
PROFILE

ONE WOMAN'S DATE WITH ADVENTURE

SONJA PIONTEK

When Ms. Sonja Piontek left the coveted job that she built for herself for nearly 13 years, she didn't realize that she would be stepping into her own place under the sun

BY LI HAOHAN





MS. PIONTEK IS A MUCH SOUGHT-AFTER PUBLIC SPEAKER

Four years ago, Ms. Sonja Piontek came to Singapore to work as Director of Marketing for BMW Asia. By then she had already established a career with the prestigious automotive brand, where she started out as an Events and CRM Manager in New Zealand, marketing manager of the BMW motorcycle side, director of marketing for the Motorsport team, global head of Strategic Naming and Branding globally, and director of marketing for the Asian region. Through these stints she lived in Indonesia, New Zealand, Germany, China and Singapore, enriching her understanding of different cultures and people.

But at the end of last year, Ms. Piontek decided to quit and start out on her own in Singapore. The dynamic young entrepreneur told us over lunch how she gathered the confidence to walk away from a comfortable life and start over.

Portfolio: You left your executive career in one of the world's leading brands – that's a tough call for anyone who still has many good, productive years ahead of her. Why?

Ms. Piontek: I had a good career indeed: great regional responsibility, amazing colleagues, the boardrooms, the international business class flights, a fancy title, a brand new X6 every so many months—overall, a pretty amazing life. But more and more I felt that if I really wanted to fly free, I was going to have to leave and start on my own.

So you just pulled the plug? Was that what happened?

I wish it had been that easy. Leaving BMW after almost 13 years was the single most difficult decision of my life.

If you already had your mind set on leaving, why was it still difficult to go?

Leaving the comfort zone is never easy. In fact it can be a very scary thing. I had spent pretty much my entire career with BMW. There was a strong feeling of belonging, of safety and of pride. BMW was like my second family and many colleagues had become close friends. Stepping out of that comfort zone into the unknown was unsettling, and I went through a fair amount of sleepless nights and doubt.

What drove you to push through?

First of all I listened to my heart. And I felt very clearly that a fulfilled future for me was outside the corporate boundaries. Secondly, I asked myself one very important question: What is the worst thing that can possibly go wrong? And the answer is, not much really if you do what you're good at and most importantly passionate about. This, as well as my surrounding gave me the courage to hand in my papers in the end.

What exactly do you mean by 'your surroundings'?

Being in Singapore, with its thriving start-up vibe, having a lot of friends that are successful entrepreneurs, a huge network of business partners across Asia and a group of trusted friends that supported the idea gave me a lot of reassurance during the initial time.

And what does Sonnenkind exactly do?

Sonnenkind creates unforgettable, tailor-made experiences for HNWI and luxury brands with impressive return on investment. Working with some of the world's most iconic brands, the Singapore based boutique agency is your strategic partner for second to none global travel and brand building experiences. Based on the exceptional concepts and holistic strategy, Sonnenkind is regularly featured in Asia's leading luxury publications.

What brands do you work with for example?

We are humbled by the amount of trust we receive from some of the world's leading brands. For example, Leica Camera HQ has just appointed us the official partner for exclusive photography tours globally. This is a dream come true as photography is one of my big passions. We bring their top end customers to the most spectacular

places in countries like New Zealand, Namibia or even Greenland so they can experience what Leica is all about. These tailor made tours come at very little cost for the brand but have huge measurable return on investment (sales as well as PR). We are also working closely with Jaguar Land Rover or Leading Hotels of the World in the region as well as some of the top private banks in Singapore creating incredible incentive tours for their clients, business partners and investors.

Last but not least, we run so-called Learning Journeys – a concept that takes business owners from the Asian region to Germany to learn all about lean manufacturing, quality management, ISO certification, production processes and the likes. Through my network in Germany, we have access to key experts in companies like BMW, Airbus Industries, TÜV Süd or Siemens, to name just a few.

What is the key to success of a business of this kind?

I personally believe that to be successful you need to first of all build trust and focus on creating win:win partnerships rather than just making the quick dollar.

And then you need to deliver. In our case we provide one of a kind immersive brand experiences as well as hard, measurable results.

Where did you obtain the know how in running a business like this?

Luckily, during my years with BMW I was able to gather vast experience in working with high-end (Asian) customers, in building brands and working with luxury brands, in creating unforgettable experiences and in handling huge budgets profitably. As far as setting up and running a business is concerned, that's obviously totally new for me. It's my own little learning journey – at times challenging, but I enjoy every step of the way.

Apart from setting up your company Sonnenkind, you're a global keynote speaker and often referred to as 'thought leader' in the field of brand building through unforgettable experiences.

Thank you. Actually, professional speaking is a beautiful way to share my experience, do what I'm most passionate about and inspire audiences across industries from all sort of different backgrounds.

What topics do you speak on?

This month for example I did a keynote speech at Google's Global Growth Summit on 'The Power of Unforgettable Experiences', then

a speech on 'Magic Happens Outside the Comfort Zone' for the Badminton World Federation in Bangkok before 200 people from 131 nations (there was even a lady there from Samoa and a gentlemen from Greenland!), and one on 'Marketing Magic In the Age of Digitalization' at the ASIA CMO Summit in Macao. It's exciting and I love doing it.

What else are you passionate about?

I'm passionate about life. And about helping others unfold their potential and seize the abundant opportunities around them. For example, I currently mentor three young adults from different social and cultural backgrounds and have started writing a book on female empowerment, which will be published in 2019. I'm also passionate about nature and travelling, meeting people from different cultures and about horse riding and motorbikes.

We hope you've not forgotten about the adventures. Any new adventures lined up?

Well, yes, actually a few. I'm going to do an off-road motorbike tour through Mongolia at the end of July with a few friends. And I've just signed up for a 90k endurance race on horseback through the Namib Desert end of August—that's going to be really, really tough. But it'll be a unique experience. I just better get my fitness under way!

If you could share your key learning from this interesting life journey, what would that be?

Have the guts to trust yourself, always follow your heart and use your full potential as it is a beautiful gift! P

More information on Sonnenkind's services, and Ms. Piontek's speaking engagements are available on www.sonnenkind.com.sg and www.sonjapiontek.com

