

The Business Of Lighting Balloons

by Thomas Richard Prakasam



2011 Sydney Vivid Festival Jelly Lights



I must admit that when I was approached to do an interview about Lighting Balloons, I was a little hesitant. Is it really a sustainable business? Is there much technology involved? Boy was I in for a surprise. Many of you might have seen one of these balloons – in 2008, between 500 to 600 Airstar balloons were used for the F1 race and since then it has become a common feature at the annual event. So I headed down to the offices of Partex International to meet with **Pascal PETIT JEAN** who also happens to be the co-founder of AIRSTAR for a chat. Partex is responsible for Airstar's business across Asia-Pacific. Airstar is considered the inventor and world's leader of lighting balloon technology.

Here is another admission. It was one of the most enjoyable interviews I have had. Pascal is down to earth and very amiable. Partex was established in 1993 in Singapore – that is a long history of 24 years. The company has a subsidiary in Japan, a Partner in Indonesia and Distributors in Australia, Korea and Malaysia.



2009 Singapore Grand Prix F1

ETA: Give us a little background about yourself?

Pascal: I graduated from the engineering school of Lyon, France, and became a Plant Manager in the family-run business – Petitjean S.A. (a world leader in street and stadium lighting poles). I then moved to Singapore in 1987 as the company’s Asia Business Director. For 5 years I sold street lighting poles, stadium poles throughout the region.

ETA: How did Partex International come about?

Pascal: I decided to branch out on my own and add more solutions so as to enable me to offer more options to my clients. I chose Singapore as the base as I had started here and had built over the years many connections. There was also competency available here in terms of technical staff. So Partex represented three companies including Petitjean S.A. with the other two companies involved in electrical and steel solutions.

ETA: What was one of the more interesting sales in the early years of Partex?

Pascal: Well a golf course in Indonesia needed lighting but they did not want lighting poles or trenches to be seen during the day. We thought about it and presented them with an idea of periscope style lighting. They loved it but unfortunately before we can proceed to install them there was political upheaval and the project did not go through. Luckily we were able to sell the concept and solution to golf courses in the Philippines and Korea. Then the 97 financial crisis happened and it became difficult for us to sell the pole.

ETA: How did you get involved in Airstar?

Pascal: I read a newspaper report from France about

a company creating lighting balloons. I was already into lighting and I am always on the lookout for creative solutions. So I packed my bags, went to see the owner and became a stakeholder with Airstar. As the company was a recent start-up, my timing was great as it allowed me to enter the company quickly as a shareholder.

ETA: Where are Airstar products manufactured?

Pascal: We have a factory in France which employs 70 to 80 people. We also have a small factory in USA – this is mainly to facilitate priority requests within America.

ETA: What was your first Airstar project?

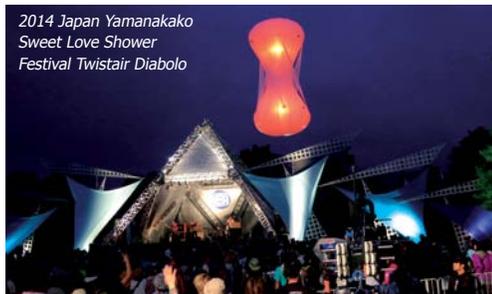
Pascal: This was around 1994 where we supplied two balloons for the opening of the Raffles Marina Country Club in Tuas, Singapore. We then picked up and started to sell Airstar lighting solutions in Japan, Korea and so forth. The initial sales were mainly to support events.

ETA: What are some of the advantages that a Lighting Balloon offers?

Pascal: Normally for an event, in the past, companies would use floodlights to light up the area. The problem with this is the size of the floodlight and the glare that it produces. With Airstar balloons, we offer the right fabric, right transparency, correct light fixture and temperature, good resistance and most importantly safety. A qualitative light with no glare that still achieves one’s objective.

ETA: How has the product evolved?

Pascal: One area where we are now actively involved in is the movie industry. We have created solutions where our lighting balloons have provided a more natural look for the cameras. One project we are most proud of is Titanic where James Cameron used our solutions. In 2003, Airstar received a Technical Oscar for the lighting technology used in Titanic.



2014 Japan Yamanakako Sweet Love Shower Festival Twistair Diabolo



2009 Melbourne Winter Festival Fed Square Solar Equation 2

Beyond that, our solutions have also been used for Rescue work. 15 years ago a building collapsed in Korea and we went there to volunteer our services. This helped us also to understand the needs and offer solutions that ensures that our lighting balloons are easy to deploy, offer sufficient brightness and reduce fatigue of rescue workers. Since then our lighting balloons have been deployed in the region for such situations. We have also supplied our lighting balloons for construction work – so we have gone beyond our initial market segment.

ETA: Is there concern about copycat products?

Pascal: Of course there are copycat products. However it is not easy to duplicate our solutions 100% due to our technological expertise. Our clients understand and realise that they may be paying more but there is no need to worry about the reliability and our service dedication.

ETA: Back to lighting balloons for events, can you provide us with some figures?

Pascal: In Singapore we support about 1000 events in average per year. This includes sales of our balloons as well as rental. 5 years ago we decided to set up a 100% owned subsidiary in Japan. This was personally very challenging because you either succeed or you don't. Thankfully we are in the right track.

ETA: What has contributed to the success of Partex International?

Pascal: The quality and reputation of our products has allowed us to penetrate many markets. This together with a great team has been a core aspect of our success. We are not just selling a product but rather our service and our passion to our products. We have many different products and that helps us but we also need to be creative in our

approach to solutions and that is where we add value to our clients.

ETA: Looking at your showroom, you seem to have expanded on your solutions...

Pascal: We have expanded in terms of complementary solutions. For example we can provide furniture, BBQ cooking system, LEDs which complement for example an outdoor event. All the solutions first and foremost are quality products from Italy, Germany and France. It is important for us that our products are reliable and that our clients are satisfied.

ETA: On a personal level, how do you feel about your journey thus far?

Pascal: When I landed in Singapore I was a wide-eyed youngster who wanted to accomplish as much as he can. Singapore is a good base due to its infrastructure and cosmopolitan nature. As years passed, I felt that this country was truly a gateway to Asia. Asia throws up interesting challenges and that is where my engineering skills come into play. I am proud of what we have achieved but I also feel that we have more distance to cover. On a personal note I have made some wonderful friends and have created precious memories along the way.

Lighting Balloons...not just used for events but for movies and rescue operations. The technology has to be able to withstand weather conditions, be fire-retardant, offer the right amount of illumination and be easy to set-up. So the next time you pass by one of this balloons, make sure you take a moment to appreciate the technology behind it.

www.airstar-asia.com

Airstar Achievements in Asia Pacific

- 1996 – WTO Closing Ceremony Singapore
- 1997 – Hong Kong Hand-Over
- 1999 – China's 50th Anniversary in Tiananmen Square
- 2000 – Sydney Olympics Opening Ceremony
- 2008 – Awarded the project to light the prestigious Grand Prix F1 Night race in Singapore and this has been an on-going since
- 2009 – Airstar created the largest 14m Helium Lighting Balloon for Festival Square in Melbourne during the Winter Festival
- 2010 – Awarded 2 light installations for the Singapore i-light Festival at Marina Bay on light sustainability for the future