



driving the brand

Piti Bhirom Bhakdi '02 drives a global brand toward stardom

A **LUMNUS** and Thailand native Piti “Todd” Bhirom Bhakdi leads a life that could rival that of Tom Cruise: race car driver, talk show host, married to a silver screen starlet, and owner of a clothing line, four golf courses, two resorts, a racing school, and eight chain restaurants. But at the heart of it all, he’s the director of Boon Rawd Brewery, a jewel in the family business, and makers of Singha beer, a global brand. The *Journal* sat down with Bhirom Bhakdi recently to talk about his business, his time at WPI, and how an engineering education can help grow a global beverage business.

You're the CEO of a global company, a talk show host, a race car driver, a golf course owner. How do you juggle it all?

Well, it is demanding to run all these ventures, but I am fortunate to have great teams and team leaders who are highly responsible and devote themselves to the success of the enterprise. I no longer host the talk show, as Boon Rawd is expanding aggressively and that's where my focus lies right now. The fun projects always end too soon! But, yes, I am fortunate to have a strong team, which allows me to juggle many projects. At Boon Rawd, we treat all our professionals as if they are family and we treat our family members as professionals.

How essential are family values to your business?

They are very essential. We recently celebrated our 80th anniversary. Only a few privately owned companies in Thailand have lasted this long, and we are very proud of that. Family values are the connective tissue and the source of our success. They represent commitment, which has created longevity. These family values bring energy to the business, helping assure cohesion, resolving conflicts, and strengthening operations. It means more than passing down a legacy, though; that's important, too. We are expanding our values by benefiting others—especially the community in which we operate.

Singha market share fell from 80% to 19% in 2004, yet now it's back up to 78%. How did that happen? What did you do to reverse the trend?

The lack of competitors in Thailand made us complacent, so when a real competitor did arrive, we had some challenges. Fortunately, my father, Santi Bhirom Bhakdi, was quick to embark upon a series of changes that were painful to implement but beneficial to the company. This is where family values become important. We were strong, but we also had our faults. We did a lot of soul-searching. We became more innovative. We developed new products. We paid more attention to our distributors and customers. Today, we are back on top with nearly 78 percent market share, while our main competitor sits at 15 percent and is in decline. Our production is more efficient. Our distribution networks are much stronger. We know exactly where our products are being placed and we are able

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to track their depletion in real time. It's been nearly a decade since we made these changes, and the results are impressive. The marketing knowledge we gained from this work has been tremendous.

Have your marketing efforts changed since the economic crisis of 2009?

We responded by establishing a stronger brand platform. I was the one who initiated this project a few years after I left WPI. A healthy brand begins with a clear structure. I brought in a well-known company from the U.S. who did re-branding for Citibank, Nikon, McDonald's, and 3M to help with the restructuring. As you can imagine, consolidating 72 years worth of marketing knowledge from a broad range of departments was a daunting task. However, a few years later, we were able to create value by making the brand central to our business aims. We now have a branding department, which acts as our in-house “Brand Police” to make sure our strategic aims are in focus.

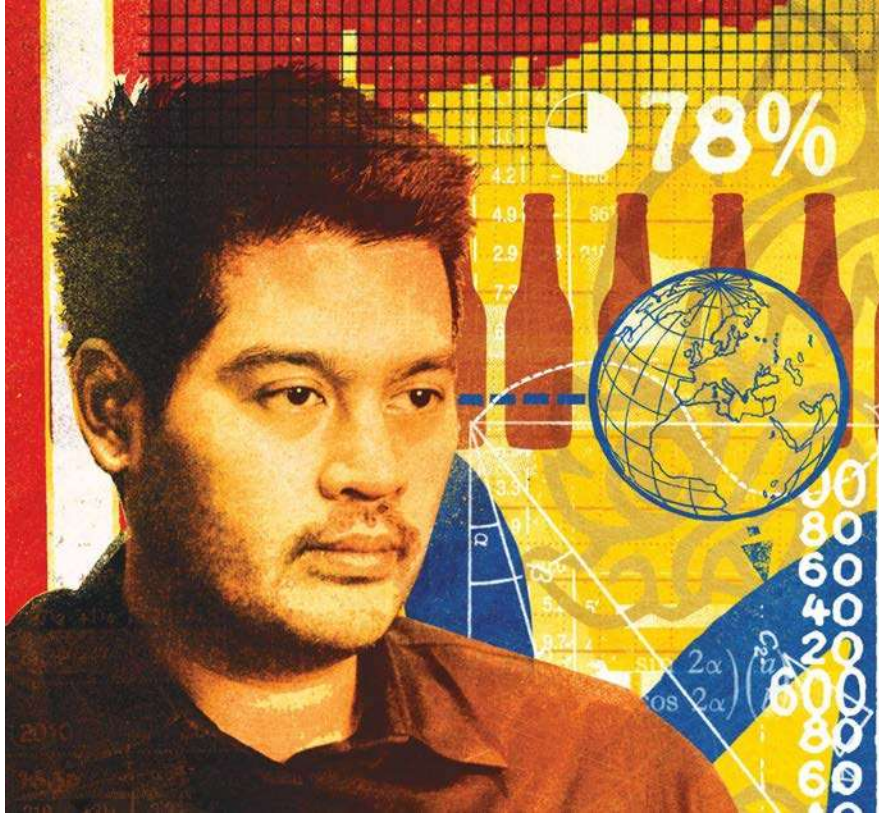
Tell us about the partnership developed between Singha and the Premier League, particularly Manchester United and the Chelsea Football Clubs.

What's better than having the two best soccer teams in the world as our partners? Many people asked me whether it is worth sponsoring these world-class teams when our product is not readily available everywhere in the world. But I look at it as a valuable long-term relationship and a great way to introduce our brand to UK consumers. Can you imagine how many people are watching each match, and how many matches they play throughout the year? It is not permissible to advertise alcohol products in Thailand, so those pitch-side billboards carry our name and image to hundreds of countries around the globe, including Thailand. These partnerships help us reach millions of households.

We also recently partnered with the History Channel for a one-hour documentary titled “The Making of the Lion.” This was broadcast regionally in September 2013 and it was an honor to have been the first Thai brand to be featured on this world-famous channel.

What was it like being an international student at WPI?

Like most international students, it took me a while to get used to the system and the U.S. environment. I was pretty young when I left



You were an industrial engineering major. Do you find your WPI education helps you in business?

Industrial engineering is a good foundation, especially when you are involved in decision making. It gives a solid framework for organization decisions, as it teaches a more structured approach. Industrial engineering also helps overcome a "complexity ceiling," which is characterized by a mismatch between the sophistication of organizational decision-making practices and the complexity of the situations. An IE background can be thought of as bringing advanced analytics techniques to the desktop of the non-expert decision maker. Engineering, in general, builds on the insight that it is possible to design the decision itself, using principles previously used for designing more tangible objects like bridges and buildings.

My engineering education helps me think more clearly, see things more vividly, and process them more constructively. I tend not to make any decisions based on emotion but rather through a scientific method. Same thing applies to my personal life.

for school in the U.S., like my father, who left Thailand to attend school in Germany when he was 16. He gave me a huge amount of advice to prepare myself. The language barrier was inevitable, even though I studied English from grade school to high school. Reading and writing English wasn't too difficult then, but speaking the language took some getting used to.

How was your experience at the Bangkok Project Center?

Very fruitful. We did a joint research project with Chulalongkorn University, the leading institution here. Our project focused on Bangkok's air pollution and how it affected the health of citizens. Sustainable development remains a challenge for Thailand, in part because policy makers often rely only on economic information. There isn't the same level of empirical data on health, social, and environmental impacts from developmental policies. Fostering and strengthening epidemiological research in Thailand can provide the necessary perspective for policy development. I learned a lot through the empirical research we did, and I think, to a certain extent, the city has used what we contributed.

Do you see opportunities for a school like WPI to increase its presence in Asia, and in Thailand specifically?

With globalization, the world is much smaller these days, and an integral part of surviving lies on local knowledge, international experience, and global vision. This speaks to opportunity here. I noticed that many western institutions have begun a presence here in the Asian region, and Thailand was not left out of the thinking. So my answer is "Yes"—I believe that WPI is unique enough to offer a great deal of knowledge by bringing western academic concepts to Thailand. It could be very interesting and we have so much to learn from each other.

What is your favorite memory from your WPI student days?

What I miss the most from my student days, believe it or not, is the food and the weather. I miss those cold morning walks to and from campus and having nice hot New England clam chowder—Christmas is kind of warm here. I also miss my student life, though I thought I had it tough then. ■