

Wearing success lightly

SheepStop, a Pune-based organic clothing brand, has grown into a ₹60 lakh venture within four years.

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The trouble with going green is that it usually makes your wallet see red. Prohibitive pricing is one of the main reasons that the organic fad is not going mainstream.

However, 31-year-old Bhagyashri Dixit is trying to change things in organic clothing with her three-year-old brand, SheepStop.

Like most entrepreneurs, Dixit spent some time on the corporate carousel before venturing on her own. After graduating in information technology from the University of Mumbai in 2003, she worked as an ERP consultant with Atos Origin, a Pune-based software company. Then, in 2005, she quit to pursue an MBA from the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad. "I did so because having learnt the technical and financial workings of a company, I wanted to focus on management," says Dixit. A year later, degree in hand, she was back in Pune, working with an MNC. At that point, entrepreneurship wasn't even an option. But two years on, a strong desire for change convinced her to step out of her comfort zone. "I realised that working full-time would not allow me to do anything else, so I quit in early 2008 to concentrate on the business model," she explains.



After brainstorming with her husband, Parag, she zeroed in on the idea, and over the next six months, they worked on various aspects of the organic clothing business. They called their company StyleBuds, with Parag as a co-founder. The couple's main challenge was to keep costs low so that their products could be sold at a lower price. So, to begin with, they designed their official website (*Sheepstop.com*) themselves and indulged in smart hiring. The Dixits put in a

seed capital of ₹3 lakh and launched SheepStop in September 2009. The money also helped them rent a small warehouse in Pune. Interestingly, all of their six employees are women. "It was a conscious choice since I wanted to see if it was possible to run a company with only women," says Dixit.

The business model is simple. Every week, freelance designers are asked to submit designs, which are put up on the website and the company's Facebook page. The audience

votes for the favourite designs, and at the end of the week, one design is declared the winner. This is sent to manufacturers in various parts of India, and the finished tees are sent back to the company. Later, as per the order book, the tees—most are priced at ₹499—are shipped out to customers. They are also sent to 50 retail outlets across the country and the designers are paid a royalty for each tee sold. So, not only does the company promise fresh designs week after week, but also saves on hiring full-time designers.

They have, of course, gone through their share of problems. For instance, six months into the business, Dixit was caught unprepared by the positive response. She had to borrow ₹5 lakh from friends and family to increase her inventory. The investment quickly bore fruit and the company managed to break even two months later. Dixit was able to start drawing a salary by March 2011.

In the previous fiscal year, the company reported a turnover of ₹60 lakh. As part of its expansion drive, the firm has recently added designer shot glasses, badges and magnets to its repertoire.



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