

DIDAC LEE ENTREPRENEUR

"Problem' is Chinese for 'opportunity'"

While he can claim to be the first Chinese Catalan, Didac Lee's real claim to fame is an 11-year business career that started at the age of 21 and which last summer earned him a prize from Cambridge University for the creation of anti-spam service Spamina

NEIL STOKES

● Would you describe yourself as a business man or a techie?

I don't consider myself to be a technician, though people see my exotic look and jump to the conclusion that I'm a computer whizz. For me, technology is simply a tool for achieving certain objectives; to work better, or remotely, to sell more, etc. Unlike for a techie, technology itself is not the objective.

How do you feel about the media interest in Spamina and the Cambridge prize?

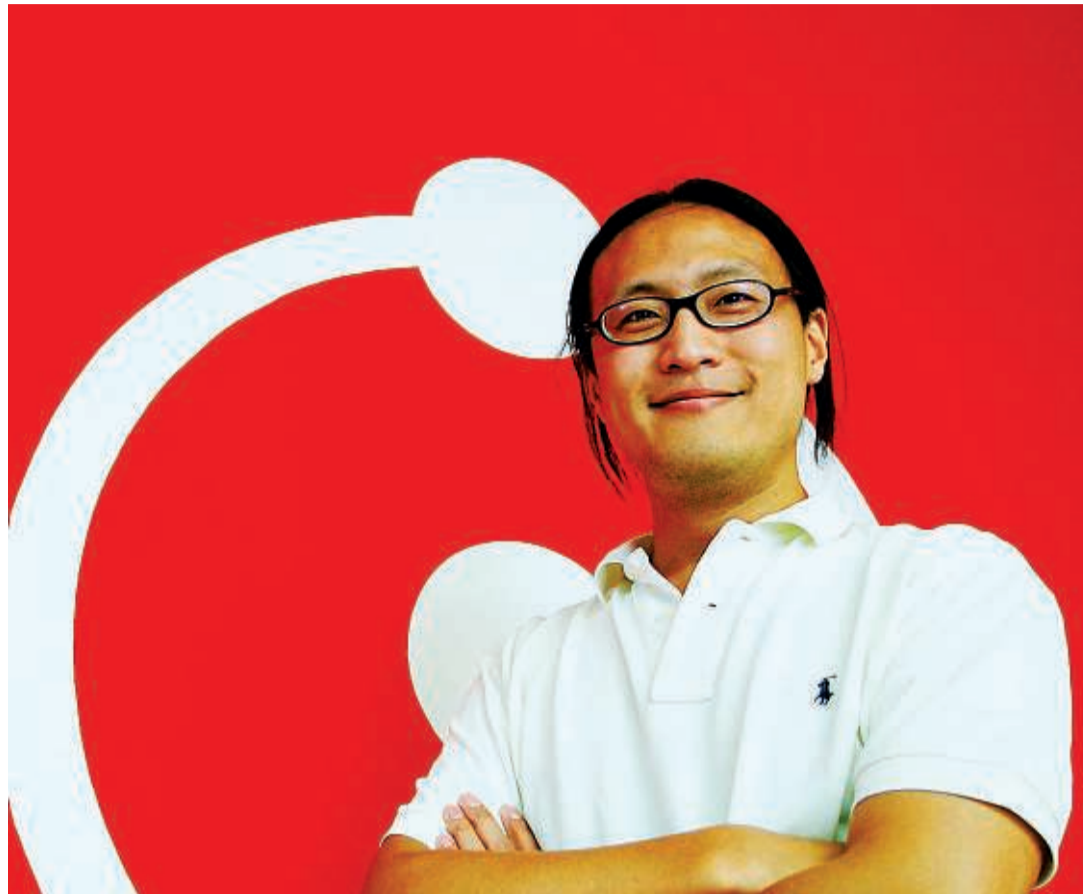
We've come up with a really good product this year. We won a prize that took a lot of hard work. But there's more to it than that. I understand if people know about me because of Spamina but behind that is a career that goes back eleven years not just six months.

What turned you into a businessman 11 years ago?

I was studying computer engineering at university and I saw that getting a decent job would mean moving to Barcelona and Madrid because job opportunities in Girona would be extremely limited. At this time I came across the internet and decided to set up an internet company. Basically, it was a case of "if there are no jobs for me here, I'll create my own".

How did you do that?

At the age of 21 I set up a business providing internet access. This meant quitting university and taking out a personal loan against the wishes of my parents. When I told them I wanted to drop out, you can imagine they weren't too happy. Their opposition, meant I couldn't count on their help. But I went ahead and set up an ISP business, Intercom Girona, providing access to the internet. I didn't have a penny to my name and had to live in



Figueres-born Lee has so far set up four companies and has two more in the pipeline / EUDALD PICAS

the office storeroom.

But how did Intercom Girona lead to Spamina?

We were providing internet access and then people said they wanted somewhere to host their websites, so we started hosting websites. Then people began saying they needed someone to design their website, so we started designing websites. Then people wanted to promote their websites so we set up an online marketing agency. After that, people said

In Cambridge I was identified as a "serial entrepreneur"

that they wanted to sell through their websites so we set up a company dedicated to electronic commerce. Then recently, people started complaining about the amount of spam they get in their email. When my mother, who got her internet access through my company, accused us of sending her obscene email messages, I got the idea of coming up with an anti-spam service.

Is spam a serious problem?

The seriousness of the problem of spam is proportionate to the amount of time you have had your email address. Stat-

istics vary but in a country like the United States, spam consists of perhaps 80% of all email. Why? Well, people in the US use email more and have been using it for longer than anywhere else. The longer you have been using an email, the more chance there is of you receiving spam.

What's next after Spam?

So far I have started four companies, employing about 80 people and now I'm planning to open two new firms related to computer security, data protection and email.

Aren't you tempted to sit back and enjoy your success?

People often ask me that but I'm quite an active person and I'm always looking ahead to the next thing. In Cambridge I was identified as a "serial entrepreneur". I think it all depends on the person and at the moment I am enjoying myself too much.

So, it is as if you were addicted to success?

Something we shouldn't forget is that it's not all about success; I've had plenty of failures too. Here in Spain failure is not always seen in the right way; if you mess up a few times it means you are useless, but things don't work like that. I'd go so far as to say that, for me, learning from mistakes is the only way to learn and I don't believe I could have done what I have if I hadn't made mistakes.

What role does English play in the recipe for success?

English is vital, it's absolutely necessary. We all have to get used to the idea that the market is global now. I have a cousin of Chinese origin but who was born in Germany, studied in Taiwan and who now works in the United States.

How important is your Chinese background to you?

I'm Catalan but I would never forget my Chinese origins. I try to enjoy the good things of both cultures. For obvious reasons, my dream as far as business goes is to do business in China. I was recently in Peking and Shanghai with a delegation of the Generalitat and I saw that learning Chinese is essential to conduct successful business there, if for no other reason than because in general the English that Chinese people speak is awful.

Yet here in Europe China's economic rise is often seen as a threat?

It is only natural that people are frightened of whatever is new or alien. However, in Chinese, the word for 'problem' also means 'opportunity' and you can see Chinese companies as a commercial threat but also we can go there, manufacture there and sell to them and elsewhere. In essence, it is as much about collaboration as competition.

Carrier adds flights

● Thomsonfly, the third-largest U.K.-based airline, announced up to seven flights per week from Barcelona to Coventry, beginning October 29. Prices will start at €33 one way. The company said it is adding flights because of increased demand. Coventry is an hour away from London by train.

Thomsonfly also said that as of this week, it will not charge passengers for luggage less than 25 kilos, of which 10 kilos can be hand luggage. The new policy is designed to distinguish the company from rivals Ryanair and Flybe, which are charging for luggage on return flights.

BBVA quarterly profits show 25 per cent increase

● The Spanish bank BBVA has presented its quarterly accounts, showing profits of €1,020 million. This represents a rise of 25 per cent on the same period last year, and is considered to be the result of the bank's growth in Mexico and South America through credit and exchange rates. José Ignacio Goirigolzarri, the BBVA's managing director, said at a press conference earlier this week that Mexico had been the main reason for the bank's improved figures—BBVA made a profit of €417 million in Mexico during the first three months of this year (41 per cent of the group's total profits), compared to the €363 million that BBVA made in Spain and Portugal. Goirigolzarri said that the bank is looking to expand further into North America.



VW to move part of Navarra plant to Eastern Europe

● The government of Navarra said it was "concerned" at the announcement by Volkswagen to move part of the production at Landaben, its Navarra plant, to Czechoslovakia. VW has two plants in Spain: the one in Navarra and another in Barcelona.