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Profile of Zhang Yan

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Zhang Yan
General Manager of CITICSat and Chief Representative
of Asiasat Beijing Office

After graduating from Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications in 1993, Ms. Yan joined Chinasat serving as a system engineer then project manager for VSAT system for 6 years. Then in year 1999, she was selected the team leader of International Private Leased Line (IPLC) service in Chinasat, providing total solution based on satellite for the international communication requirement from customers. Ms. Yan was promoted to be the deputy director of Marketing Department of Chinasatcom as well as the director of Marketing Department of China Orient in year 2002. Since then she helped the company to penetrate to several new fields and gain the good reputation in satellite industry. From Dec. 2008, she joined CITIC Group and Asiasat as the General Manager of CITICSat and Chief Representative of Asiasat Beijing Office, directing the satellite business of CITIC and marketing and sales activities of Asiasat in China.

1) How did you get started in the satellite business?

I joined ChinaSat after graduating from college in 1993, with a degree in Electrical Engineering. I thought satellite was the most advanced communications technology.

When I entered college, very few women were accepted into electrical engineering program because it was the most popular and competitive college program in China. Usually boys are better than girls in learning mathematics and science; as a result, men scored higher than women on college entry exams. Women represented 20-30% of all students in electric engineering programs across the nation.

My initial job was in engineering at ChinsSat , when I worked on many enterprise solutions using satellite technology. I became familiar with the satellite technology and solutions through the experience of installation, operation and maintenance of various VSAT systems. From this experience I learned about not only the satellite field, but also how to meet customer requirements. It was a good experience that prepared me for ecareer advancement in a marketing and sales role.

2) How have you been involved in changes brought about in or by this business (innovations, technologies, services)?

I worked at ChinaSat during the exciting growth period of satellite communications, 1993-1999. Before 1990's, the telecom infrastructure in China was very poor. Chinese government invested a lot in satellite technology as part of the economic development program.

By 2000, terrestrial infrastructure (fiber and wireless) displaced many satellite networks because terrestrial service was cheaper and more reliable. For example, one of the major clients of ChinaSat had reduced its satellite requirements from more than 40 to 6 transponders overnight. At the time, I had just been appointed as the Deputy Director of Marketing and this became my problem. When I learned that China Mobile was searching for a technical solution to extend its wireless service to remote villages, I worked with the ChinaSat team to demonstrate the satellite network capabilities. Finally, China Mobile selected ChinaSat as the supplier of choice for its backbone and backhaul infrastructure after a fiercely competitive bidding process. The first phase of the satellite network installation was completed in 2002, followed by annual expansion plans. By 2008, ChinaSat implemented six expansion phases for China Mobile, using over 20 transponders.

3) What do you think was the greatest event/situation/opportunity you experienced?

Satellite is a very important telecom capability because it is the only solution for many remote and rural villages where there is no technical alternative. For example, when Chinese government issued the notice that 'every remote township and village must have telecom service,' most telecom service providers could not respond timely, technically, or economically because there were geographic constraints (mountain, river, deserts, etc.). Communications in some of these rural villages had relied on horses that transported mail and/or people to nearby towns, and a journey could take more than three days. In these difficult situations, satellite was the only viable telecom solution because satellite systems could be installed in days connecting the people in the remote community to any major cities.

In 2008 following the Sichuan earthquake, I went to the disaster zones. My flight circled the airport for a long time, a two-hour flight became a six-hour journey because the airport was not designed to handle so many planes landing at the narrow runway...there were military flights with rescue worker and rescue flights with food and medical workers. Chinasatcom delivered 1500 satellite phones to Sichuan. Satellite was proven to be the only solution that can provide these relieve workers with a critical communications tool.

I am very gratified to be able to deliver satellite solution to save life and to protect communities. Through my experiences, I found a larger purpose in life.

4) What was the greatest obstacle?

Satellite industry has many obstacles such as spectrum regulation, operational license, and national policies. In addition, men are generally preferred for management positions because men don't have family and childcare responsibilities. Women have to demonstrate exceptional performance and commitment to seize opportunities.

5) What do you see happening in the next five years in this industry? and 6) What advice do you have for women interested in entering the industry?

There are many opportunities for women in many different roles...China is in the process of revitalizing its commitments for satellite technology. I believe satellite will expand in three important applications:

1. Emergency Communications: Following the Sichuan earthquake, the national and provincial government will have requirements for nature and man-made disaster backup service.
2. Rural Communications: The economic stimulus program includes infrastructure projects for remote and rural communities.
3. Broadcast TV: China has only 200 TV program channels, there is a huge growth opportunity in the coming years.

In China, satellite field is a very specialized and niche industry sector for both men and women

One must demonstrate exceptional performance, and the confidence to seize market opportunities and dedicate herself/himself to the work. As a women leader, one must have a great mind.