Anthony Chong is the first to acknowledge that his phone never leaves his side— even when he’s on holiday. “We have to be contactable around the clock; there’s no alternative,” he says.

Due to the live nature of the business, the group managing director of Kingsmen Exhibits, a wholly owned subsidiary of Kingsmen Creatives Ltd, admits he “can never totally switch off.” It’s a sacrifice that comes with the job, managing the leading Singapore-based communication, design, and production group’s theme parks, museums, exhibitions, and events operations—a remit that covers everything from live motor racing to luxury product launches and beyond.

Managing an events company comes with its benefits, and in talking to The CEO Magazine, it’s obvious Anthony wouldn’t have it any other way. After 36 years in the business, he still gets as much buzz from the successful completion of a project—and the smile of a satisfied client—as he did on his first day on the job.

The CEO Magazine: You joined Kingsmen Creatives Ltd in 1981 as a visual merchandiser, and today you’re group managing director of its subsidiary Kingsmen Exhibits. How have you risen through the company? What have been the biggest highlights?

Anthony: From operations to sales to project management, I’ve held a variety of roles at Kingsmen Creatives Ltd. Today, I am group managing director of Kingsmen Exhibits, and I also sit on the Board of Directors of Kingsmen Creatives Ltd.
One of the highlights was when I was transferred to Bangkok in 1984 to establish the company’s presence in Thailand. It was only our second office outside of Singapore; the first was Malaysia, which opened in 1982. Working in Bangkok was quite difficult because of the language barriers and the different culture, but I mastered the local tongue and we were able to really develop the business there.

Along the way, we have also been involved in a number of projects which really stand out. One of them was Universal Studios in Singapore, which opened seven years ago, and also the inaugural Youth Olympic Games, which was held in Singapore in 2010. We also played a very significant role in all the hospitality and events surrounding the first Formula One night race at the Singapore Grand Prix in 2008. Most recently, we were accorded the ‘Exceptional Achievement Award’ by the Singapore Tourism Board for being named ‘Best Business Event Service Provider’ for three consecutive years – 2014, 2015, 2016. It coincided with our fortieth anniversary celebrations last year, so it was a great recognition of all we have achieved since the Group was established in 1976.

You’ve been with the Group for 36 years. What keeps you motivated?

The desire to see my people succeed, the team succeed, and the company succeed and maintain its position as one of the leaders in our industry in the various disciplines we specialise in. I am actually very excited to see the extent to which we have expanded our service offerings to advantage our clients. We started out with display works, before expanding into exhibitions and retail interiors, followed by museums and theme parks, and now corporate marketing. It’s a dynamic industry, and that is something that motivates me. No project is the same and every day is different. It really is a job that never ever ceases to surprise.

What have been some of the biggest challenges you’ve faced?

The biggest challenge was being able to deliver close to S$100 million worth of themed attractions in Universal Studios Singapore within a short time frame. Normally, it would take around five years to build a theme park on this scale, but we had half of that time; two and a half years at most. As it was essentially Singapore’s first major theme park, and, as you can appreciate, resources were scarce, we had to draw in support from all over the world – with the limited amount of time, the financial strain, the technical calculations, the project management issues all as constraints. I can’t think of anything that has been more challenging.

Can you elaborate further on your role in Universal Studios Singapore?

We were commissioned to design – from the concept provided by Universal Studios, of course – and build a significant part of the base park of Universal Studios Singapore. Since the park’s opening, our involvement has been ongoing. We have helped design and build Shrek’s House and Romeo Drive, for example. And our reach has extended beyond Singapore: we are currently in the process of finishing up a new attraction at Universal Studios Japan.

Along with Universal Studios Singapore, you may have felt the Kingsmen creative touch in the Enchanted Garden at Changi Airport, under the Christmas Lights on Great Street or in the Cloud Forest at Gardens by the Bay.

What do you believe gives Kingsmen its point of difference?

With 19 offices around the world and a team of more than 1,800 creative professionals, Kingsmen is one of the only companies in the world that is able to serve its clients on a truly global scale. We offer end-to-end solutions for temporary and permanent exhibitions, theme parks and attractions, as well as retail and corporate interiors. Of course, there are companies in the industry that specialise in some of these disciplines, but there aren’t many that can deliver quality and service across all our disciplines and at such an international level. That is what sets us apart from the rest. With each project, we don’t simply build; we research, we undertake design development, and from there we provide the management, fabrication and the after-sales service. It is what we consider the complete end-to-end solution.

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“We have to continue to innovate to keep up with the changing trends, to be flexible and adapt.”

How has the industry changed?
Technological advancements and globalisation have had an enormous impact on our industry. Everything is now available in an instant, and, with that, clients’ needs have evolved and they expect us to be able to produce results very quickly. But technology also means that visitors to an exhibition now expect more engagement, more experiential interaction, rather than just attending an event to browse the products and discuss business. But, although event organisers have experimented with virtual exhibitions and the like, it is something that never really took off. People still prefer face-to-face interaction when conducting business, so exhibitions – by which I mean the actual, physical exhibition space and product – still remain relevant. While the industry has evolved, some needs still remain relevant.

Are there any trends that we should look out for? What are some of the disruptions that you predict?
The past decade has seen an influx of bigger and newer attractions in the region. Singapore has definitely raised its profile as a MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conference and Exhibitions) destination choice with many top-notch convention and exhibition venues and facilities. This is a trend that looks set to continue; I think bigger and better trade shows will be held across Asia in the next decade and beyond. Technology has been the biggest change and is also responsible for the biggest disruption. Augmented reality and virtual reality are making their way into trade shows and events, with clients asking for immersive and interactive exhibitions and experiences. We have to continue to innovate to keep up with the changing trends, to be flexible and to adapt to our clients’ requests and requirements.

How important is innovation?
The digital domain is probably the most important aspect of our business. We have made significant investments in software and programs that enable our people to manage the project and manage their accounts more efficiently. Our teams have also adopted relative applications, including social media, to improve communication. Internally, we also have a very good enterprise resource program system for up-to-date financial reporting.

On the hardware front, we use CNC machines to support our production needs. We will continue to invest in technology to enable us to be more efficient.

How do you ensure you deliver the best customer experience?
Our people are trained to communicate with our clients frequently, to pay very close attention to their needs, and to go the extra mile. That’s our culture: to ensure that our clients’ experience is of utmost importance. Their projects must be a success. After all, our clients’ success is our success, so after-sales service is an important part of ensuring that our clients are supported even after their project is completed. More than 70 per cent of our clients are repeat clients.

The nature of your work must come with enormous pressure. Yes [laughs]. It’s the name of the game. With enormous pressure and enormous disruptions, you have to be flexible and adapt to our clients’ needs and to keep up with the changing trends, to continue to innovate and to change. But, although event organisers have experimented with virtual exhibitions and the like, it is something that never really took off. People still prefer face-to-face interaction when conducting business, so exhibitions – by which I mean the actual, physical exhibition space and product – still remain relevant. While the industry has evolved, some needs still remain relevant.

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Mediatechnic Solutions Pte. Ltd
F: +65 6284 5434
Email: info@mediatech-eng.com
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- BCA BIM Award (Project Category) - Gold Plus in 2015/2016
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- Ranked 5th in Enterprise 50 Award 2013
- BCA Construction Productivity Award 2013 - Advocates (Merit)
- SME Growth Excellence Recognition Award 2010

2 Kaki Bukit View #05-00
Kaki Bukit Techpark II
Singapore 419942
F: 6748 8633
E: admin@dle.com.sg
W: www.dle.com.sg
The first question we ask in any interview is: “Are you able to handle stress and pressure?” Deadlines are part of our daily reality. The client has invested millions for the event to open on that date, so we have to deliver. Whatever it takes.

What do you identify as the X factors that make an event a success?
When the clients don’t see any flaws. When the clients’ clients have a very good experience, an experience that captures their attention and leaves them with an impression even after the event is over.

People should talk about it. That to me is a successful event. From an operational view, it’s minimal distractions.

What are your current areas of focus for growing the business?
At this moment, the theme park and the entertainment segments are growing quite strongly in Asia, so we are placing more emphasis on this area, and putting a little more effort into developing resources regionally.

But we will also continue to focus on our core business, which is exhibitions and events. The growth for Kingsmen Exhibits, I would say, is in the theme parks and attractions industry.

Where do you draw inspiration from?
All over! It could be at home; it could be in a shopping mall or at the airport. You just have to keep looking out. Everything could be turned into opportunities to be creative, so we just have to keep our eyes open and ears on the ground, always.

What’s the best decision you ever made?
I would say the decision to branch out into the theme park space 12 years ago. I was sceptical at first. As mentioned, our initial interests were in window displays before expanding into exhibitions and retail, and I wasn’t convinced that theme parks would be a growth area for us. We had no idea that there were plans being developed for the emergence of theme parks in Singapore, but I decided to go to the US anyway and take a look at what was happening there for inspiration.

This was very fortuitous, as Universal Studios Singapore was announced shortly after and other theme parks in the region have followed.

“Over the years, our business relationship with Kingsmen has evolved into a partnership. The company’s requirements and expectations are clearly communicated to us, which in turn afford us the confidence to suggest myriad service offerings for different needs.” – Luke Kwan, Managing Director, Shuttle Cargo Services (S) Pte Ltd

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