

Bag of dreams

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Starting a company exclusively focussed on making bean bags is the stuff of farfetched dreams in some faraway never-never land, not in the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong.

So it comes as no surprise that it has taken an Australian expatriate, Felix Chang, to come up with the idea and to, fittingly enough, name his corporate vehicle SLACK Lifestyle.

But Chang hadn't always planned on doing so from the outset of his arrival in Hong Kong in 1995. It was only after a stressful spell of working in the marketing world and realizing the career was not panning out that he turned his mind to finding another more relaxing way of making a living for himself and creating a more idyllic lifestyle for himself.

He was uniquely qualified to do so, having been sports marketing manager for Reebok Asia Pacific.

But even he had to admit it was a big decision to step away from the corporate world and take that plunge into creating a lifestyle brand that promotes relaxation.

I had a regional job that I loved, but when you work for a company, at the end of the day, you are restricted by the company's policy, he says.

I grew up with bean bags when I was a kid, and after being in Hong Kong for a couple of years, I began to miss home.

I took all my savings and invested it in the company. It took us three to four years before we started to generate positive cash flow.

Chang says the majority of his profits come from exports.



I have friends who are global distributors for our products. Distributors are located in countries such as France, Dubai, Spain, and Belgium.

Despite the risky nature of this niche market, Chang says Hong Kong is a great place to test a new business idea.

Hong Kong is truly a cosmopolitan city. Because of the speed of the city, you can start something and be able to test it and see if your idea will actually work or not.

Do not be fooled by the name of the company, however. Chang says he is focused when it comes to working.

I wouldn't say I am a slacker, I work when I have to, but a person has to learn to relax as well.

Chang says he works with his own designers as well as outsiders.

We aim to produce five to 10 designs a year.

Being next door to the mainland, Hong Kong is also a great place to start a furniture business as

materials are not costly.

The network that he built up while working in his previous post has helped. Before I started the company, I used to travel to factories in the mainland and got to know several manufacturers there.

Chang says he was initially inspired by the colorful fabrics that he found while visiting factories as part of his previous job. I found all these fabrics lying around and I really wanted to do something with them.

But, with the recent spate of safety scandals involving mainland-made toys and other products in mind, Chang is quick to add that his bean bags use fire-retardant filling.

Although he does not have a design background, having read psychology at university, Chang refuses to accept that as a handicap, drawing full inspiration from life itself.

I get ideas from my surroundings. I would be travelling to a country and see something I like, or an interesting design on a person's outfit, and turn them into bean bags. Designing a bean bag is very much like life. You can't completely control the outcome and the shape.

Chang says the bean bag as a concept is still relatively new in Hong Kong because for the first five years, most of our customers were from overseas.

Proof that his approach works came last year when his company's designs won recognition with a furniture merit award from the Hong Kong Designers Association.

It is good that we are slowly getting more recognition, but I believe we are still in the infancy stage we still have a long way to go, he says.

Chang designs bean bags that are anything but traditional. He incorporates funky designs such as a bean bag shaped like the open mouth of a monster,

complete with tongue sticking out.

As the bean bags are manufactured in mainland factories, Chang emphasizes the importance of building relationships.

I used to visit hat and costume manufacturers in the mainland, and I really got to know the manufacturers and I treat them like friends, he says.

That personal touch helps. Realizing Chang's company was a start-up, one manufacturer agreed to make an exception to his normal rule of only accepting bulk orders.

With the trade show organized by Hong Kong Trade Development Council, we were able to get our name out in the public, he says.

The high point for Chang so far was when one client flew in by private jet to purchase a bean bag. I was very surprised, but excited at the same time.