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Sherry Tai (21 years old) and Michelle Ho (21 years old) have transformed their love for nail polish into an online business by selling AQMORE nail enamel over eBay.

“We have always wanted to start a business but we are not sure what we should be selling. Later, we discovered nail enamel and subsequently won a business plan competition which gave us a chance to travel to the United States to gain experience. Step by step, we are slowly inching towards realizing our dream.”

Both girls are good friends and schoolmates at the Singapore Management University (SMU). They took part in the SMU-eBay Live! 2006 Contest, impressed the judges with their business plan and took away the top prize. In June this year, they flew to Las Vegas for the three-day eBay Live! Learning Festival 2006. After networking with many fellow eBay users at the event, they returned home and set up their own online store on eBay.

Inviting a male classmate to join in the business

Sherry Tai discovered the water-based enamel earlier this year through a friend. The difference with conventional nail polish is that the nail enamel, which originated from Taiwan, is free of chemical ingredients such as toluene and formaldehyde. They are gentle on the nails, suitable for doing nail art and can even be used to decorate the surfaces of mp3 players and mobile phones.

The most interesting thing is that the two girls were totally new to eBay and though Michelle Ho had sold off old clothes online, they were still considered greenhorns. “We are still not familiar with the entire eBay process especially how to make this into a business as compared to one-off purchasing,” said Michelle. Hence, they netted a fellow male schoolmate, Leong Wei Qiang (23 years old) as a partner because he is IT-sawy, knows web design and helped save the girls some costs in engaging an external web designer.

Wei Qiang did not feel he was being “exploited” by his female schoolmates. “While retailing nail enamel is the domain of females, yet I have acquired skills in doing business and the practical experience has allowed me to learn things outside of the textbook. I have even learnt nail art! We all have different skills and are in charge of different areas. I take care of the IT department while the girls do sales and customer service,” said Wei Qiang.

With the popularity of blogs, why did they not consider doing business using blogs? “The primary audience of blogs is personal friends. Hence, the target group is small and you need friends to spread the word of mouth. On the other hand, eBay will allow one’s product to be captured if users key in the right search words. Besides, your customer can be from anywhere around the world,” said Wei Qiang.

To see their product, please visit http://stores.ebay.com/AQMORE or www.aqmore.com.sg

On her experience in Las Vegas, Sherry said that online shopping is not popular in Singapore because locals tend to be more conservative and perceive online shopping as risky as one cannot see or feel the products.

“At the eBay festival in Las Vegas, we saw many middle-aged people, retirees and even disabled people who are successfully making money through online business,” said Michelle.

In some countries like the United States where it may be inconvenient to travel to shop, people turn to online shopping. This is not so in Singapore where shopping malls are conveniently within easy reach, so most would prefer visiting the malls.

Hence, the students are tailoring their plans to suit the habits of local consumers by setting up counters to allow shoppers to try out the nail enamel and then go online to make purchases. Sherry explained that this would create a complementary situation for their eBay and shopfront business.