

Bringing corporate experience to the small business

BY **Kathleen Tan**

Entrepreneur coach, business marketing consultant, web show host, blogger, author and motivational speaker — these are the many hats that Whitney Keyes wears to work everyday.

However, if there is any role that she is most passionate about, it would be anything related to entrepreneurship — be it revitalising ailing businesses, giving guidance to start-ups or establishing her own businesses.

Born into a family of entrepreneurs — her parents were both professors and artists who painted and sold their artwork — Keyes says her passion for small businesses comes naturally. “The understanding of how business can be infused in all aspects of my life was ingrained in my family value system,” says the 42-year-old American during an interview on March 17.

Keyes was in Kuala Lumpur to conduct a series of workshops on “Empowering Women through Entrepreneurship” from March 18 to 20. The programme was organised by the United States Embassy and Warisan Global.

A broadcast journalism and public relations graduate from Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, Keyes managed the family’s retail art gallery before working for the city’s business district assistance programme to help revitalise small neighbourhood districts.

In 1997, Keyes joined Microsoft’s marketing communications team to produce the company’s first corporate social responsibility (CSR) report. Microsoft was active in CSR, but was not promoting it so Keyes was tasked with

identifying and compiling the company’s CSR initiatives worldwide into physical and online reports.

As part of the corporate communications team, Keyes briefed founder Bill Gates and CEO Steve Ballmer for media interviews and ongoing issues related to products, consumers and partners.

So what was it like working with Bill Gates? “Incredible and challenging!” she laughs, flashing her megawatt smile.

Keyes left after eight years at Microsoft as she missed making an immediate impact on people’s lives.

“In a small business, if I share ideas with someone, they act on them and I can see the results within an hour — that’s very powerful to me, and that was something that I was missing,” she says.

Using her corporate experience, she started Whitney Keyes Productions in 2005. She advises small businesses and large corporations on entrepreneurship and marketing.

“I’m a big believer in learning and borrowing ideas from the big companies because they have an incredible amount of resources,” she says.

Basic business principles in large corporations are applicable to smaller businesses, she says. “For example, Microsoft may have a 20-page business plan but one page is fine for a small business,” she says.

To publicise a small business, Keyes says: “You only have a few seconds to grab the me-

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dia’s attention so have a small press release or an email pitch.”

Keyes advises budding entrepreneurs to talk to others who are in the same boat. “In the US, it’s common to treat someone to a coffee or tea and pick his or her brains — an informational interview.”

“A successful entrepreneur must wear at least three hats — technician, business manager and innovator”, she says, citing the book, *The E-Myth* by Michael E Gerber.

Prioritising is vital in managing one’s time, she says, speaking from her own experience. “Know what you are working towards and which things in life will help you move in that direction.”

Curiosity to keep learning from others is a key trait for any entrepreneur. “My friends tease me that I’m a walking Rolodex. Time is limited so if I can text someone or call someone for that information, that’s one way of being resourceful,” she says.