

INSPIRING STORIES

Charged Up for the Battery Regeneration Business

Anandan Eahambram's entrepreneurial journey started with his growing frustration over a lack of freedom to pursue his ideas, when his proposals and ideas were constantly ignored or run down by his then bosses.

Anandan says, "I craved the freedom to explore opportunity without restrictions. To take risks, learn and get results without having to go through layers of command. The day came when I simply had to find my own path in my own business".

Anandan, a Bachelor of Business Administration graduate, was working in healthcare and logistics sector then. When he saw potential in regenerative technologies and identified a market gap for sustainable solutions that could benefit both businesses and the environment, he decided to take the plunge into entrepreneurship and established Renewcell (M) Sdn. Bhd.

He explains, "Malaysia imports more than RM1.5 billion worth of lead-acid and nickel-cadmium batteries annually. These are used in power generation, utilities, transportation, marine and defence. I had developed a technology to revive, reuse and repurpose batteries, reducing the need for replacement and recycling. There are environmental and financial costs in discarding batteries after short-use cycles. Extending battery life would contribute to a greener environment, aligning with global sustainability goals while cutting costs in battery deployment for businesses".

As with all start-ups, the company struggled in its early stage. It was a challenge to sustain the business with limited capital, which was mostly from personal savings and loans from family members. Another big hurdle was gaining market acceptance, with many prospective customers were resistant to adopting new technology and preferring to stick to conventional practices. Anandan says, he had to educate the customers on the potential for battery reuse and the advantages of battery regeneration as against traditional replacement methods. The situation was compounded by regulatory issues related to the use of used batteries.

A breakthrough was achieved when prospective customers gradually began to see the benefits of the company's technology. He also engaged with customers through partnerships with industry stakeholders and participation in events and programmes such as the International Greentech & Eco Products Exhibition & Conference Malaysia (IGEM) and Malaysia Commercialisation Year (MCY), which showcase green energy solutions. The company also leverages on social media communications to reach a broader audience.





Financial assistance to scale production came in the form of grants from Cradle Fund via Cradle Investment Programme 300 (CIP300) and the Business Accelerator Programme 3.0 (BAP 3.0) from SME Corp. Malaysia. As operations scaled up, soft loans were obtained from financial institutions like Yayasan Hasanah, SME Bank and Maybank. Financial support such as these, Anandan says, was instrumental in helping the business expand and invest in cutting-edge battery regeneration technologies.

Anandan is grateful for training and mentorship support received from various agencies. “Cradle Fund and Malaysian Research Accelerator for Technology and Innovation (MRANTI) also helped in grooming us through various training programmes, such as Global Accelerator Programme (GAP) and mentorship. These equipped us with valuable skills and insights along with enhancing our capabilities and positioning in the industry. We also collaborate with various research institutions and industry stakeholders”. Renewcell partnered with University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) for research on improving battery lifecycles and with the Technology Depository Agency under the Industrial Collaboration Programme (ICP) for industries reliant on battery-powered systems, such as LRT3. The company has developed two proprietary solutions, Battmama and BuggTrac, to provide information on battery performance, location and preventive maintenance.

The company, Anandan says, owes its success to its ability to surmount the challenges in introducing a disruptive technology as well as the strong support from various agencies. “Thanks to their support, we were able to sustain our business and validate our technology through various trials. Growth has been driven by increasing awareness of environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles in the marketplace. This has enabled us to diversify into battery management applications integrated with Internet of Things (IoT) technology. And thanks to SME Corp. Malaysia’s BAP 3.0, we were able to add two high-capacity regeneration machines to boost capacity”.

Asked as to how the Government could help MSMEs, Anandan suggests, “Expand funding programmes with favourable terms, especially through grants, soft and collateral-free loans and venture capital, to help start-ups scale quickly. Encourage MSMEs to adopt digital technologies by providing subsidies, grants or training for digital tools, e-commerce platforms and cloud technologies. Initiate more programmes to help MSMEs leverage on technology to improve efficiency and reach global markets while reducing costs”.

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He says the Government could provide more support, especially for start-ups, through public procurement programmes which set aside a portion exclusively for MSMEs. The Government could also facilitate market access and export, capacity building and entrepreneurial development. Incentives such as grants, tax relief and advisory services to help MSMEs transition to eco-friendly production and operations should be provided.

Anandan sees the growing awareness of ESG principles as an opportunity to creating greater demand for his services. "As more industries prioritise sustainable practices, our battery regeneration service becomes a critical solution in helping businesses meet their ESG targets".

As a word of advice to aspiring entrepreneurs, especially in a technical field such as battery regeneration, Anandan says, "Knowledge and expertise are essential for success. Understand battery chemistry and lifecycle management. Invest in advanced diagnostic and regeneration technologies that can extend battery lifespans and reduce waste. Acquire knowledge of sustainability practices and expertise in supply chain management. And collaborate with research institutions, industry stakeholders and Government bodies for further development".



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Two Women Entrepreneurs with a Cool and Thriving Business

Yasmin Karim developed a craving for lime-flavoured ice lollies during her pregnancy, consuming from three to four sticks a day. However, the consumption of these store-bought lollies, loaded with sugar, artificial flavours and colouring, had her ended up diagnosed as pre-diabetic! Forced to part ways with her sweet cravings, Yasmin decided to concoct her own lollies using lime and various fruit juices. It was her homemade lollies that led to her Aha! moment in her entrepreneurial journey.

Thus, Doluvo Sdn. Bhd. was born which specialise in manufacturing of Popsmalaya Ice Bars, made from real fruit, with no artificial flavour or colouring or preservatives, shelf-stable / ambient ice lollies that can be stored at room temperature. Popsmalaya has nine flavours: mango, strawberry, grape, lychee peach, passion fruit pineapple, raspberry, pink guava, green apple and a chocolate variant. These plant-based ice bars also cater to those with specific dietary preferences, such as vegans and those with lactose intolerance.

Yasmin and friend, Zuraini Zulkifli founded Doluvo, based in Puncak Alam, Selangor, in 2016. Yasmin, a former research analyst and journalist with a Bachelor of Business Administration from Universiti Malaya, is Chief Executive Officer of the company and Zuraini Zulkifli, a former auditor with a Bachelor of Accounting and Finance degree from London South Bank University, is Chief Operating Officer.

Why venture into business? Yasmin says, “We enjoy the process of turning an idea into a tangible product and sharing it with the masses. I also like that business performance is predicated entirely by merit, not politics. I also did an audit of our skills & capabilities. While we don’t have everything figured out, Zuraini and I knew we were resourceful enough to figure things out and resilient enough to face challenges”.

The first three years of business were especially challenging, working long hours including weekends, with most of the decisions based on trial & error and having to pivot several times when some decisions backfired. Funding for the business initially came from what little savings they had. To scale further, they borrowed from family. It was only after obtaining three years of audited accounts were they eligible for more support from the Government as well as loans from banks.

Yasmin says of the early stage of the business: “We started out with a 2,500 square feet factory and sold our products at food festivals and to a handful of retailers as well as at catering events. We were largely self-taught because there are no textbooks on how to run an ice cream factory. Zuraini and I were both first-time manufacturers, first-time brand builders and then first-time exporters. When it comes to exporting, we had to ensure our products are eligible for certificate of origin and our factory has Halal, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP), Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) and ISO 22000 certifications”.



“We wouldn’t be here without the extensive Government support, especially from SME Corp. Malaysia through the Bumiputera Enterprise Enhancement Programme (BEEP), Business Accelerator Programme (BAP) and Galakan Eksport Bumiputera Programme (GEB). We are also alumni of MATRADE’s Bumiputera, Women and Youth Exporter Development Programme and recipient of MTDC’s Halal Technology Development Fund 2.



They became an exporter two years after starting the business upon receiving orders from Viet Nam and New Zealand for a container load of ice lollies. Currently, Popsmalaya Ice Bars are sold in 27 countries, including the United States (US), Europe, Middle East, Pakistan, Southeast Asia, South Korea, Japan and Barbados. Their customers include large distributors and some of the world’s largest retailers like Costco in Spain, TJX and TKMAX outlets in the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe, Seijo Ishii in Japan, Lulu Hypermarket in Gulf countries and Emart in South Korea.

To make their presence felt in the international market, the partners attended iconic B2B international trade shows such as Anuga in Germany, Salon International de l’alimentation (SIAL) in France, Summer Fancy Food Show in US, Gulfood in Dubai and Foodex in Tokyo, focusing on shows that draws regional visitors and has the potential of generating a return of ten times on investment. Yasmin says, “Once we started getting into more markets, we began getting incoming leads when customers discovered our products overseas, as in the case of our Indonesian importer who discovered our product in South Korea”.

She attributed their success to the vision set by them: “What we wanted our company to be and the question we asked ourselves in the process: how shall we equip ourselves so that when opportunities arise, we would be ready to seize them? We kept a tight rein on our finances, re-investing profits into trademarking our brand in multiple countries while also being mindful not to make any pre-mature investments due to limited funds and time, all of which paid off when overseas buyers came calling”. She added that when it comes to exporting, “The first step to catching an international buyer’s attention is a good product and packaging that screams from the shelves, the rest is all about speed of response and ability to deliver to buyer expectations”.

Yasmin is grateful for the support received from the Government. “We wouldn’t be here without the extensive Government support, especially from SME Corp. Malaysia through the Bumiputera Enterprise Enhancement Programme (BEEP), Business Accelerator Programme (BAP) and Galakan Eksport Bumiputera Programme (GEB). We are also alumni of MATRADE’s Bumiputera, Women and Youth Exporter Development Programme and recipient of MTDC’s Halal Technology Development Fund 2. Recently we were selected by SME Bank for Business Export Program (BEP) to help us access the international market. We also received support from many other agencies, like the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, FAMA and MARA”.



Yasmin believes constant innovation is necessary for business sustainability but innovation is not only in terms of product development but in every touch point of a business, from sales and marketing to internal processes. Doluvo recently won Innovative Product Award at the Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS) 2023 and was also top six finalists from hundreds of companies that competed for the Malaysia Commercialisation Year award by MOSTI.

To aspiring entrepreneurs, Yasmin advises, “Ask yourself what is it that you want and most importantly, what price are you willing to pay to get it. It’s good to dream big but do remember the bigger the dream, the bigger the sacrifice. If you have a family, ensure they are onboard with your dream because the first three years especially will take a toll on you if you and your family are not mentally prepared”.

“Invest in learning, especially technical knowledge, but keep your learning time short. The most important thing a business owner needs to learn is how to sell. Selling is the heart of any business and sales is a cure-all for most of the ailments facing a business. Do remember that things are moving at breakneck speed in the marketplace. Whatever knowledge you acquired last year may not be relevant now. Keep up to date on happenings in the marketplace so you don’t miss out on what could potentially be a game changer for your business. If you are a manufacturer and exporter, there are IoT and artificial intelligence (AI) tools that could help you minimise labour costs and increase efficiency”.

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Sticky Rice Travel is Doing Good in Eco-tourism

Sticky Rice Travel brands itself as a responsible travel operator that offers 'meaningful adventures' in Sabah and Sarawak through personalised trips that explore indigenous cultures and sensitive ecosystems of the region.



The company offers a variety of itineraries to cater to the specific interests of travellers. There are itineraries for birders to search for Borneo's endemic species or for photographers to capture wildlife. If one is inclined towards wilder experiences, opt for deep jungle trekking and homestays with remote ethnic groups or go for culturally immersive experiences by engaging with communities in rural and remote areas.

Jessica Yew and Charles Ryan started Sticky Rice Travel, based in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, as a two-person home-office operation in 2012. It has since grown into one of the most respected travel companies in Sabah. Jessica says, "Charles and I are passionate about travel. We wanted to build a business based on a sustainable and responsible model that would benefit all stakeholders, customers included. We also aim at raising the standards of local tourism to match nature and wildlife destinations globally. We saw this niche was not being served, so we tapped into it, targeting tourists from the US, the UK and Australia who are like-minded about eco-tourism. We have now also attracted travellers from Hong Kong and Singapore".

"We have travelled extensively across Malaysia Borneo to obtain greater understanding of the region's eco-tourism potential. In fact, our guides are among the best in the region. This has enabled us to craft personalised, high-quality trips that explore sensitive ecosystems and indigenous cultures while adhering to a strict policy of low-impact travel. Borneo attracts people who share the same zeal for conservation".

The partners used their personal savings for the initial paid-up capital to start the business and for the first five years, reinvested almost all profits back into the company as the interests of the company and employees is paramount. Jessica says things went smoothly enough in the first three years of the business. "Growth was pretty good, with annual sales growth of between 50% to 70%. Challenges, however, emerged as the business grew bigger and when systems and structures had to be put in place. These brought about some disruption, which raised concerns as we had to ensure that our workforce was on the same page with us in relation to our vision for the business".

In the early days, they promoted their business through cold calls, targeting very specific travel brands that they wanted to add into their portfolio. Once links had been established with these handful of travel companies, they made sure that their service delivery was above and beyond expectations. Once confidence had been established, they would tap into these linkages for referrals to other travel brands.

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Currently, 85% of sales are generated by B2B activities through international partners who are among the most established global travel brands.

Jessica explains that the company's success has been shaped by creating unforgettable experiences for our clients and delivering a high level of customer satisfaction. "We became a top-rated company in travel books and online peer review sites due to delivery of high-quality products. This, plus strong networking and membership of global travel associations with similar values as ours were essential and powerful enablers that helped grow our business".

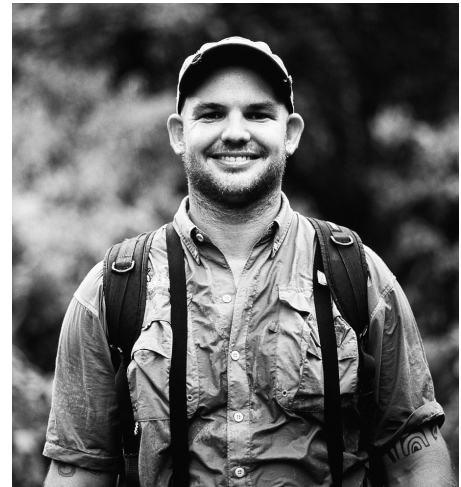
She adds that travel companies have the corporate social responsibility of ensuring that tourists leave minimal impact on sensitive ecosystems while industry players should make monetary contributions to conservation organisations that protect Sabah's natural assets such as the marine environment, forests and flora & fauna. This, she says, is something that is expected of Sticky Rice Travel by their international partners.

The company has begun the process for sustainability certification with B-Corp, one of the leading global certification organisations. "We committed to this certification to stay relevant and competitive as this will be the future of travel, where sustainability principles are increasingly coming into play".

She says that Malaysia Borneo is close to full capacity when it receives more nature travellers. "This situation has led us to pioneer travel programmes utilising existing infrastructure, like the under-utilised Danum Valley Field Centre. The centre was previously unknown to the tourism industry but has become a popular destination for travellers to Sabah. A by-product of such a programme is the channelling of tourism dollars to a conservation area".

As to how the public sector could help travel companies like theirs, Jessica says public funding for marketing and collaboration would be most welcome. "Things can change fast in tourism, so it is important to constantly adapt to industry trends. Open channels of communications between the public and private sectors help Government agencies to keep pace with the developments in the industry. We are thankful for the good relationship we have with the Sabah Tourism Board and for their collaboration with us in terms of financial support and contribution towards targeted marketing, including media and marketing trips, to the US". She suggests that Malaysia adopt more open policies in relation to foreign investment in tourism, in terms of offerings and products. Malaysia Borneo in particular lacks high-quality products to attract premium and high-quality tourists while current policies do not incentivise investment in the industry.

As for those who aspire to enter the travel business, Jessica's advice is: "Understand the market segment that you are targeting and be sure to deliver a product that caters to the client's interests and wants. Be an expert in your own field and never stop learning. Continue to expand your horizon by looking at how tourism is done at other destinations and apply what is relevant to your destination. And do maintain a clear vision for your business and also to invest in leadership".



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Strong Footing in the Slippers Business

Penang-based ANH Smart Venture Sdn. Bhd. is a 100% Bumiputera-owned company co-founded by Haryati binti Saree and Mohd Azhar bin Azam. The company started off in 2011, selling items such as t-shirts, tote bags, umbrellas, caps and corporate attire as well as offering printing services for these items. In 2022, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the company launched its latest product, rubber slippers.

Haryati says, "Rubber slippers, with a twist, are the latest addition to our product line. We offer customisation services for customers, for example, to personalise the slippers by mixing straps and base colours".

The 46-year-old entrepreneur, a former secretary in a private firm ventured into entrepreneurship in 2011 with Mohd Azhar, the Managing Director of the company. Mohd Azhar is a veteran in the retail business, with years of experience in fashion accessories, souvenirs and clothing. Haryati says, her decision to be an entrepreneur is inspired by her father and grandfather. "Entrepreneurship runs deep in my family. Both my grandfather and father were successful businessmen. It was their success in business that inspired me to be an entrepreneur too. I see business as a blend of hobby and passion. Turning what I love doing into a business gives me great satisfaction. I enjoy what I do while creating something meaningful that others can appreciate and benefit from".

She describes the early stage of the business as challenging. "One of the biggest challenges we faced initially was securing enough funding to kickstart the business. Our start-up capital came mostly from personal savings. Later, we received a small business development grant from a Government agency to help us commercialise and expand. Another challenge was getting market acceptance. As always for a new brand, it was difficult to penetrate a market where there are already so many established competitors. We had to differentiate our products, so they stand out enough to attract customers".

The company has a physical shop complemented by sales via e-commerce platforms. Promotion is conducted through various channels, including social media, with positive customer reviews and word-of-mouth advertising playing a big role in boosting sales and building a loyal customer base, especially among tourists. Haryati says that the company's emphasis on quality for their products has been instrumental in building a solid customer base, with many repeat customers. Growth in sales value has been holding steady annually. Haryati says the company's main priority now is to enhance its branding in the local market: "Once we are better established locally, we will explore opportunities in international markets".

She thanks the Government for its support in providing grants and soft loans. "We have benefited from participating in various training programmes to develop our workforce capability as well as to help us adapt to market demands". The Government, she suggests, could further help MSMEs by providing more accessible financing as well as programmes on skill-building, market access, innovation and mentorship alongside providing infrastructure and creating networking opportunities.



Haryati says, the company is much aware of sustainability trends which are opening up new opportunities for their business as customers are increasingly looking for eco-friendly products. "This has spurred us to integrate sustainable materials and processes into our production. For example, our slippers are made from eco-friendly rubber, which not only helps reduce environmental impact but also aligns with growing consumer demand for greener products. We minimise waste in our production processes and are looking into ways to enhance our supply chain sustainability".

As for business sustainability, she says, "We practise prudent financial management as that is the key to long-term sustainability. Innovation is key to catering to changing customer preferences, for instance, with new features and designs for our slippers. We are exploring new markets while focusing on enhancing customer experience. We have also developed our own e-commerce platform to boost our market presence, patented our logo and received a registered trademark to protect our brand identity. We are continuously investing in human resource development as that is key to better productivity".



Haryati advises those who aspire to enter into her kind of business: "First, understand the market by researching trends and customers' needs and also to sell only top-quality products. And do not forget that, in this digital age, e-commerce and digital marketing skills are key in building market share".

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