Going Green in just 600 rupees

Poonam Bir Kasturi, a Bangalore-based NID graduate, introduces composting in terracotta vessels—a simple and sustainable way of managing waste from the very comfort of your home.

Shilpi Kumar

Genesis of the innovation

It might seem surreal to get people to do away with the good old trashcans and buy a pot worth Rs. 600 for disposing garbage. However, that is exactly what Poonam Bir Kasturi, the woman behind the Bangalore-based startup Daily Dump has been up to for the past one and a half years.

Poonam’s terracotta vessels are designed to convert household waste into useful high-quality, nutrient rich manure. Ask her what made her come up with such a concept, and she says, “An average urban citizen generates over half a kilogram of solid waste everyday, which is disposed off without being segregated. People want to make a significant contribution towards reducing landfill waste, and they look for a simple way to do so. Replacing dustbins with these pots is an easy solution for customers to do their share of environmental friendly work.”

An alumnus of the National Institute of Design. Poonam’s knowledge of design also contributed in the shaping of the vessel. “Design as a process thinking tool is extremely powerful. I would constantly ask myself, ‘How can design impact everyday life?’, ‘Can it be an enabler for a dignified individual action?’ ‘Is there an alternative to this obsessive consumerism?’ It is after having many such discussions with friends and my students at the...
Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology, that the idea evolved," she says. After testing many different materials, Poonam concluded that terracotta is the best for decomposition. "Plastic failed miserably," says Poonam.

Implementation of the idea

Poonam made an initial investment of Rs 400,000 to set up the business. This included the cost of researching, getting the material, prototyping, publishing hand manuals that accompany the product, etc. The project has been completely funded by Poonam herself. As she puts it, "I do not want to sign for a grant or a loan, because I want to prove in some way that it is not always about the money or a business model, it is about intentions."

How did she implement the program and get the word across? She claims that a clear vision, correct platform and proper packaging are all it takes to build an intrinsic value and to disseminate information. In Poonam's case, her Website (dailyydump.org), which cost her around Rs 200,000, played a great role in implementing the project. "I don't advertise for my products so most of the publicity happens through the Website. You can put up a lot of knowledge; you can direct people, and use it as a central force," she claims.

Thanks to their beautiful designs, these vessels can be placed anywhere from the garden, kitchen or even the entrance of the house. Also, there is a wide range of products, including the gamla, patta kambha, leave-it-pot, kambha and mota lota, from which the customers can choose. Miniature sets for kids, aprons, rakes, spoons and spatulas are available as well.

For customers who don't have the time or are unsure about how to begin with the composting process at home, Daily Dump offers service plans where someone from the team comes on a weekly basis to help with the maintenance. "Our fastest moving product, the kambha costs Rs 600. The cost of other vessels and accessories ranges from Rs 50-500, depending on the size and if someone wants a specific design, there is an extra project cost. The cost of the service plan is Rs 2,000," claims Poonam.

Challenges en route

One of the initial conflicts Poonam faced was to come to terms with the decision to make Daily Dump an open-source idea, i.e., to allow other players to venture into it and not patent it. Her friends thought that she was impractical in doing so and she was told that it is a complete do-gooder scheme and not a viable business proposition. Poonam, however, decided to march on. "I have just leveraged my expertise and haven't put a cost to it. Business analysts might think that my business model is all wrong, but I look at it as enabling several others to make money.

I love the fact that I am a woman living in a developing country, working with completely low-tech ideas, addressing a real urban problem and enabling someone in Florida to make money. Just the thought of it is so exciting, “ says Poonam.

POONAM BIR KASTURI
DAILY DUMP

Making it future perfect

Poonam is currently working on designing a mechanical composting device, which she dreams would one day be fitted into everyone's house and it would become like second nature for people to use it. "Firstly, architectural solutions are required to execute this project. Secondly, I need money to travel to places in India and abroad, to show the product to people, as well as to educate them about composting. This, combined with a two-minute scoop on composting by a Rajnikant or Amitabh Bachchan, aired free on a Star TV or Zee, and I'll feel like I have really achieved something," she says. Again, she plans to make this an open source idea for small fabricators all over the country to start replicating.

Whether it is constructing green buildings, using CFL lamps, driving eco-friendly vehicles or something as simple as replacing plastic bags with those made out of paper; everyone seems to be doing their bit to become a responsible, environment-friendly citizen. Poonam, by offering a range of composting products and flexible service plans to households is not only doing her bit, but has also paved the way for about 1100 customers, based in Bangalore and Chennai, towards becoming green citizens.