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A Breath of Fresh Air

Having made her name in marketing, Joanne Ooi has turned her not inconsiderable strength of character to the challenge of solving Hong Kong's air pollution. Ashford Pritchard speaks to a woman on a mission.

Hong Kong's environmental NGO culture is, let's be frank, a little staid. From the business suits of the industry bodies to the bureaucrats of the full time non-profit organisations, there's a certain feeling of ennui with how things are done in the city. Joanne Ooi, the former Creative Director of Shanghai Tang and Chief Marketing Officer for local biotech firm Filligent, does not quite fit the mould. "I don't bring any NGO baggage with me, which is a huge boon. NGO's don't touch people's hot buttons. That's my job – I'm a consumer marketing expert."

Grassroots

So how did a high-flying communications whiz end up leading a small team in a neat but tiny office in an old Sai Ying Pun building, launching a campaign to motivate and educate Hong Kong residents to do more about the quality of the air that we breathe? "My own son has been affected. He's 11 and since he was seven he's had some sort of chronic recurring cough because of the air pollution, especially in the winter months when it's really bad." Ooi explains. "In January 2009 I went to a Civic Exchange conference, called The Air We Breathe and was struck by the high quality of the people who attended. I assumed that there would be some fantastic online resource that would address the question that people were asking, which is essentially 'how does it affect my health?' I did a little bit of research and found there was nothing that addressed the everyday concerns, and I thought, Hong Kong needs something like this."

Advised to contact Christine Lo, head of Civic Exchange by friend Professor Tony Hadley, Chair Professor in Community Medicine at Hong Kong University and a leading expert on air quality, Ooi found herself taking on the challenge of taking on the public messaging side. She began working on the issue full time late last year and now, just over one year after attending the conference, she finds herself helming one of the biggest NGO public health campaigns Hong Kong has ever seen. The situation, she explains, is grave. "The air is three times worse than New York, 2.7 times

worse than London, 1.7 times worse than Singapore and 1.3 times worse than Tokyo. Yet the governments air quality standards haven't been revised for 20 years, they are based on really old research." According to research conducted by Hong Kong based scientists, air pollution contributes to 1,115 avoidable deaths per year, over 81,000 hospital days, and HK\$231,713,000 avoidable costs.

Through the Smokescreen

However, despite what is in effect a public health crisis, there is still a basic understanding of air pollution both within the government and in the public sphere. Ooi says, "Sometimes the government says the majority of air pollution is from China. I want to make a very important point: the pollution which harms people the most is roadside emissions because they are hitting people in the face. Roadside pollution is far worse than the same tonnage being released 60 meters up in the air from the top of a smokestack on Lantau island or in Guangdong. What should we really worry about? It's when you go out on the street and are breathing in gigantic spumes of smoke from the excessive number of empty buses out there at face level on the sidewalk."

The Challenge

If there is going to be a change, explains Ooi, "the main driver has got to be the [Hong Kong government's] Air Quality Objectives. It is like any kind of policy, you've got to have an official target – that's how government goes back to businesses and says "we have a new standard in place, now you've got to go and do something about it." It all starts with the objectives themselves." Once these are in place, the government can use them to grab the low hanging fruit, to drive change within the two key sectors affecting air quality: transportation and shipping.

"The government already has a subsidy in place to enable replacement of pre-Euro 1 and pre-Euro class trucks and buses. But it had a really bad rate of uptake from the transport sector. It's







Air pollution in Hong Kong contributes to 1,115 avoidable deaths per year.

been considered a big failure, and the reason for this is primarily because the amount of the subsidy was too small. Now a new subsidy of HK\$560 mil for pre-Euro 2 class vehicles has been launched, but really it's a question of getting the amount of the subsidy right," Ooi explains. Another major issue is shipping. "Ships are one of the biggest contributors of sulfur dioxide in Hong Kong, period. It's important for Hong Kong to have green harbour measures. For example, to mandate the use of ultra-low sulfur diesel when they come into Hong Kong waters."

Engagement

Hong Kong Clean Air Network is currently collecting signatures for a petition which it hopes will motivate the government to finally tackle air pollution. That alone will not be enough. "We all know that in Hong Kong business leads the government by the nose," says Ooi with characteristic bluntness. Therefore engaging industry is one of her key challenges, and it is in this

guise that she will address the facility management community at the IFMA Integrate conference in June this year. "There are a few messages that I have to share" she says. "The first is that the community is going to reward greener operation and sustainable practices. People should use it

as an integral part of their brand value. We want business and government to bridge the gap in communication. Businesses need to communicate that they will acquiesce and be fine with the government pushing them to become greener. They don't necessarily want to be the first to stick out their neck, but if the government proposes something they'll be onboard."

"Businesses need to communicate that they will acquiesce and be fine with the government pushing them to become greener."

Other cities such as London have managed to turn around their air pollution problems, and their examples offer hope that a solution can be found if people pressure government and businesses to step up. "You need to have political will to really make a change," she notes. Another hot issue which Ooi has just encountered is that of indoor air quality (IAQ). Ironically, the Hong Kong CAN's office has its own IAQ issues following its recent fit-out. It has really driven home the point for Ooi. "There's an ignorance of the toxicity of one's own environment. Another part of it is the sense of utter civic helplessness. However, the MTR XRL process made a difference, the Soko island petition where they got 27,000 signatures made a difference. The government does care about public opinion."

Ooi admits that a bizarre combination of roles has brought her to her current position. Her connections and experience has meant that she can rely on the support of some of the industry leaders, such as Glenn Frommer at the MTR, Link REIT CEO Ian Robins and Swire Pacific Group's head of sustainability, as well as her numerous media connections. At the end of the day, she knows that in order to succeed in public engagement, as well as business, you have to wholly dedicate yourself to the endeavor. As we wrap up her interview, she is already tapping on her keyboard and checking her blackberry for messages. After all, the campaign has just begun. When it comes to being a sustainable champion, "You really have to live and breathe it." 

Joanne Ooi is CEO of NGO the Hong Kong Clean Air Network. She will speak at the IFMA Integrate 2010 conference on 2 June at the Hong Kong Convention and exhibition centre (ifma.org.hk/integrate2010).

Sign the petition and learn more about air quality in Hong Kong at hongkongcan.org.



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Find out more about participating restaurants at <http://www.hongkongcan.org/eng/act/consumer-sign-up-campaign/> and sign up online at www.hongkongcan.org.

