

Interest in artisanal products opens up avenues

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METROBIZ

Thursday, 26 Feb
2015

12:00 AM MYT



Diverse: The range of Claire's Organics natural products that caters to different skin types, handmade by Louise Chu.

With increasing concerns over health issues and awareness of environmental hazards, natural products have emerged as a major trend in recent years.

Interest in natural personal care products, especially skincare and cosmetics, is outpacing processed products with high-technology formulations in luxury packaging.

A growing number of consumers nowadays, concerned about what goes onto their skin, are less enticed by technological innovations and more interested in ingredients and the efficacy of products.

As a result, many are moving towards artisanal products, with some even making their own natural products.

For Louise Chu, founder of Claire's Organics brand of personal care products, it all started with the birth of her baby girl. She had wanted to provide her daughter with a healthy and chemical-free environment.

Chu stumbled upon a website about the benefits of breast milk soaps and decided to attend local classes to learn soap-making and started making them at home.

"As one batch of soap comes in 10 to 20 pieces, I shared some with close friends and family members," says the 35-year-old mother. Some of her homemade soap were given to people who had skin problems such as eczema.



Homemade: Chu enjoys the process of creating her products at the comfort of her own home.

"Friends commented that the soaps eased their skin conditions," she says.

Soon enough, word spread and Chu started receiving enquiries. This gave rise to the idea of turning her passion and hobby into a business.

Without much of a background in beauty products, she invested more than RM20,000 in workshops and courses both locally and abroad, and obtained a professional aromatherapy certification from the United States.

Claire's Organics, named after Chu's daughter Norra Claire, was established in mid-2012 as a blogshop with a line-up of handmade soaps and natural body-care products.

Riding on graphic design and marketing skills that she gained from her full-time job, Chu created the whole brand image, from product types to the packaging, by herself.

She spent between RM3,000 and RM5,000 on ingredients, tools and packaging material, and set up a little production corner in the comfort of her own home.

"The online platform required the least cost but once I started venturing into participating in bazaars and setting up a kiosk, more money, between RM5,000 to RM10,000, was invested into physical setups and manpower," Chu says.

Expanding from the online platform, Chu marketed her brand at weekend bazaars, artisanal markets and handicraft networks in her second year and then ventured into placing her products on shelves in malls.

"Things went well, and I did not expect my products to get onto shelves so soon," says Chu.



Carefully done: Lee pouring the mixture into a soap mold.

As smooth-sailing as it may seem, there are always challenges in every business.

Finding time, Chu says, is one of the biggest challenges as she has to juggle a full-time job, her homemade products and her daughter.

"I can only start production during the night after my daughter's asleep.

"With the limited time available, I also have to cope with the orders for all three of the business platforms, as I am the only one making the products," Chu explains.

The shorter shelf-life of natural products and their formulation processes are another challenge she faces.

Now in its third year, Chu says, the business has broken even and enjoys sales of RM3,000 to RM5,000 a month from all three channels.

Clair's Organics products, which include soap, lip balm, face oil and body scrubs among others, are priced from RM15 to RM65.

Asked about plans to expand the brand into physical outlets, Chu says she might consider it if the capital to do so is available and, most importantly, her products are kept original.

Meanwhile, Nadya Lee, too, established her own brand of soaps, The Saponifist, three years ago.

The 37-year-old has always had an interest in handicrafts, honing her skills at making accessories and art pieces from an early age.