



Laid-back designer's success is in the bag

A successful entrepreneur explains how he took a simple product and built an international business selling bean bags into Europe and the Middle East

Lee Wing-sze

Update on 24 Nov 2007

Everything that people see and do at the Cannes Film Festival has to look chic - even the chairs. At a special event this year, guests could enjoy their champagne on award-winning bean bags designed and produced by Felix Chang, founder of Slack, a Hong Kong-based company.

Thanks to his cutting-edge ideas and social network, Mr Chang has taken his bean bag business to an international level in just a few years.

"With a small company like mine and just me doing it, I can pretty much go as crazy as I want. That really helps me create a unique range that nobody else would dare to do," said Mr Chang, a former advertiser and marketer in sports marketing.

Slack produces about 20 designs in a range of colours and patterns, with styles ranging from fun to stylish.

The company's signature product - the Amphibious Lounger - is a bean bag sofa that floats in water. It won the Best Seating category in the ELLE Decoration International Design Awards - Hong Kong in 2005, and was also one of the finalists in last year's Design for Asia Award organised by the Hong Kong Design Centre.

Creativity is the key to this growing business. Mr Chang said he had rolled out 20 to 30 new designs over the past few years, each of which had gone through six to 12 months of research and development.

Mr Chang got his inspiration for Slack during an exhausting visit to a mainland factory when he settled in to a huge collection of colourful fabrics for a break.

"I kind of had a 'miss home' moment at that time. I grew up with bean bags in Australia. I was sitting amid

a pile of fabrics which reminded me of the comfort and relief of sitting on a bean bag at home in Australia,” recalled Mr Chang, who spent 16 years in Melbourne, Australia. “I looked at the fabrics and said ‘there’s something I can do with this’.”

After six months of thorough research and development, Slack was founded and six innovative bean bag designs were launched in 2001 at the company showroom in Wong Chuk Hang in South District. The showroom is still the company’s only outlet in the city, but its distribution network has expanded to Europe and the Middle East.

Initially promoting his business through word of mouth and the internet, Mr Chang began extending his retail network through contacting buyers from lifestyle stores such as City’super and Log-On once his company had been operating for a few months.

“It was fortunate for us. As a company with a new brand and new designs in the market, it was not something that you would expect people to accept immediately. But the buyers at these stores really liked our concepts and presentations and gave us a chance,” he said.

“We then evolved with them and learned how to present our brand in the retail setting.”

A year later, he approached Bookazine. “They thought it was crazy to sell bean bag furniture in the outlets of a book store chain. But for me, the Slack brand is so unique. We believe that its distribution channel should be equally unique,” said Mr Chang.

Successfully associating bean bags with the concept of people reading in a relaxed environment, the brand landed a distribution contract with Bookazine within a month.

While the bean bags were not a high turnover item compared with other products such as books and postcards at the store, they impressed the customers and helped boost revenue.

Slack is growing steadily, and Mr Chang finds taking care of the financial side of the business a challenge, especially since he has no financial background.

“In trying to build a brand, you need heritage and lots of resources. Over the past six years we haven’t used investors, we’ve used our own money instead. The toughest obstacle has been to not rush selling an item, but rather selling a brand,” said the 39-year-old entrepreneur, who runs the business with the help of his wife and five part-time staff.

With a shoestring budget, Mr Chang said he had to do everything himself, from design, sourcing materials, sampling and quality control to marketing, sales and brand building.

“Most people gave me advice, saying all you need to do is find a customer, sell thousands of a particular style and move on to the next thing. I really want to nurture the brand and build it from ground zero. It needs to be done step by step, so the general public will be educated about what Slack lifestyle is about.”