Great goods for the greater good – that’s what these businesses, leading a charge in social responsibility, are offering the savvy consumer.

Altered states

CHOOSE
26A Sage Street
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WHILE there are those who fancy the idea of leading a more environmentally friendly life, actually doing so isn’t the easiest of tasks in Singapore, where “green” retail is still in its infancy.

Or so it might have been until Singapore’s first eco-store, CHOOSE, opened in Chinatown last September. The store, which stocks environmentally friendly products and promotes green practices, is the retail arm of Olive Ventures – a company spearheaded by an university coursemates turned fellow eco-warriors Low Yiqi and Stuart Ong, who wanted to start a “green” business straight after they graduated from Singapore Management University.

“Initially, we didn’t know what form the business would take, whether we should start with green retail or consulting,” says Mr Ong. “But after doing some research, we realised that there weren’t any shops in Singapore that only sold eco-friendly products and that this was a niche in the market we could work on first.”

The idea therefore, adds Mr Ong’s business partner Low Yiqi, was to “make CHOOSE a one-stop-shop providing everyday products that are environmentally friendly”. CHOOSE stocks all sorts of “green” knick-knacks from cleaning products to stationery made out of recycled material to energy saving electronic goods. The best-sellers so far have been household products like Soap Nuts ($23) – a natural alternative to detergent – because customers feel the direct impact on their lives as they use them daily”, says Mr Low.

Practically aside, CHOOSE also sells a range of eco-friendly designer goods such as bowls and boxes made of magazines (priced at between $28.50 and $55) and clutches from Nahuil Olin ($129) that are made out of defective candy wrappers. These items, says Mr Ong, make good gifts – some 10 per cent of the store’s business come from people and companies buying presents.

The store uses energy-saving lights, has recycling and compost bins and is cooled by using an inverter air-conditioning system that is more energy efficient.

USE ME
Above: Upcycled magazine basket and document holder, and Soap Nuts, a natural alternative to detergent, at CHOOSE.

Furthermore, in a bid to keep the carbon footprint as low as possible, the products stocked at CHOOSE are mainly sourced either from local distributors who have already shipped the products in from overseas, or better still from local suppliers like the all natural CleanBio cleaning range from local company CALFARMER and one of a kind accessories from Singaporeans label All Things Green and Beautiful ($24.30 to $49) that are made with materials from unwanted handbags, purses and wallets.

However, now that the duo is in the midst of expanding the store’s portfolio they admit that they have to start looking outside of Singapore for their goods but even then, they insist that they won’t be looking too far away.

“True, there are a lot of ‘green’ labels in the market, especially in the West but we feel that there is still so much that can be found even within South-east Asia,” says Mr Low. “For example, we found this guy in Thailand who makes furniture from post production waste and a bunch of artisans from Indonesia who make accessories out of waste paper. The accessories will be sold in the store come July.”

Cost is another challenge. Due to a lack of economies of scale, “eco” products tend to be more expensive. As a result, the store’s mark-ups are very low in order to keep their prices competitive. That said, the founders remain encouraged by the positive response that consumers here have given to CHOOSE, the store now makes enough to break even on its monthly operational costs.

And despite the fact that the duo haven’t quite made back the $200,000 they sank in to start Olive Ventures, they reveal that CHOOSE is doing well enough for them to be able to concentrate on building up ACT, a consulting arm that aims to provide advice to individuals and businesses interested in sustainable practices.

“Hopefully this will increase the revenue for the company,” concludes Mr Low with a laugh. “Unfortunately this also means that our research and development arm, THINK, is currently on the backburner, but if and when we think of a green product that the market needs, we will definitely try and produce it ourselves. For the moment though, all we can say is that we don’t need another environmentally friendly bag on the market.”

By Melissa Lwee