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Headline: Creative Capital: The entrepreneur who's making people smell good naturally

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Inspiration can come from almost anywhere. For Jun Tan, an avid traveller and professional marketer, an underarm rash while visiting Cuba kickstarted an interest in all-natural personal care products.

Two years ago, Jun Tan enrolled in Singapore Management University's (SMU) Master of Innovation programme. She had wanted to make a change in her life. More specifically, she wanted to become an entrepreneur. As she went through her course, the idea of launching a very Asian, all-natural line of deodorants and other personal care products took shape. Believing she was on to something, she quit her job at Bose and invested her savings into launching Jomingo.

Jomingo's packaging is eye-catching and colourful. And even more importantly, in the eyes of her customers, her deodorants are very well made, with lovely scents and great results. Over the circuit breaker, Jun even launched a new and so far well-received range of hand balms.

HI! TELL ME, WHO IS JUN TAN? WHAT DID YOU DO BEFORE LAUNCHING JOMINGO?

I am the eldest of three girls. My dad used to be a businessman and my mum is a housemaker. I was from CHIJ Toa Payoh Secondary School, then Catholic Junior College. For my bachelor's degree I was in Australia studying Information Technology, learning to code with different programming languages and to build software and websites.

After my studies, I took on an IT job but it was too boring for me. I switched to a marketing role in a consumer electronics company called O2 selling first-generation smart phones – back then they were called PDA phones. I got to work with the latest technology in consumer products and that was fun for me.

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Following that, I worked in Sony and Brother, and my last job was with Bose, all in marketing roles. Work was great. I got to travel and I got to work with people from all over the world. But, not so long ago, I started to want to do something for myself. I wanted to start my own business. I wanted to change my life and also see if I could contribute something to the community.



IS THAT WHY YOU WENT TO SMU FOR A MASTER'S IN INNOVATION?

Yes. I already had it in my mind to start my own business but I didn't know what I wanted to do or how to start. I was hoping to get some inspiration during the course of my studies and also lean on SMU's entrepreneur network. I quit my job in the midst of my course to start my own business. It was a leap of faith and till now, I don't regret my decision at all.

HOW DIFFICULT WAS IT TO CREATE YOUR FIRST RANGE OF PRODUCTS? WHAT WAS THAT PROCESS LIKE?

Starting a business is not easy. It is hard work and every sale no matter how small has been an achievement. In the development phase, I worked on more than 60 recipes, experimenting with many ingredients to achieve the right texture, to get the perfect scents, and most importantly, to make sure the product was effective. Then, after all the testing, sourcing and experimenting, it took me about nine months to launch my products and to sell my first Jomingo product.

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I'm so grateful for my friends, family and even my SMU classmates. They all willingly became guinea pigs, helping me test the products. They all believed in me. I received a lot of feedback about my products that helped me develop the final product and formulation.

After I completed my degree, my professors suggested that my business could be incubated in SMU's Institute of Innovation & Entrepreneurship (IIE). There, I would have the chance to mingle with other entrepreneurs and access to mentors to guide me. It was very helpful to be in IIE. There is strong network support from the IIE team. I got to exchange ideas and share the joys and pains of starting a business. It was really comforting to know I was not alone in the journey to become an entrepreneur.

HOW DOES JOMINGO STAND OUT AS UNIQUE IN THE MARKETPLACE?

We are a natural and eco-friendly Asian brand. Our mission is to inspire healthy living for all, with no harm to animals or the environment. I also want Jomingo to be a colourful and fun brand. I want it to be outstanding enough for people to take an interest in it. I see a lot of eco-friendly brands from Europe and the US and I hope to see more eco-friendly brands in Asia. Did you know that 80 per cent of marine plastic waste comes from Asia? There is so much we can do to improve the environment and I think one of the best ways to do that is to give people in Asia more access to making eco-conscious purchases, as well as the ability to buy locally or regionally.

TELL ME ABOUT THE PRODUCTS THEMSELVES.



All the products are made from natural ingredients. I handmade most of my products. I also outsource to a local manufacturer depending on the demand.

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I worked on a formula that suits our tropical weather. It is important to me that the key ingredients can all be sourced within the Asia region – for example, tapioca starch from Thailand and cocoa butter from Vietnam and Malaysia. I also pick scents true to Asia such as Litsea Cubeba from Vietnam. Several friends suggested I use the always popular lavender scent in my products but lavender essential oils are mostly sourced from Europe. We have such a wide variety of scents from Asia so why not pick something close to home? After all, I believe in giving back to our regional community. Choosing Asian ingredients helps to reduce our carbon footprint in the production process.

I use minimal ingredients in my products. I study each ingredient carefully so that I know it is not toxic. I use a website called the Environment Working Group (ewg.org) as my main reference tool. Using the site, you can search ingredients to check their impact on both human health and the environment.

When I use the term “natural”, it means they are naturally formed from plants and are naturally occurring. I use non-animal derivatives, so the products are also suitable for vegans.

I also experiment with different packaging to see which works for the deodorant. Some people have said I should just go with plastic deodorant tubes instead of the paper ones I use because they are cheaper and much easier to use but I know I have to stay true to my strong environmental values. Some things just cannot be compromised.

WAS QUITTING YOUR FULL-TIME JOB TO START YOUR OWN COMPANY A NERVE-RACKING EXPERIENCE?

Yes! Giving up a good job and a stable income takes guts. At the same time, I’m grateful that I have the opportunity to start my own business. It requires not only a lot of time and money but also the support of your loved ones. The moral support is what keeps me going.

My friends and family were surprised that I wanted to give up my job but they encouraged me once they realised I had made up my mind.



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WHERE DOES THE NAME “JOMINGO” COME FROM?

I am very fond of animals and I love flamingos. I love their elegance and their amazingly eye-catching pink colour. My name starts with a J. So it's a blend of flamingo and the first letter of my name. I had actually wanted to name my business Jumingo but the domain name was taken so Jomingo was my next best choice.

HOW HAS IT BEEN SO FAR? WHAT HAS BEEN THE LOWEST LOW AND THE HIGHEST HIGH?

There are so many learnings in this entrepreneur journey and I have loved most of them. That said, there are so many things I wish I could go back and correct from the start but I guess that's what every entrepreneur has to go through. I started off as a one-woman business and I didn't come from a personal care industry, so I had to learn everything from scratch. I lack experience in that industry and this is my first business. It has been tough and fun at the same time. Every step has been a new discovery for me.

Every single sale is a high moment for me. This means someone sees the value of my product and my brand. That's an achievement. When my customers give me positive feedback and they like my products – that's a bonus!

Lows are when things happen that are out of my control, like when a shipment is late and my stock gets stuck. Once, I had a batch of products whose manufacturing I had outsourced turn out to be a disaster. Also, most customers in Singapore are not familiar with using natural products. Since they are used to using conventional personal care products like commercial supermarket deodorants, what a natural deodorant is like can often be a surprise to them. I find that I have to do a lot of education about using healthy, all-natural products.

HOW DO YOU MARKET?

Social media and word of mouth. My customers post about my products. I rely on great reviews and recommendations to get the word out.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST SURPRISE FOR YOU SO FAR IN YOUR ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY?

Honestly, I have been pleasantly surprised that some of my customers have been as encouraging as they have been. Some have reached out personally. They have become big fans of my brand and are open about sharing this with me. They keep me motivated and I appreciate their time and effort in reaching out to me.

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HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED YOUR BUSINESS?

Sales have been slow, I admit. I am taking this time to focus on improving my business efficiency and creating a new product line. I recently launched my hand balms in the midst of the “circuit breaker”, for those who wish to keep their hands moisturised after frequent hand washing and sanitising.

I LOVE YOUR PACKAGING. CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT IT?

As a marketer, I know how important packaging is. It’s the first thing that catches the eyes of consumers and it represents the identity of the brand. I wanted the packaging to portray nature and be colourful so it stands out. I got to know my designer through one of my SMU classmates. The illustrations on the packaging were designed by him. They were so good, I didn’t even make any changes to his first submission. He pieced the animals that I had seen in my travels into the packaging design. The only animal on the packaging that I have not seen is the mermaid whose tail you can see if you look hard enough.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR THE BRAND? ANYTHING EXCITING YOU WANT TO SHARE?

I have just launched my natural and vegan hand balms so I’m really excited about those. My next plan is to launch another product line in the coming months in time for Christmas. I hope to grow Jomingo to be a natural and eco-friendly brand not only in Singapore but also across Southeast Asia, and spread the word of the importance of using natural products for the benefit of one’s health as well as for our planet.