

CAREER TIPS

A world full of surprises and adventures?

ENCATC spoke with Albert Chen from Surprise Lab., a company that designs experiences by combing through different entertainment to enrich participants' experience, such as theatre performance, environment communication, catering design, interactive design, storytelling. Surprise Lab.'s goal is to encourage people to use their five senses to feel every simple fragment in a well-organised experience that it provides to extend their awareness of real life, and inspire people to think creatively.



ENCATC: What is the story behind Surprise Lab.? Why did you want to start that company?

Albert Chen: I and my partner studied in London for a master's degree. He stayed in London during 2012-2013 and I finished my degree in 2015. We both had wonderful experiences when we were in London. There were a lot of great projects that came out during my time in London, such as *The Chambers of Flavour* by Gingerline, *Alcoholic Architecture* by Bompas & Parr, and also the life-changing project – *Dismaland* by Banksy. It was a time of immersive experiences and food design. In these years, I also did a lot of traveling with my classmates and paid visits to their hometowns around Europe. We cooked and dined like locals, did things that were unconventional, cool, and unforgettable. I simply just turned into a why-not-give-it-a-try person. The life experience I gained broadened my horizon, which truly inspired me to take these experiences back to my home country, Taiwan.

This led me to the creation of Surprise Lab., which is an experience design company that produces experience-oriented projects. We combine different entertainment factors to enrich participants' experiences, such as theatre performance, environment communication, catering design, interactive design, storytelling, and so on. We want to encourage people to use their five senses to feel every simple fragment in a well-organised experience that we provide to extend their awareness of real life.

ENCATC: What have been some recent innovative projects you have worked on that you are most proud of?

Albert Chen: For the first two years, we focused on food design-oriented projects. For example, we launched a *Dining in the Dark* project that put the audience in a 120 minutes dining experience in a



pitch-black environment. Despite the original Dining in the Dark around the world that emphasises the empathy of visually impaired people, we make it into an entertainment experience focusing on exploring the different ways to taste food. Furthermore, we developed a solo dining experience - *Table for ONE*, bringing a getaway moment for the guests in this rapidly changing city. The whole *Table for ONE* experience is about enjoying being alone, listening to their inner voice, discovering joy in their 90 minutes phone prohibited dining experience, and having a chance to recover from their bad feelings and move on.

After working for two years, we were seen as a pioneer of the "Experience Industry" in Taiwan. We figured that the timing is right to combine different elements into our projects to not only raise the participants' numbers, but also increase the initial investment to make projects well-rounded and level up our design. In 2019, Surprise Lab. collaborated with the hotel industry, incorporating cocktails, performance, and immersive theatre, which resulted in introducing a new project, *The Great Topsy* (微醺大飯店). The 90 minute journey took 24 visitors into a hotel environment we had created and paid a visit to each of the actors who played the hotel patrons. The actors offered snacks and cocktails while they shared stories about their persona, leading the audience to reflect the stories on themselves. Over eight months, this project attracted 15,000 visitors and became the longest-running repertory production in Taiwan.

In 2020, we introduced *Club Tomorrow* (明日俱樂部), which is a reality game show with its own theme, creating an immersive experience that engages all five senses, including meals, drinks, and performances. We rented a 17,791.6 square foot

space and transformed it into a sci-fi, futuristic and cyberpunk world constructed by a super-AI named Emily. Each performance welcomes 60 players, who are divided into five different groups. After experiencing the story of "Yesterday" the teams have to work together to win the fight and winners will be welcomed to this world's "Tomorrow". Losers will be removed from the game. The performance has attracted 6,000 players within three months since it was launched. However, the project has been put on pause due to COVID-19.



ENCATC: Where do you get your inspiration from?

Albert Chen: The projects we create are drawn from our personal experiences or things that affect us personally.

The idea of *The Great Topsy* arose from the creator's personal story. It portrayed the stories of some passers-by's sweet memories that we carry with us, but for some reason, we don't want to lose contact with that person and become trapped in a predicament created by ourselves. At the end of this immersive performance, the audience walks out of the hotel, which is a scene we created and asked them to make an imaginary phone call to that particular person that came into their mind during the performance. We noticed that 40% of the audience left the venue with tears. The core of the story triggered raw emotions deep inside the audience.

The *Club Tomorrow* production was developed between August and December 2019 during the Hong Kong protests. The anxiety and depression prompted us to think deeper about the world we live in. We witness different forms of expression, e.g. the Lennon Wall in Hong Kong that documented peoples' hopes and encouragement. This urged us to consider if we could create a project that can allow participants to feel that tomorrow, where we can still make a difference and where we still have hope.

ENCATC: How are your projects different from traditional cultural events?

Albert Chen: Experience is at the core of Surprise Lab's projects. We hope to deliver that through a series of processes, flows, and mechanisms. Entertainment is another important factor – how to grasp and communicate the plot, thematic experience, and world view; how to be fun and engaging; how to provide a holistic immersive experience, and to be able to deliver the intended

message lying underneath the core experience.

For me, in comparison with traditional cultural events that focus on certain ceremonial events, historical connotations, or beliefs, our projects are intended simply to entertain the participants with a strong core emotional delivery.

ENCATC: How do you build the relationship with the audience? How are you working on engaging new audiences?

Albert Chen: Surprise Lab. has a strong marketing communications team that creates effective and successful attention for the show. Often, when we are in the process of creating a new project, we start with creating a fictional character who would act as a greeter and introduce the scene to the audience at

the beginning of the show, inviting them to participate in our story.

For instance, in *The Great Topsy*, we introduced a butler who was responsible for managing the hotel to the audience: Mr. Topsy. Every event and point of contact was orchestrated through Mr. Topsy's narrative. He communicated and built a relationship with the audience, creating a long-lasting influence even after the show ended. Visitor's met him in online to offline realms, including our

landing page, purchasing a ticket, following Mr. Topsy's to the hotel and made an imaginary phone call on the day of the performance, and lastly, asking for feedback in a follow-up email from Mr. Topsy days after the performance. Mr. Topsy was the narrator and the voice of the performance who advocates and promotes the show to our potential customers, instead of deploying the traditional marketing tactics on building customer relationships. After the performance ended, we discovered former participants shared their feelings and thoughts in a post about the show and hashtagged #Mr. Topsy (#微醺管家).





The Great Topsy

As for *Club Tomorrow*, we created a character, super-AI Emily, who is disappointed in humanity and thus has launched a series of personality tests. Through researching and analysing online communities on social media, we identified that many people are attracted to interactive personality tests and social experiments, hence the creation of Emily to act as a medium to engage with our audience. In addition to the virtual world, we also created an opportunity for Emily to intervene with the real world. Once on April Fool's Day, Emily appeared at a restaurant right in the centre of the city, attracted 300+ players to engage in an alternate reality game (ARG).

These 'characters' are created to engage with the audience, and these different content strategies attract different target audiences, including age group and interest, our audience base is expanding as new projects roll out

ENCATC: Can you give us some background into your educational and professional experience that has led to where you are today leading Surprise Lab.?

Albert Chen: I studied Ocean Engineering in college and have an engineering background, followed by a masters in Entrepreneurship Management. I've always enjoyed dancing and I was an active member of a pop-dance club in high school and college. My interest in film and photography led to me being involved in a group of 60 students filming a ten-

episode musical series in college. It was a self-produced series with a group of amateur filmmakers, that included scriptwriting, filming, directing, acting, and music. This experience led to a series of film and video production, doing music videos, advertising, and even a movie created in 2014. As a person, I am a well-rounded and open-minded person, who has been exposed to different backgrounds, cultures, and cross-disciplinary activities. All these experiences and characteristics are reflected in my work in the Surprise Lab.

ENCATC: What skills or personal attributes do you think you have that have helped you to run your company?

Albert Chen: Likeability and stubbornness. I once dreamed of becoming a comedian. I am willing to be the joker, peacemaker, mediator, or leader of the group - as a glue that binds various elements together. I enjoy connecting people with diverse backgrounds and creating a space where they can work together and mediate their conflicts. I would also say I'm also quite stubborn. Sometimes I wish to create a scene, which after careful evaluation I'm confident that I am capable of realising. It is very difficult to convince me to do otherwise. I will do whatever it takes to make it happen. I guess I am very persistent as well.

ENCATC: What do you wish you had known before starting the company?

Albert Chen: I am grateful that I am surrounded by partners who guide, accompany, and help me learn from hardships and experiences throughout this journey. They motivated me to go to London for unique and enriching experiences that motivated me to create Surprise Lab. By knowing what I wished I had known, or the mistakes I could've avoided, before starting the company - could have not made me the person I am today. I enjoy the challenge and continue to grow as we continue to live.

ENCATC: What have been the most difficult challenges you have encountered? How have you been able to overcome them?

Albert Chen: It has been quite difficult to get the market to understand the value of intangibles. Customers spend more money on tangible things, such as the food, scene props, facilities, etc. and we are oftentimes being criticized on that. The intangibles, like experiences, feelings, memories might be seen as a non-pertinent value of the show.

What we intend to sell is these intangible experiences. We still have a long way to penetrate this 'product' to the market in Taiwan.

I think the hardest part was to start from zero and communicate the concept to the market that does not put a price tag on experience. It is intangible and very difficult to rebrand or resell. We want to keep the surprise for the customers with tickets and be secretive about the experience. We only release a little information, like a teaser which gives a sneak peek into the experience and leaves the rest to the audience's imagination. However, trying to sell this concept has left us spending quite a lot of energy to communicate with our customers. For instance, selling the concept of *Dining in the Dark* was extremely difficult for those who are sceptical about the culinary adventure. Sometimes we do feel frustrated by criticisms, especially from those who have not even personally seen or experienced any of the performances.

In time, the audiences have come to understand what we are promoting - that experiences have a price tag. We have a group of returning customers who had bought tickets to our first shows, and who were vital to get the word around about us. Next thing we knew, the media started promoting immersive experiences, and the market began recognising intangible, value-driven experiences.

ENCATC: How did you go about getting start-up funds and how did you use them to get your company up and running?

Albert Chen: I asked Yeh to be my business partner, whom I worked with on a couple of creative projects throughout my teenage years, and who was a friend

of mine since high school. The second key person was a senior in my family whom I grew up with and who had given me advice on my projects when I was in college. I created a ten-year project for Surprise Lab. and pitched the idea to them. Our pilot project was *Dining in the Dark*. The start-up funds for this were limited, but as the set design was close to none it didn't need a large fund to launch. We wanted to do a test run to try out the potential of this market. The plan was to see if the return on investment balances and if it starts to make a profit within the first six months, it shows that there is a market demand in Taiwan and then we can continue to move on to other projects. If that would have failed, Yeh and I would have started to look for a job elsewhere. And it was a success which made us move on from one project to another, including *Dining in the Dark*, *Table for ONE*, *The Great Topsy* and *Club Tomorrow*. We are planning to launch another two completely new immersive experience projects in the upcoming summer of 2020. One is to build a playground in the centre of the city to give a whole new approach to relaxation and the other is to merchandise an experience that a person can have at home.

ENCATC: What advice would you give to students or early career professionals looking to start their own creative business or project?

Albert Chen: First, advance yourself by accumulating practical experiences! You may hear many people say that you should have some work experiences before starting your own business, and I believe this is true. Soft skills such as how to operate a business, communicate effectively, and engage with stakeholders – these cannot be replaced by technical knowledge or the creativity of one's mind.



Our company grew from a small, four-person team to thirty employees, during which we have restructured the organisation thrice. When the team is small, communication is simple, roles and responsibilities are clear as long as everyone participates in the meetings. To keep people on the same page was quite effortless. However, with the expansion of the team group meetings were more difficult to follow. If you have prior work experiences in a well-structured business corporation, you will learn how a business functions, which helps you choose tactics for your organisation.

Besides taking away the experience from on-the-job training, work experience is also an opportunity to expand your professional network, develop your communication skills, and learn about building a company culture. These experiences lay the foundations for entrepreneurship that supports you in developing effective solutions to your problems.

ENCATC: What keeps you motivated and going?

Albert Chen: I have a vision, which is a projection of my life in London onto Taipei, where I live now. In this vision, we are creating a lively city where edgy space design companies promote their vision and effort in every corner of the city. People will see adventures everywhere, people are open-minded, willing to try new things, could experience the beauty of this world, and support the creatives who brought these innovative and fun experiences to life. On the other hand, we hope that people acknowledge that the world is imperfect and are willing to take on the role as a 'surprise maker' to spread positivity. I believe that we can transform this vision into reality, and that's where we're heading towards.



About Surprise Lab.

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