

Entrepreneur interview: Affif Ziaudeen, CEO of Chope

Posted on Fri, Oct 04 2013



Arrif Ziaudeen

Singaporean

Founder and CEO of online restaurant reservation internet company Chope

EX: How did you start out?

AZ: Food, technology and business are three things I spend 80% of my life talking about, so it was natural that I would end up starting something that involved all three - an online restaurant reservations company.

What were you doing before?

I studied law and worked in finance and consulting before starting Chope. It's true what Steve Jobs famously said about connecting the dots backwards - I now apply all my previous experience at Chope when I'm reading contracts, structuring investments or assessing our strategy.

Ok, so how did Chope really come about?

I had been sitting on the idea for two years before starting Chope. The theory was simple: people book airplanes, cinemas and hotels online, so why not restaurants? It's so obvious that in five years people will go online for everything, so the question was not whether it was a good idea - it was whether I could pull it off.

Why the name Chope?

"Chope" is a uniquely Singaporean slang for reserving. It started from the weird practice of using tissues to "book"

seats at hawker centres, but nowadays refers to any reservation. It's a great, fun brand, but credit goes to my friend Andrew for the suggestion - I don't know how he knew it though, as he's Canadian!

Are you enjoying your job?

Tech startups sound glamorous, but I can confirm that they're not. Besides the occasional flattering article (thanks EX mag), it's really no different than setting up a car dealership or real estate agency - most of your time is spent doing things like selling, invoicing, accounts, etc. So make sure it's an industry you love.

Any advice you wished someone had told you when you first started?

In two years, I've made tons of mistakes. Some say the important thing is to learn; I think it's more to persevere. You don't really learn much from a bad decision, I keep making them! On average I do think I make more good decisions, but the bad ones still hurt. That's why running a company is not for everyone.

How did you handle that then?

Having a strong support network was critical in the first year. My girlfriend, family, friends, contacts and investors all played a part in keeping my dream alive, and I'm forever grateful to them. The lifestyle is still tough today, but the worst part was really that first year.

The Chope team is very important for us. The team is made of foodies who truly care deeply about eating - we have constant debates about a dish or a new restaurant. We carefully curate our clients so that eating at a Chope restaurant guarantees a type of experience. It comes through in the brand: fun, passionate, dedicated.

We have to ask, how did your friends and family react when you said you wanted to start a business?

Singapore is a difficult place to be taken seriously as an internet entrepreneur. When I quit my job to start Chope, well-meaning friends asked me, "But what are you going to do full time?". Then it became "How's your little app thing going?". Then after we announced our \$3 million Series B, my neighbour tweeted, "It's pathetic that people call Chope 'innovation'".

What are your future plans for Chope?

One of my current challenges is expanding Chope into Hong Kong. It's comfortable in Singapore, but investors rightfully demand regional growth. Of course, Asia is so diverse and fragmented so we have to learn a very different market early on - as soon as we learnt to walk, we needed to run.

The theory was simple: people book airplanes, cinemas and hotels online, so why not restaurants?

Any last words?

Chope exist in part to make life easier for expats who might have difficulty when calling restaurants. Singapore is a city of many different languages and accents, so we make that process easy and quick. Turns out convenience is something that transcends language barriers.