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Startup eSeries: Take Small Steps for Big Change

ENTREPRENEURSHIP LIFE **Aug 29, 2015**



Ritika Bajaj



In my last [Startup eSeries article](#), I wrote about the concept of "empowered wealth" and how new-age businesses focus not just on



profits, but also on empowering their consumers through powerful and transformational experiences.

One reader wrote in saying he would like to read about businesses following this thought. It was a happy coincidence that at the time of writing the piece, I encountered an entrepreneur whose every business move is directed by a "conscious" mindset.

Conscious, because her enterprise truly reflects a [spirit of uplifting everyone](#) in the ecosystem... the environment included. It is a social enterprise with community welfare at the core of its being - but, like any other sound business model, it is also scaling up and touching lives at an equally rapid rate.

Uma Haimavati, a design graduate from NIFT, founded the [Upasana design studio](#) in 1997 in Auroville, Tamil Nadu, with a vision to seamlessly weave together fashion, design, Indian culture, business, social responsibility and spiritual progress.

Uma Haimavati



Uma describes Upasana as "a place where people are the central focus and its projects, products and resources help people grow and develop into their full radiance."

Upasana has since created a variety of brands and products that combine Uma's design aesthetics with her socially conscious compass.

Weaving threads of tradition

Upasana started out with using traditional textiles from different states in India. Uma believes, "India is the only country of this size where the cultural identity of textile is still alive. Every state expresses its unique personality through specific textiles, and Upasana wishes to bring this to the forefront... India has such [great richness and wisdom](#) to offer the world."

In this endeavour, Upasana researches and incorporates one new state to their collection every year. So, by the end of 29 years, they would have a complete collection from all of India's 29 states!

Additionally, Upasana's designs use the tagline "draping the soul", which looks at design beyond just draping the body, but touching the whole person. "Clothing becomes a means to enhance that element of a person's being. It's not about how you look in what you wear, but also how you feel," explains Uma.

Designing a symbol of hope

In 2004, Tamil Nadu was struck by the devastating tsunami. Coastal areas near Auroville were badly affected, leaving several women and families traumatized. This natural catastrophe changed the way Upasana looked at business thereafter.

"During tsunami and post tsunami Upasana underwent a complete transformation - by using design as a tool for social change... It was the discovery of a lifetime for us," states Uma.



Thus came into being project [Tsunamika](#) - a 'living' symbol of hope, love and unconditional giving. In this project, 600 women from six different villages were taught to make tiny dolls called 'Tsunamika' out of industrial waste.

Tsunamika dolls were then gifted - never sold - running on the principle of a 'gift economy'. The project continues to run on community support where people take dolls and contribute as per their capacity. Today, more than five million dolls have been made and sent to over 80 countries.

Saving the environment in little steps

Since then Upasana has initiated various projects exploring socially responsible design. One such is called [Small Steps](#), where women from more than 14 villages work at making eco-friendly shopping bags in the size of mobile phones.

Small Steps believes that the solutions to our problems lie in [every little step we take](#) every day. It is a green campaign launched as a solution to the

environmental problem of plastic carry bags.

"We want to tell people to carry their own shopping bags and avoid the use of plastic... The future of Small Steps is to create a social company around it, enlarge the consumer base and have a bigger impact," says Uma.



Creating socially responsible brands

Social responsibility is the underlying thread that connects all of Upasana's brands. In 2006, when [BBC broadcasted](#) internationally about the survival of Varanasi weavers being under threat, due to a lack of demand for their saris in India - because China was providing a cheaper silk substitute - Upasana decided to intervene and work in Varanasi for the weavers.

This project encouraged the Varanasi weavers' community to continue what they were good at by bringing them several projects to work on, helping them create a line of scarves and clothing that they could sell internationally, and also teaching them marketing and [communication skills](#). This eventually gave birth to a brand called [Varanasi Weavers](#).

Integrating creativity with life

Not just the products, the processes too at the design studio follow a harmonious and [conscious approach](#), where design becomes integral to all the facets of a product's life-cycle - those who design and produce it, those who use it, the larger socio-cultural context and the environment. As one designer says (in the many [YouTube videos](#) on the brand), "People here are calm and not in fighting mode... we are a little team but with big strength."



Upasana is also actively impacting the next generation of designers by inviting [students](#)

and volunteers from different parts of India and abroad to come learn and contribute to its ongoing projects. Here, they learn through real life engagements and the creative exploration of "socially responsible design".

This stems from Uma's central thought that, "A designer has to be a conscious human being as different aspects of life are attached to her. In my space I have made design conscious, and this has inspired many people and organizations... Social enterprise is the only way of the future, businesses will be holistic... it has already started and is picking up in fashion too."

Uma's company Upasana is a "living symbol" of a socially responsible enterprise that encourages and nurtures social entrepreneurs, designers and consumers in becoming more conscious of the processes of creation and consumption. And not to forget she makes it fashionable too, as she puts it: "Fashion has the power to change the world, give it a chance!"

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Dr Gopi Ghosh
26 Sep, 2015

Highly innovative and inspiring initiative! My best wishes to the groups and everyone associated with this great social economic transformation.

Like

Dr subhas
12 Sep, 2015

Congrats and hats off to your for the excellent thought of this idea which is empowering , inspiring and good tool for self reliance. please keep it up. Let this become more dynamic and vibrant in the coming years.

Like

Chinmoy Gupta
05 Sep, 2015

Kudos for the good job done.Had the profit and how the project has sustained, would have been a little more informative. Wonderful,job done.

Like

aditya sonthalia
03 Sep, 2015

really commendable work Hat's Off to her.

Like

Pravin
30 Aug, 2015

Great initiative by upasana

Like

JOSYULA. V
30 Aug, 2015

In the age of 'fb/whatsApp' learning from real life engagements has become a rare phenomenon. Whole hearted appreciations Upasana. Please keep it up...

Like (1)

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