

Sustainable Rose Petal Fabrics Benefit Artisans and the Planet

A Start-up Story: Telaship, Singapore and India

After traveling around the world for work with global giants such as PWC and Proctor & Gamble, Covid stopped Telaship founder Amrita Haralalka in her tracks. Seeking more meaning in her work and wanting to support artisans in India who produce sustainable fabric, she decided to develop an online platform to help them scale up.

Building a Platform to Help Artisans

While talking about artisans may conjure up images of skilled individuals toiling at home to produce handmade materials, her model is vastly different. “The artisans I’m talking about are handling fabrics,” she explained. “This happens across 70 different factories across India. The ability to scale and produce sustainable materials is huge. 5,000 tonnes in a day is not a huge feat for us.”

The artisans she works with create a multitude of products. “We can have just garments. We have the whole vertical from fabric and not just the garment. We have natural dyes, clean painting, or embellishment in the form of embroidery. You call it and we manage it.”

A key focus is biodegradable fabrics. “Some materials on Telaship are made out of dried rose petals and many are made out of lotus roots,” she said. “Some are made out of metals. I don’t think of this as an innovation because that happened 500 years ago. Certifying it is my role here.”

One benefit for the artisans is indeed her working on certification, which fashion brands now demand. Certification is more difficult in India than in many markets, though, because no single certification is available and there is nothing to verify products as biodegradable. She has taken a different approach. “We do have certifications for good. We have ones to show that there are no chemicals. We have certificates to show that it’s natural. Wherever possible, we have certified.”

Leveraging Experience to Build Sales and a Competitive Advantage

Although Telaship was only recently registered in Singapore, in July 2022, Amrita has leveraged a combination of her family history and her career at a consumer goods company to grow sales and gain a competitive advantage.

Being part of the fourth generation in a textile family helps. “I’m standing on the shoulders of giants,” she said. “We know these artisans. I have a relationship with them. These artisans visited my house.” They already operate environmentally sustainable businesses and are open to experimentation, so her online platform can help them scale up. “That kind of network and verification is very difficult for anyone to replicate.”

To build the business, Amrita has leveraged her skills from global companies and her relationships with artisans to create the online platform. “I know the sourcing. I know how to talk to clients. I’ve done marketing. I’ve done sales. I think how to break into this network of textiles.”

Telaship’s marketing, perhaps surprisingly, uses traditional channels. Although she did try social media, she found it difficult. “I wanted to be all digital. It’s the problem of trust and industry practices. That’s why I’m not going to be on social media for the dealers of the world. What works for me is really textile trade shows and face-to-face.”

Amrita went to Texworld in New York, for instance, to run seminars. Because her efforts have been focused on the US, many of her clients are there. She also identified contacts and clients in Dubai through friends and family, and Telaship has clients in Australia. “Anywhere I think there’s a trend of slow fashion and luxury, that’s what we aim for.”

Most clients are currently medium-sized specialist fashion houses. “I would definitely say medium-sized. What we see is that value or disruption, the kind of experimentation and co-

creation we bring, is more for small and medium businesses. I focus my efforts there. With large players there is a huge waiting cycle. Having said that, we're in conversation with Ralph Lauren. I also have artisans who have experience with Dior and Chanel, behind middlemen. It is just a long cycle."

Telaship's Resource-Light Model Gains Traction and Grows Revenue

The opportunities for her to grow the business are tremendous. The handmade industry today is worth US\$5 billion, Amrita said. A large part of it comes from Asia - India, Indonesia, Malaysia. There is also a lot from the Middle East and even Eastern Europe. South America also has beautiful handmade items. About 30 percent of global sales come from India, around US\$2 billion. "Even if I get 20 percent of that share, I will be quite happy."

For now, Amrita said, "I want to stick to one country because I know that so well." However, she has also made a small foray into selling goods from other regions. "I had artisans from Kazakhstan who wanted me to sell their fabric contact me. It's beautiful silk. They make beautiful hand-woven silk carpets. I'm doing that." Looking ahead, she says "I do think I will also venture out more."

While she seeks to minimise the number of direct employees, she does hire staff for core functions. "A lot of it is contract. My testing is outsourced. I have four designers spread across different states in India. I have a sampling and quality team, because without sampling and without quality I am nothing. I have eight people in Kolkata who do sampling and quality control. That's also where my manufacturing unit is. I do have a little bit of an in-house manufacturing team across the sourcing of whatever is popular. My tech team in ecommerce is outsourced in Sri Lanka."

So far, Amrita has funded the company herself. "I worked for almost 16 years. I have things which I have funded, my family has funded. It's brand-building and then business-building. I want to make sure that after 15 years, I control the purpose, how it's done. If I get into funding, it changes the whole dynamic. Later, we might look for funding. Right now, it's friends and family."

The Business is Truly Meaningful

"COVID enabled me to be more present and think about my purpose more," Amrita said. "Fabric is in my blood." Although industrialisation has taken over much of the fashion sector, her purpose is supporting artisans and slow fashion. By giving the artisans more business and by offering sustainable fabrics, she has a very meaningful business that clearly benefits people and the planet tremendously.