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ENVIRONMENT

## The die-hard 'accidental environmentalists'

Duo set on running business that is green, yet still profitable



Bloomerang directors Wong Joon Ian (left) and Thian Zhiwen use eco-friendly materials to make coat hangers which double as advertising platforms. -- ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

HE DOESN'T fit the mould of your typical eco-warrior but a novel business idea has helped turn Mr Thian Zhiwen into a keen environmentalist, albeit one with an eye on the bottom line.

The 27-year-old founder of Bloomerang wanted to use coat hangers as an advertising platform but was unsure of what materials to use.

When he was working for a disposable foodwares company just months earlier, he saw excessive wastage as paper and plastic products were regularly thrown out.

'There were quality checks and so if one product is a little bit damaged, they can't use it, so the whole batch of easily 1,000 cups could potentially be destroyed,' says Mr Thian.

So when he founded Bloomerang in June last year - his former schoolmate Wong Joon Ian, 28, joined him in August - he was determined to run his \$10,000 start-up in an eco-friendly way.

Mr Thian's research found that a single laundromat could use thousands of plastic hangers a month, yet only 8 per cent of plastics used here is recycled.

Half of all paper is recycled and that became the start point for Bloomerang's eco-friendly product: BloomerHangs.

BloomerHangs are made from recycled paper held together by water-based glue, printed with soy ink and sealed with oil-based varnish, making them completely biodegradable. They are made at a manufacturing plant in Woodlands.

Although the costs of producing from recycled materials are high, the two are counting on advertisements to generate revenue.

These can be printed on their paper hangers, which are distributed to four laundromats and 16 hotels.

The firm plans to extend their reach to recreational spots like gyms.

With each hanger costing only five cents - up to 60 per cent cheaper than plastic - it seemed BloomerHang's benefits would be clear to all and sundry.

Yet during visits to launderers in industrial estates, Mr Thian met with such resistance that one launderer actually threw him - and his ideas - out. 'He said, 'I've been in the laundry industry for donkey's years. It will never work, don't waste my time', ' says Mr Thian, recounting how the launderer scrunched up his hanger and chased him out.

But his perseverance led him to keen supporters like operations manager Kenny Thong, 34, of Active Laundrette in Bukit Batok.

Mr Thong, who is constantly looking for cost-saving measures, thought BloomerHangs were a useful tool to help him stand out from his competitors.

'Everyone wants something new. Going green is a good way to create brand differentiation for my customers,' says Mr Thong, who also plans on advertising with Bloomerang.

In January, the company signed on its first advertiser, the eco shoe brand Terra Plana, which has two stores here.

Bloomerang is distributing 5,000 of its hangers, which include an advertisement for Terra Plana and a discount coupon for customers.

Its first campaign has led at least six other companies, including a local organic skincare brand and others in Canada, Kuwait and India, to inquire about advertising opportunities with Bloomerang.

And Bloomerang's work was discussed in an eco-design and sustainability class at the National University of Singapore on Thursday.

BloomerHang will also be highlighted in a business textbook, published by McGraw-Hill Education (Asia), set for release this year.

The start-up pals have also been interviewed by Channel U's Money Week programme for running an eco business and are finalists for the annual President's Design Award, which recognises the national significance and creative value of products.

But for now, the two-man firm is focused on improving its design and seeking more partners to 'green' more wardrobes. They are hoping to turn in a profit by the end of the year.

'A good business that is innovative and creative can impact change. To save the environment, you don't have to hug trees. Business, with good ideas, can do just that,' says Mr Thian.

**CASSANDRA CHEW**