

Never stop reinventing

When life throws the business a curveball, Patrick Lim's response is to face the challenges head-on. This means going back to the drawing board and coming up with products to suit new demands and circumstances.

BY SREEREMA BANOO

Patrick Lim knows what it's like to face a seemingly insurmountable task. But where others would walk away from a challenge, the 46-year-old simply rolls up his sleeves and thinks of ways to overcome that obstacle. It's an attitude he has adopted from the very start of his entrepreneurial journey.

Lim always dreamt of starting his own business. As a young boy, he took the *keropoh* his uncle had bought from Terengganu and sold them to his friends — much to his uncle's consternation — and had a front row seat to the ups and downs of starting a business, thanks to his father, who traded in agricultural products.

Lim spent years in the business and corporate sector, learning the ins and outs of seasonal sales, design of retail stores, distribution, operations and product development. These were useful skills, which he added to his résumé, along with a postgraduate diploma in marketing and an MBA, but still the entrepreneurial path eluded him.

"I wanted to start a business that would allow me the opportunity to create great products and not just sell great products," he says. So when a friend suggested bags, his interest was piqued. The six years he spent with a computer company, which required him to spend most of his time at the retail outlets, meant that he was working out of his backpack.

"I was well aware of the brands in the market and it was easy for me to understand the overall market, so I saw the potential," says Lim. Not having any background in bag design or bag making did not deter him. While still working full time, he picked up the rudiments of bag design and bag making, learning to sew from scratch and spent many hours at night tinkering with his designs.

In 2011, after a year of research — and several blistered fingers — Lim founded Greenroom136. From its first product, the JunkMonkey, which drew its inspiration from single-strap, bike messenger bags, Greenroom136 has since expanded its product range to include various carry gear such as backpacks and wallets. Handmade from Cordura, with straps made using seatbelt material and buckles for quick release, Greenroom136's products are durable and water-resistant ("built like a tank" and "bombproof stitching" are just some of the rave reviews received). Greenroom136 also allows buyers to customise their bags. They get to choose from a selection of customisable bags, then decide on the desired specs and colours before making payment.

Admittedly the first four years in business were a struggle for Lim. "It was a lot of elbow grease. Starting a business after coming from the corporate world, you tend to think that if this doesn't work out, you can go back to the corporate world. So, I always had that so-called 'get-out-of-jail card' tucked in my back pocket. When things started to go bad, I would look at that card. One day, I realised that it was holding me back. So, I metaphorically threw that card away. There was no way out now. It was just one direction from then on. So, I just set



about doing what I needed to do," he says.

Today, this home-grown independent bag company, with a staff of 12, has developed a loyal following in Malaysia and abroad, garnering keen reviews from vloggers and the international online community of bag-carrying enthusiasts.

Pandemic lessons

Although the tough early years are behind him, Lim says the prospect of having to shutter the business was very real when the pandemic hit, especially because orders from the US — its largest revenue contributor — had dropped. "But I told myself that no matter how bad things get, so long as we keep moving forward, one step at a time, we would still be better off than where we were in year one. That helped. The challenges of 2020 were something we had not encountered before and for a time, we did go into hibernation so that we would not close down. During this time, the focus was on payroll so that the people who were important to us were taken care of, including the creditors and [suppliers] of raw materials."

Indeed, Lim's response to the pandemic's impact on his business is testament to his tenacity. "Each time we're faced with a challenge, the first step is to think about it and figure out what to do next. During the two months of the MCO (Movement Control Order) last year, we were at work trying to figure out how to survive 2020," he says.

That was when he decided to make face masks and researched the attributes of a good product. "We looked at why it had to be three layers, why there had to be a polyester layer and a cotton layer ... all these aspects played a role in the product's DNA," he says.



**SURVIVAL TIPS
FOR ENTREPRENEURS**



★ **Navigating a pandemic is like juggling while balancing on a ball and going through a thunderstorm in a boat. Expect losses and casualties while trying to weather the storm. The trick is to stay in the game and outlast the storm.**

★ **Accept change and be ready to change. Be ready to create products that will conform to the new normal.**

★ **Never give up, never surrender. Businesses fail to survive when management decides to stop solving problems or when a problem has become too critical to repair. But a little ingenuity, elbow grease, processes and time can help resolve the problem, and sometimes it's a quick fix because a long-term solution is not yet an option.**



While this new product would support the company through this difficult time, there were still some stumbling blocks. “For one, you cannot change [the design] a lot, so profit is low unless you have the volume. There is also the question of pricing it fairly, and that was why we decided to sell the masks in packs of three,” says Lim, adding that fans of Greenroom136 responded positively to the product.

When it came to the core products, he realised that people were not going to buy backpacks any more. “People were not going back to work anytime soon, so messenger bags were not going to sell well. We had to come up with products that would fit people’s current routines, so we looked at our Metro line of products like the Metro-monger and Metrodrifter, which were successful pre-pandemic.” The latter, a small sling-style, single-strap bag, which was released last year, was especially popular with customers and was even twice imitated by entrepreneurs abroad.

“I knew this was something I could look into, and that was how the Metrorunner came into the picture. This is a small bag because, thanks to the 11in iPad and Apple Pencil, people are now operating in a different manner, increasingly using smaller laptops and iPads. It’s that little bit of luxury during such a difficult time. During the MCO, I sent out images of the bag via social media and asked people what they thought of it, and if they’d like to see a product like this. The response was very positive ... so I’ve dedicated this bag in remembrance of that lockdown period,” says Lim.

In the months following and as orders rebounded in the US — as the country got a firmer

grip on its pandemic response — he upped the ante by launching the PRIME edition of Greenroom136’s best-selling Metro line of products. Made from a choice of either sailcloth or military camouflage fabric, and with extras like premium-grade buckles, the bags — with a limited run and serial numbers — were enthusiastically received. “We sold enough to sustain the business,” he says.

Always a silver lining

Reinventing has been second nature to Lim since he began the business. Over the years, he says, people have congratulated him for the products that the company comes up with. But the truth is that these products were created at a time when business was lacklustre. “It was because we had all that spare time. So, instead of wallowing in depression, I used the time to create a product and launch it, which then sparks interest in the market,” he says, pointing out that this has been his approach over the last decade.

As a bag maker, Lim, who still sews all the prototypes himself, sees beyond the fabric, buckles and strap. “Our bags speak of the people who carry them. The contents of their bags represent their livelihoods, and that is why we tell our customers to look beyond the bag to what it represents. We say, ‘Buy it because of your story. That’s why you pay more, because you want to protect that investment in your livelihood’.

“As a maker, you do get a special high when you create something out of nothing. When I have an idea for a bag, I have the ability to turn the idea into reality. And when our customer base — which we treat like friends — like the design, well, that gives me another hit of endorphin. The idea of creating something and having people appreciate it, use it and love it, that keeps me going.”



The response to Greenroom136’s most recent offering, an everyday carry wallet affectionately called the Sardine Tin, has further fuelled Lim’s business aspirations. The Sardine Tin, a collaboration with The Perfect Pack, a community of global bag aficionados that started as a Facebook group, has a story regarding its genesis.

“We started on it during the recent lockdown, which meant that all the pieces were actually made by one person working from home. And because all the print shops were closed, the product card for it was actually printed on the office inkjet printer ... so it was really a kind of underground production,” he says. Response to the Sardine Tin was so overwhelming that all the pieces, numbering in the triple digits, were sold within an hour of its launch at the end of June. “This kind of reaction is something we hope to replicate again and again,” says Lim.

Having fulfilled his lifelong dream of becoming an entrepreneur, he says the experience of the past decade has taught him an invaluable lesson. “I have learnt that I can stand on my own two feet, that I am not dependent on others, and that no matter what the challenges are, there is always a silver lining,” he says. **E**