



From Entrepreneur To A Multinational



GolinHarris

*Interview with
Anne Forrest— Managing Director
Golin/Harris International Limited*

Anne Forrest, the Managing Director of Golin Harris in Hong Kong has visions. Unlike many of us, she can see into the future, a clear picture of her objective in mind, whether it's her business or her personal life in question. But even more remarkably, she can turn that vision into reality.

This gift for looking into the future led her to set up Forrest International in 1993, a corporate communications and public relations consultancy that specializes in managing a company's reputation with its primary investors. She knew where she, personally, wanted to be in seven or eight years, and that Forrest International was her ticket there. Yet she wasn't entirely sure she had the right formula for a lasting business in Asia. So, with her company at the tender age of just 18 months, and with a staff of only five, Forrest took the unusual step of seeking help.

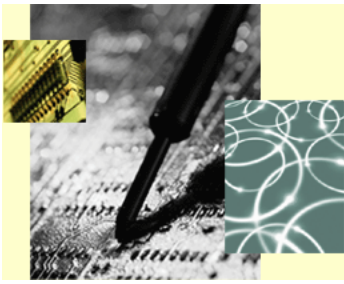
That help came in the form of Strategic Thinking Group, an international consultancy that guides companies through the development of their corporate strategy. While many companies set out on a long-term strategic planning process when the company is already in trouble or needs to make dramatic changes, Forrest saw early on that she needed to set goals for her young company, and that simply looking for growth to ensure a positive cashflow wasn't enough.

"When we started out, we were growing rapidly and facing so many opportunities in terms of areas of service, and areas of the region. It was just mind-boggling when we looked at the opportunities throughout Asia," says Forrest. "We were also facing questions such as what size do we want to be? How do we want to operate? And where? What services should we offer? What types of skills do we need?"

"I wanted someone who could force me ~ and the rest of the staff ~ to think about these issues strategically in terms of what the market was going to be, what our needs were and where our strengths were," says Forrest. "I believe any chief executive can benefit from having someone 'hold up a mirror' so they can see themselves and their company as they really are at that point in time," she says.

As a small company with limited human and financial resources, "We could have lost a lot of time and money running down wrong alleys chasing 'opportunities' had we not taken time to take stock," says Forrest. In fact, what she learned right away was that her personal vision for the company wasn't enough to inspire her staff. By the end of her strategy sessions with Strategic Thinking Group, Forrest International had a plan that all her staff could buy into. Not only that, all future staff that came on board were brought into the plan, taking it on as their own.

"I knew we needed to have a clear perspective way out into the future if we were going to develop a strong business," says Forrest. "And that's just what happened." Within six months of the first strategic thinking session, Forrest International doubled its business ~ with the same five people. "At the time, we would never have dreamed it would be possible," says Forrest. "But the strategic thinking focused our business decisions, helped us get over some short-term hurdles that were preventing us from moving forward and opened new doors." Twelve months later, the company had grown to 13 staff and was set to open its second office in the region.



Forrest says that her company's clients also benefited from Forrest International going through the strategic thinking process. "Our clients undergo annual financial planning and most also develop a three- to five-year strategic plan," she says. "Having been involved in our own strategic plan and annual budget, the staff all gained a better understanding of our clients' business management processes," she says. "The process gave us insight into how our clients think and how they plan long term. In some cases, it even helped us identify a need for our clients to undergo a strategic thinking process, and several of them have also turned to the Strategic Thinking Group."

She adds that understanding a client's strategy makes communicating with its shareholders much easier. "It is very difficult for a company to build an excellent corporate reputation or overall position in the marketplace if they themselves don't know where they are going and cannot articulate a clear strategy and vision," says Forrest. "Working with the Strategic Thinking Group, we can help them present their strategic direction to employees and investors."

"Thinking strategically and planning ahead are so much a part of my own personal philosophy," says Forrest. "The Strategic Thinking Group's process made sense to me," she says, adding that: "The greatest result to come out of our strategic thinking process was that we all agreed on a strategy for the next seven years and were all committed to that particular vision." That vision helped them grow over the seven-year period into a prominent public relations firm with four offices across the region and more than 70 people. Clients include such heavyweights as Hong Kong-listed VTech, Jardines and the Asian operations of multinationals such as Kimberly-Clark and Marriott.

But the even more remarkable thing is that the company stayed on target and met the goals of the plan it developed in those early strategy sessions. Part of its plan was that at the end of seven years the company would find an investor that could help it continue to grow. "As part of the plan that we developed in 1994, we knew that in order to fund our expansion we would have to find a venture capitalist or be purchased by an international firm," says Forrest. Other than being set back a year by the Asian economic crisis, "basically we were right on track," she says.

Forrest entertained five offers before settling on US public relations firm Golin/Harris. Prospective purchasers were impressed by Forrest International's ability to set a strategy and see it through to meet its targets. "We had offers from five public relations firms to buy us," says Forrest, "because one of the things that was most impressive to them was that we were very clear in our strategy and were able to show that we could develop a plan that was seven years long and be almost on target." This put Forrest in an enviable position - she could pick and choose among her company's potential suitors.

"When I sat down and did my wish list for the company [that was to buy us], I listed criteria that I wanted to see in a deal," says Forrest. "First, before the money, was fit and culture. One main part to that was, did they believe in Asia? We so strongly believe in Asia, we wanted to be sure that a company would not just buy us to run their US stuff through us. We wanted a company that would say, 'we also believe in Asia, we will fund you to go out and acquire or build high-end operations like yours in Asia.'"

Golin/Harris fit the bill, and in June 2000 it purchased Forrest International. Of Golin/Harris, Forrest says: "They are truly committed to building a global brand and have allowed us to continue to develop our strategy and our way of operating." Not only that, becoming part of a global company "gives us greater opportunities for career development and greater access to ideas," she says.

Now Forrest finds herself at the helm of the Asian operations of a multinational, with a mandate to grow and the funding to see it through. And that's just what she had in mind. These days, when Forrest goes out and gives talks to entrepreneurs about the value of developing a strategy, she says she frequently hears the excuse that they don't have time. She says: "I don't know how they have time to do anything else."