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Commerce

Doing a World of Good

Global Shopping Program Delivers Products to the People

Priya Haji loves to shop. But she is a demanding customer, always on the lookout for high-quality items reflecting superior style: soft, hand-woven scarves, the color of the turquoise sea, from Northern India; fun and funky hand-sewn shoulder bags of bright Mayan fabric; sophisticated black shell evening clutches hand-beaded in Vietnam.



These are the kinds of irresistible goods that Haji, co-founder and chief executive officer of World of Good Inc. offers consumers through her company. But Haji is on a mission to transform the way the world does business.

Haji wants to see purchasing dollars create good on a global scale. And for the last four years, she has directed her profitable, award-winning company on the premise that other shoppers do, too.

Since 2004, Haji, 38, has been the visionary behind Emeryville's World of Good, bringing fair trade, ethically produced gifts, clothing and handcrafted household articles to mainstream American customers. World of Good got off to a running start with test displays in Bay Area Whole Foods Markets and hasn't looked back since. The company brand, marketed as Original Good, is now in 1,200 retail locations across the country, including 250 Whole Foods stores. The product line also boasts crafts such as necklaces finely constructed of glowing brass beads and horn; ebony black serving dishes shaped from gray clay; and delicate leaf-pattern iron baskets. Women artisans in developing countries create the goods, so they're handcrafted; and they're priced for budget-conscious buyers with a penchant for "good," "green" and "fair-trade" buying principles. Additionally, each product carries the individual artisans' stories.

Customers, with every purchase, help create sustainable livelihoods for these women

artisans, their families and communities, in an environmentally sound way that guarantees fair wages. Since its launch, the company has worked with 6,000 craftspeople and artists in 34 countries directly affecting more than 25,000 dependents.

Haji coined and trademarked the term “trustology” to describe her rigorous screening process (performed in partnership with programs like the International Fair Trade Association and the Peace Corps) to assure the positive human and environmental impact of the products, most of which incorporate recycled and naturally abundant indigenous materials. An example of the ingenious results includes trivets made by Mai Handicrafts in Vietnam from lacquered strips of recycled magazines. The artisans who make the trivets now have health insurance, scholarship funds and decent living wages thanks to their partnership with World of Good.

Some say the third time is the charm, and World of Good is Haji’s third outing as a start-up genie. So far, the philanthropic-spirited business is flourishing in the competitive sphere of gift retailing. This fall World of Good and eBay, the world’s largest e-commerce enterprise, began a first-of-its-kind collaboration, creating a huge, ethical online marketplace, a natural extension of World of Good’s retail presence.

But Haji’s first two organizational efforts were, contrary to the old cliché, just as remarkable and also geared toward communities in need. Which for Haji proves two things: The successful launch of a new venture is about skill and imagination, not luck; and you really can do well by doing good. Or to be more exact, business can be profitable while making a positive contribution to the world. It’s the World of Goods marketing credo more or less: Given a choice, buyers will opt for people-positive, planet-positive products. If positive karma plays a small role, all the better.

Haji’s soaring path to entrepreneurial success took a sharp detour from her family’s expectations, but it always adhered to her family’s strong values. Raised in a small Texas town by East Indian physician parents—dad an immigrant from East Africa, mom from Bombay—Haji feels blessed by their guiding philosophy. “My parents are amazing people in that they showed me that doing something great isn’t necessarily one historic moment. Doing something great is the incremental good acts across your lifetime.” Haji was in high school when her father and aunt started a free clinic in an old hotel in a rough section of town. “Somebody had to organize everything and I wanted to do it,” she says. “A lot of parents would have said, ‘You’re too young.’ But my dad was like, ‘Sure. Why not try it.’ I did the incorporation papers. I was 16.” Her earliest undertaking is still a thriving clinic.

Haji’s first lesson in entrepreneurship? “Just like you play house, you play office. Then it becomes real.” Haji carried this can-do spirit with her to Stanford, planning on medical school upon graduation. Instead, she co-founded and served as executive director of the nationally recognized nonprofit organization, Free At Last, a recovery and rehabilitation center serving East Palo Alto, garnering recognition from the DoSomething Foundation, MTV and *Mademoiselle Magazine* as one of “America’s Ten Most Outstanding Young Leaders.” Up until then, Haji and her parents assumed she would become a doctor. “But I realized that one doctor helps X number of people. One person who builds a great company or institution can do something that helps 1,000 times X, or a million times X people.” Inspired by the positive impact of her second start-up, Haji steered herself toward Berkeley and an MBA.

“When I went back to school, I wondered what kinds of problems I wanted to try to solve this time around,” says Haji, considering the role of karma in her life. “Sometimes I feel it is an accident of birth that I am this girl who was born in America with so many opportunities. So how do I spend my life to make that possible for others?”

A worldwide jaunt to Asia and South America following graduation fired her entrepreneurial passion. During her travels, she visited many “producer communities”—groups of women artisans crafting goods to sell from their homes and villages—and witnessed the ability of women’s empowerment to transform whole communities. “I realized that there were amazing initiatives going on, led overwhelmingly by women,” she says. “There is this incredible force of entrepreneurship bubbling up from within the community and resources pouring in.”

But one critical thing was missing: access to global markets. Haji was convinced she could solve the problem. “What if we could build the companies of the future that shape the world that we want to live in—the kinds that rely on smaller artisan communities, making goods that empower women to work in their homes and communities, in a slower way, with a more handcrafted feel?” she asked herself. Haji studied the barriers for retailers and shoppers, determining the most effective way to build market access would be through



collaborative partnerships, setting the stage for World of Good’s relationships with Whole Foods and eBay.

But first things first: getting a company up and running. Upon her return to the United States, Haji enticed fellow Berkeley MBA Siddharth Sanghvi to quit his job and co-found the new endeavor, World of Good.

“Looking back, it was quite scary,” says Sanghvi, director of marketing. Haji used \$10,000 of personal savings as start-up

funds; Sanghvi offered his apartment as office space to save money. Haji insisted they needed a real office; Sanghvi was reluctant. “We don’t have any money; what are we doing?” he said. Haji’s response? “I don’t know. But it is like playing house—buy the office supplies, set up the desk, get a phone. Then it’s real.” Using shelves from Ikea to construct an “Indian bazaar” display of Original Good products for Whole Foods was the next step, which earned the grocery retailer’s confidence.

Fortunately, Sanghvi trusts Haji’s instincts and thoroughly enjoys the journey. “I am excited to come to work every day,” he says. “I’ve learned that people, when given a chance, really want every dollar they spend to count, to make a positive difference.”

Over the past four years, the company has grown from three employees to 60. Ninety percent are women. The office buzzes with purpose and upbeat vibes. And this buzz follows Haji wherever she goes, including her keynote address this fall to the incoming MBA class at UC Berkeley Haas School of Business, Haji’s alma mater. Speaking to a crowd of several hundred, Haji likened their tremendous potential and palpable excitement to “a powerful drug I walked around the room inhaling.” As she described her own start-up experience, she electrified the crowd, charging them to live up to all their possibilities and dreams.

Big dreams, like World of Good’s partnership with eBay. In the collaboration, World of Good.com gathers World of Good’s thousands of products and their producers under one global electronic roof and connects to them to millions of socially conscious Web

customers. The eBay connection expands the Original Good marketplace beyond the bricks and mortar displays. The partnership has resulted in a unique business model—a small entrepreneurial team made up of employees from both companies and a new concept—products with a “Goodprint,” or the good each World of Good product leaves behind in the world.

World of Good is, in fact, two organizations: World of Good Inc., which is the business side working with retail and online partners; and the nonprofit World of Good: Development Organization, which focuses on fair living wages and invests 10 percent of World of Good profits in health and education initiatives in artisan communities.

World of Good has been often celebrated for its genius, and such recognition from peers and awards are nice, but for Haji, it’s about so much more. “We know budgets are tight. We don’t suggest that people buy more, just buy differently. Shopping should be fun and should be easy and can actually create a positive impact in the world,” she says. “That’s really what’s cool.”

—By Noelle Robbins

Inside World of Good

World of Good Inc.: Retail and online product sales and store locator, www.worldofgoodinc.com.

Original Good.com: Product line of handcrafted, fair-trade gifts, accessories and housewares with artisan community profiles, www.orginalgood.com.

World of Good.com: eBay marketplace for Original Good Products, www.worldofgood.com.

World of Good.org or World of Good: Development Organization (nonprofit sister to World of Good Inc.): Working to improve economic and social conditions for millions of global artisans, www.worldofgood.org.