



**DEBT-FREE:**

Dr Seamus Phan (right) started three businesses within the past decade without taking up loans - except for the \$5,800 that he had to pay using his credit card for a laser printer he needed for his first venture.

BY TEO HWEE NAK

THIS entrepreneur does not believe in borrowing money.

So he paid \$130,000 cash in full for his Housing Board flat.

Dr Seamus Phan, 38, lives out this philosophy because of an unforgettable lesson he learnt.

He was a 20something yuppie who wanted it all - and he ended up rolling in debt.

He would max out his credit card every month as he went clubbing, indulged in branded goods and dined at classy restaurants.

He even used one credit card to pay the bills of another. In two years, he chalked up a whopping \$60,000 debt.

"That was a rude wake-up call," Dr Phan recalled.

When he came to his senses, he conscientiously worked to clear everything in one year.

From then on, he swore off debts.

Now, Dr Phan lives in a four-room flat in Jurong with his wife, a marketing support manager, even though he can well afford to service a loan for a private condominium.

He does not own a car.

The best part is, he has set up three businesses and one is

becoming a successful international firm.

They were all started in the past decade without taking up loans.

The only exception was his first venture, a marketing communications firm. He bought a \$5,800 laser printer with his credit card.

Dr Phan now runs KnowledgeLabs News Center, an independent news and research bureau that also provides keynote speeches and custom training programmes to corporate clients.

His clients are spread across the region, and include Hong Kong's Civil Service Training Institute, the Hong Kong government's training branch.

He commands between US\$2,000 (#3,526) to US\$5,000 as a keynote speaker, but did not want to say how much he charges for his articles.

Recently, Dr Phan and his company was selected by Business Owners Idea Cafe to be profiled on its website at [www.businessownersideacafe.com](http://www.businessownersideacafe.com). (see report at right.)

Dr Phan said, "I stand by my philosophy of not borrowing money because I believe that when you're stuck in that mode, it's very difficult to pull yourself

out."

"It's always better to save enough to start a business with no loans. This way, you don't have a very hefty overhead to begin with."

**LOW-CAPITAL VENTURES**

The new knowledge-based economy, which Singapore is heading towards, is perfect for low-capital ventures such as his, Dr Phan said.

"Bio-tech, life sciences, software development... all these fields need not require loans," he said.

Dr Phan failed his A levels, but went on to get a degree in marketing, a Masters of Science in IT and Distance Education, and a PhD in Business through distance learning.

He is a champion of going the "free agent" way, even though he was once a corporate creature. Previously, he had worked for high-profile companies such as Ernst & Young, Price Waterhouse, Seagate Technology and Citibank.

He said he made the decision to go it alone when he got tired of dealing with management as a marketing manager of a local



computer firm.

So he started his own marketing communications agency, and merged it three years later with another company he co-founded, McGallen & Bolden Associates, now an international publicity and training consultancy.

He left the company last year to start his present business, hiring only one employee and working with a small pool of freelancers.

Being his own boss, Dr Phan can choose whether to work from home or from the office he shares with McGallen & Bolden.

He revels in the freedom he has: "I can turn down assignments, and when I feel I need to rest, I can take a break. In fact, with more time to reflect and think, I feel I have become a better consultant."

**PROFILED BY US WEBSITE**

THE Business Owners Idea Cafe is a popular online resource base for small business owners to network and find ideas.

The US website, which was set up in 1995, targets business owners of US companies with 20 or fewer employees.

It has been lauded by The Wall Street Journal and BusinessWeek Online for its success.

Ms Francie Ward, CEO of Idea Cafe, told The New Paper that Dr Phan is among a select group of businesses profiled at Idea Cafe each year.

She said, "The businesses we select to profile are the ones which embody the essence of independence, hard work and a positive attitude."

"We were impressed that Dr Phan had co-founded a successful international consulting firm; then in 2001 decided to pursue a more independent path by starting KnowledgeLabs News Center."