were a lot more cooking classes and cooking shows in the market, so he felt it was a good time to launch a concept like this," said Ms Tan.

It was the opportune timing that enabled her to play an essential role in this new venture, along with her sister Lynette and a few other key management personnel.

Sia Huat opened ToTT in October 2010, and after a year-and-a-half, Ms Tan steered up to assume the role of store manager, where she continues to "handle strategic business development and marketing for the store – like planning sales schedules, strategic partnerships with banks and other partners; and also, as the brand manager, making sure that the brand is represented correctly on different avenues."

As part of a business family, Ms Tan feels that her father had a significant influence in pushing her entry into Sia Huat.

In the past, "every time we went out, we would be looking at plates, glasses and tableware. He’s a workaholic, so he’s always talking about work at home, and always applies life lessons relating to work" in his interaction with his children.

So even while there was no real obligation to continue their father’s legacy, "eventually, all of us (she and her siblings) went towards studying business... so I guess, indirectly or subtly, there was a gentle push in that direction," said Ms Tan.

Nonetheless, she is quick to emphasise that at Sia Huat, equal opportunity based on merit is always afforded to all who wish to make a contribution in their own capacity. This invitation is not exclusive to Ms Tan’s siblings, but also to all the cousins of her generation, and even non-family members. It is this all-embracing nature of the company that truly defines it.