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Home Edition

Want a Corner Office? First Check the Chi; **More big firms, among them News Corp., are quietly using feng shui in their work spaces to help ensure success.**

By Sallie Hofmeister, Times Staff Writer

Mitchell Stern had one of the best perches in town.

From his window on the 11th floor of DirecTV's El Segundo headquarters, the new chief executive of the satellite-TV company could take in the mountains, downtown skyscrapers, LAX and ships out at sea.

Stern traded that panorama last week for a view of the Hyperion sewage treatment plant and the company parking garage. But the new office has something his old one lacked: It's a lucky charm for someone born on May 25, 1954, Stern's birth date.

At least that's the assessment of the feng shui consultants hired by Stern's boss, media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

Along with a growing number of major corporations, Murdoch's News Corp. empire is quietly employing the 4,000-year-old Eastern practice as a way to improve its business success.

Other corporate believers reportedly include Coca-Cola Co., which called on a feng shui expert at the suggestion of one of its Asian bottlers, as well as Procter & Gamble, Hewlett-Packard and Ford Motor Co.

At least one state lawmaker also is promoting the custom. In January, California Assemblyman Leland Yee, a San Francisco Democrat, proposed a resolution that would require the state's building standards to promote feng shui principles.

"Is it mainstream? No. But it's used more than people acknowledge," said Peter Reiss, a feng shui practitioner in Centerport, N.Y., who serves as a consultant to several corporate clients.

News Corp. declined to discuss its use of feng shui, as did Murdoch and Stern. But sources said that since Murdoch's 1999 marriage to Wendy Deng, who is of Chinese descent, he has become a big believer in its powers.

Shortly after taking over DirecTV in December to fill a gaping hole in his global satellite TV operation, Murdoch turned to an elderly Chinese couple who are considered feng shui masters, according to several News Corp. executives.

The couple couldn't be reached for comment. But DirecTV insiders said the couple was horrified by some of the things they found at the El Segundo headquarters.

One of their biggest concerns was the office occupied by the company's chief financial officer, Michael Palkovic.

The problem? The adjoining bathroom.

The feng shui consultants said the company's profits, which have been negligible since DirecTV launched in 1995, were being sucked down the toilet, according to people familiar with the findings. As a result, Palkovic is scheduled to move this week to a new office on the 11th floor, the only one without a bathroom.

Meanwhile, an even bigger relocation was averted. At one point, the consultants were said to have wanted a unit of the finance department moved from the fourth floor because they said four is considered an unlucky number when it is linked with money. They changed their minds when they discovered that the unit didn't handle money, but rather tended to DirecTV's relationships with its dealers.

Murdoch moved his own New York office about three years ago at the behest of a feng shui expert, company sources said. He and several other corporate officers relocated to the eighth floor, a number that is financially auspicious, according to feng shui tradition.

It's not clear how Murdoch decides when and where to use feng shui.

News Corp. executives noted that he didn't rely upon it two years ago after he wrested control of Gemstar-TV Guide International from its founder and moved the financially troubled company from Pasadena to Hollywood. "Maybe he wishes he had," said one.

Once reserved for China's emperors, feng shui is now widely used in Asian corporations. Most banks in Hong Kong, for example, practice feng shui by placing a pair of lion statues in front of the building to "guard" the wealth inside.

Although feng shui is becoming more common in U.S. homes and businesses, experts say companies typically try to keep its use a secret because some people consider it a flaky New Age fad.

Reiss, the feng shui consultant, won't discuss his clients but concedes that few people in an organization know when he has been hired. "It's the chairman, president and comptroller," he said. "The board might not be OK spending money on a feng shui consultant."

A source at DirecTV said only a handful of people knew about the feng shui masters who paid a visit in January.

According to its followers, feng shui is equal parts philosophy, science and art. Its basis is the belief that everything in the universe has a life force or energy, called chi, that can be manipulated for beneficial results.

Good chi can generate new business and rising profits, according to proponents. Bad chi conjures up mayhem and can cause business to go south.

Feng shui consultants, who can charge hundreds of dollars an hour for their services, typically assign certain objects, such as crystals, plants and water fountains, to specific locations. Or they may change the color scheme within a work space. The aim: to reverse bad chi or to achieve good chi.

One Silicon Valley company, for instance, painted the walls green and purple-- the colors of wealth -- in the department that takes customers' orders.

Regent Worldwide Sales Inc., a Los Angeles-based entertainment company that produced the movie "Gods and Monsters," hired feng shui expert Angi Ma Wong to help it relocate to a penthouse on Wilshire Boulevard in Westwood.

Wong used the birth dates of Regent's 35 employees to position them in the new digs. A birth date can determine how a person's energy will coincide with the Earth's magnetic pull, as well as a building's energy force.

"It's very personalized," Wong said. "I can tell someone whether they should be using a wooden or a marble-top desk" based on their birth date, she said.

There is no way to know for sure if the feng shui is working, said Paul Colichman, the chairman of Regent. But, he added, business is healthy and "I have a very happy staff."

For his part, News Corp.'s Stern had largely overlooked the feng shui recommendations as he settled into his 11th-floor quarters with the great view and had four large-screen plasma TVs installed, those inside the company said.

Then came the foot-long ceramic horse in the mail. Before long, Murdoch followed up with a phone call to ask Stern whether the talisman was correctly positioned -- with its head facing east -- inside his new, chi-friendly office.

The one overlooking the sewage treatment plant.

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Rethinking the executive washroom

Don't occupy an office that faces a restroom, or else you'll risk draining all the wealth from the room, say feng shui experts. A look at other key principles for harnessing environmental energy -- also known as chi -- to promote prosperity:

Do's

- ☉ Want to be a leader? Place a dragon symbol on the right side of your desk so it faces a window or door.
- ☉ Figure out the wealth and prosperity corner of your business by employing a bagua -- the diagram used by feng shui experts to determine the best positioning for furniture and other objects. The wealth corner is the place for fax machines, telephones, computers, cash registers and bookkeeping files. Water elements, including an indoor fountain or fish tank, could also be helpful here.

- ☯ Place a three-legged toad god, also known as a money frog, near the entrance to the front office, or facing into your office.
- ☯ If your business deals with technology, decorate with pictures of nature.
- ☯ Get a crystal ball to attract good luck, and symbolically gaze into a fruitful future.

Taboos

- ☯ Never sit with a window behind you. Instead, sit against a solid wall to ensure that you will always have support in your life.
- ☯ A manager should not sit in a room with two doors, because energy could go in one door and out the other. Keep one door closed off.
- ☯ Avoid clutter. Keep desks neat and tidy to promote energy flow.

Sources: fengshuitips.co.uk; Feng Shui Dos & Taboos for Financial Succe\$\$

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