

Eco Entrepreneurs

With environmental awareness among consumers on the rise, there's money to be made in smart, eco-friendly businesses. By **John Robertson**

Brian Pemberton, ReSACKel bags

Derived from traditional rice sacks collected here and just across the border from Pemberton's ReSACKel bags are unmistakably genuine and come straight from the heart of a passionate local environmentalist. His idea naturally came in response to Hong Kong's notorious plastic bag habit. Government figures reveal that we use a whopping 8 billion bags per year, which amounts to about three bags per person each day. All end up in landfills that are predicted to clog up in about eight years.

Pemberton's bag is an example of how even the simplest of ideas can contribute to the "circular economy." His first sack was scavenged off a man on the street. Pemberton took it home, chopped it up and stitched it together. From these humble beginnings eventually came the line that's now just been launched by ThreeSixty.

While he faced a tough struggle earning others' trust in the idea before they went into business with him, Pemberton is confident opportunities are growing for similar green businesses. "The green movement is something that's growing and isn't going to go away," he says. "Quality and value for money is going to become more important, and people want things that can be used time and time again, not once and then thrown away."

ReSACKel bags are available at ThreeSixty for \$50 each. See www.resackel.com.



Boyd Boxshall, Verte vertical plantscapes



Anyone starting to get sick of rock will want to check out Verte's vertical plantscapes. Also known as "green walls," they're essentially vertical gardens, said to improve a building's aesthetics, energy efficiency, temperature, and air quality. Australian co-owner Boyd Boxshall says the trend has only really started spreading around the world in the last few years, thanks to new technologies in the growing field of green architecture known as "biorecture." His plantscapes grow from a near-hydroponic medium that is soil-less, organic and biodegradable, and requires little maintenance. Verte's Hong Kong clients include big development firms such as Sincere, architects, and interior designers. An environmental scientist, Boxshall says his own interest is to mitigate the heat island effect in Hong Kong. Green walls, he says, have been shown to reduce a building's core temperature and stabilize its internal temperatures.

Set up in Hong Kong in 2007, Boxshall's company now boasts clients in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Dubai. One reason for the international expansion is a lack of large-scale local interest here. Nevertheless, Boxshall is certain demand for green walls here is about to grow. "There's a lot of exciting potential right now," he says. "Hong Kong is the right place for it because horizontal space is at an absolute premium. The only way for gardens now is upwards."

To learn more about Verte and vertical landscapes, visit verte-asia.com.

Julia Washbourne, Bamboa

Since starting her company Bamboa last August, Julia Washbourne has been tirelessly singing the praises of what she calls "the wonder plant of this planet." Speaking to groups ranging from the Rotary Club to architecture bureaus, she lays out the case for bamboo: the fastest growing plant in the world, it can yield 20 times more timber than trees on the same area, it releases 35 percent more oxygen into the atmosphere than forests, it reduces water pollution through its high nitrogen uptake, and so on. In a world full of deforestation, plentiful waste, and shrinking resources, bamboo just might, in short, save us all. Bamboa sells hand-crafted bamboo furniture of all shapes and sizes, for interiors and exteriors. The shop serves a wide range of customers, from interior designers and architects to retailers. Many have enquired about building schools or other buildings out of bamboo. "People in Hong Kong are definitely becoming interested in bamboo for environmental reasons, but it takes a lot of education," she says. "People don't know all the things you can do with bamboo. They often see it used in scaffolding, but it can also be woven," she says.

An open display of different bamboo products by Bamboa will be held at a showroom in mid-June. Check www.bamboa.asia for details.



Salina Khan, DIAZ Fine Jewelry and TheWayToGo



Part of living in a greener economy involves recognizing one's place in the global environment. Salina Khan co-founded her "eco-ethical" jewelry brand DIAZ (www.diazjewelry.com) with just that in mind: the chain sculpts handmade jewelry only from synthetic jewels, such as cubic zirconia.

The business was originally going to work with real diamonds, but she decided against that after learning about the toll diamond mining takes on the both the local population and the local landscape. "It was something we didn't want to be involved in no matter how much we love jewelry," explains Khan. In fact, her business goes one step further, and donates proceeds from some sales to non-profit organizations such as One Sky, which helps convert mining sites in Sierra Leone into sustainable agricultural land. They also loudly proclaim their use of synthetic jewels. "Only if people have information, if they're aware of the environmental problems that exist, then there can be action," she says.

The same conviction underlies Khan's other project, TheWayToGo (www.way-to-go.org), her online media outlet dedicated to environmental news and issues affecting both Hong Kong and the wider world. After a 13-year absence from the city ending in 2006, Khan says she was shocked about how much worse the pollution had gotten since she had been gone. TheWayToGo was started as a response to these worries, and has been growing ever since.

Find Khan's projects on www.diazjewelry.com, www.way-to-go.org



Doug Woodring, Project Kaisei

This isn't a business per se, but it is an impressive project from Hong Kong aimed to raise environmental awareness around the world.

Scheduled between June and August this year, the Hong Kong-based Project Kaisei will be one of the biggest environmental endeavors to originate in Asia, and is already putting Hong Kong on the international map as far as environmental action is concerned. Dreamt up by local environmentalist entrepreneur and extreme sports fanatic Doug Woodring, the mission will see an international team set out to examine how to tackle the "Plastic Vortex."

If you haven't heard of the Plastic Vortex, you're not alone. It's not a black hole in Alpha Centauri—it's a very real, and very big, mass of plastic waste that has been gathering for over 100 years where currents meet in the Pacific Ocean. It's estimated to be twice the size of Texas (over 1,000 times the size of Hong Kong), but hardly anyone knows about it.

Part of the reason the problem has gone unaddressed so long is because many believe it to be too big to do anything about. Another reason is that it lies in international waters, and thus no nation feels obliged to clean it up.

"This is a global problem, and it's a problem for us all to solve, or correct, from each of our shores and countries," Woodring. He decided to form his team largely between Hong Kong and San Francisco to emphasize that everybody around the Pacific Rim is contributing to the problem, which is now causing an international health hazard thanks to toxins seeping from the bags into the fish supply.

Woodring's partners in San Francisco were instantly eager to join the project, using their own 150-foot tall ship named the "Kaiser" (Japanese for Ocean Planet). Meanwhile, National Geographic came on board to make the documentary, Google Earth to provide the mapping and tracking, and top ocean institute Scripps in San Diego, California, will be working closely with the team.

The first journey this summer is aimed at finding possible ways to solve the problem before a massive cleanup can be attempted—namely by processing the plastics caught with two new technologies. The challenges ahead loom large, but the team takes its motto from Jacques Cousteau: "The impossible missions are the only ones that succeed."

Find out more about Project Kaisei at www.projectkaisei.org.



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