



Guiding the future entrepreneurs

An innovative scheme helps secondary students run their own small business selling products they have designed and made, writes **Donna Mah**



Each year Project WeCan, an initiative to promote business in the community, runs a programme for secondary school students to manage their own enterprise. The Young Innovators Bazaar sees teams of students paired with an organisation which acts as mentor and general adviser, ensuring that each group really benefits from the experience.

Prizes are awarded in various categories including for best product and best theme presentation, as well as for business plans, booth design, and highest profit. To give everyone a chance to shine, there are also awards for best learning report, promotional video, salesperson, team spirit, and all-round improvement.

This year's three-day event was held at Plaza Hollywood where the teams set up booths to sell products they had designed in consultation with their mentors. Before that, the students had learned about the basics of running a small business with the help company- and university-based volunteers. They also attended pre- and post-event briefing sessions to reinforce those lessons.

Along the way, team members were encouraged to think like entrepreneurs as they refined their initial ideas. They went through a process that included market research, devising and presenting a business plan, budget planning, and developing sales and marketing strategies.

The bazaar took place from 22-24 March, and since there was no set theme for the event this year, students were free to come up with any ideas for a product they thought would sell.

Previously, the bazaar was held just before the Lunar New Year, meaning that many products and designs were linked to that festival. This time, though, students could really showcase

their creativity and business sense in other ways.

As a member of the Project WeCan organising committee, Ricky Wong often asks participants how they plan to differentiate their products from the competition.

"This year, the students did a phenomenal job of coming up product ideas and promotion strategies," said Wong, the managing director of Wheelock Properties (Hong Kong) and chairman of Enhancing Self-Reliance. "We saw a much broader range of products and greater variety than before."

For example, Candy Lit Hang-yi, a Form 6 student from Ng Yuk Secondary School, and her team designed and assembled "pour over" coffee-brewing sets and made wooden coffee trays from up-cycled floorboards from their school auditorium.

"Beforehand, we weren't really aware of the coffee-drinking culture and how brewing your own coffee could be a relaxing pastime," Lit said. "But we were familiar with instant hot beverages, especially the 3-in-1 packets, so we really had to study the background to understand what coffee drinkers would want in a special brewing set."

To learn more, the team attended a coffee brewing and tasting workshop which explained the characteristics of different types of coffee. As non-experts, though, it was sometimes difficult to discern the contrasting flavours.

"To be honest, at first we couldn't taste the difference from one cup to the next," Lit said.

However, they were quick to learn about the different beans and roasts, and chose four types of coffee to sell

at the bazaar. They considered factors like aroma, acidity, sweetness, body and aftertaste. They were also helped by an award-winning local supplier, who roasts beans in Hong Kong thereby assuring that products are fresh.

“We learned a great deal about different coffees and what consumers look for,” Lit said. “We could use this knowledge during the bazaar to answer questions about the types of coffee we were selling. Learning from an expert gave us a really good understanding of our product and how to communicate the information to customers.”

Lit and her teammates - Louis Tse, Brian Chan, Esther Lo and Karry Wong - named their business CofThree Craft, a reference to their main product and the three basic pieces of equipment needed to make “pour over” brewed coffee. They packaged everything in a wooden box to make it an ideal gift item.

Essential support

Besides a mentor, each team also had the support of a supervising teacher. In this way, they could benefit from a range of experience, insights and knowledge on how to approach problems, collaborate effectively, and run a retail business.

The volunteers from mentor organisations were generous with their time and expertise. In talks and training workshops, they were ready to discuss anything from product development to sales, customer service and intellectual property.

Lit’s team was advised by Wheelock Properties (Hong Kong), who made very practical suggestions.

“We originally thought of producing about 20 sets for sale,” she said. “But when we proposed that figure, Mr Wong advised us to increase the number and to raise the retail price. We took his advice and were able to sell more than 100 sets.”

Wong also suggested customising the box lids with company names and logos using a laser to engrave the wood. This idea naturally led to taking further orders for customised boxes for delivery at a later date. In addition, the team made engraved wooden coasters to give away to key opinion leaders who uploaded posts about CofThree Craft on social media, thereby helping to attract more customers.

“The Ng Yuk team’s coffee trays had features that helped differentiate them from other products,” Wong said. “Items were handmade, making them one-of-a-kind or limited editions. Using old floorboards meant there was also an upscaling element in the project.”

It was generally agreed that teamwork and a clear division of tasks were the key to getting everything done in time for the bazaar.

“Our success was definitely down to working well together,” Lit said. “Being from different grades, we didn’t know each other at the start of the project. But by working together to build our small business, we became a real team.”

Wong added that, over the years, he has watched over the growth and development of other student teams from Ng Yuk. “They have consistently done well when presenting their business plans,” he said. “This year’s team won a number of awards, at a time when the overall competition continues to get tougher. Teams need to be



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RICKY WONG



Part of the coffee set is handmade and crafted from upcycled floorboards.



The Young Innovators Bazaar attracts more than a thousand students to join

innovative and bring more creativity to the table – just like in the real world.”

Building a network

Since the Project WeCan was first established in 2011, the number of participating students, teachers, volunteers and supporting organisations has increased every year. This success, Wong said, is a result of the creativity, determination and hard work shown by the students, but also thanks to the generous support of mentors, partners and everyone else involved.

The programme was initially launched with 11 schools, 11 companies and one university taking part. In 2019,

the numbers had risen to 76 schools, 47 companies, six universities, five consulates and 10 other organisations.

This year, stage performances by students from participating schools were another aspect of the bazaar, helping to attract and entertain potential customers.

“It is not just a sales event,” Wong said. “Students also learn valuable and transferable life skills in engaging with the wider community. This time, we invited primary students and a group of elderly people to visit the bazaar. We hope to inspire the students who take part to give back to the community just as the mentors have given something to them.”

Project WeCan

Project WeCan is a business-in-the-community initiative providing secondary school students with opportunities and empowering them to pursue further education and plan for their futures. Recognising the need to foster not only academic skills, Project WeCan offers diversified programmes designed to give students new experiences and enhance their communication skills and foundation competencies. The aim is also to build characters and to foster innovation and creativity.

Each participating school teams up with an organisation, whether a company, university or consulate that offers a multi-year collaboration and provides financial and volunteer

support. These participating organisations “adopt” a school and act as mentors. All groups involved in Project WeCan have access to a network of members who share information about best practices and their own experiences.

“Over the years, Project WeCan, has provided scholarships and training opportunities for disadvantaged students, and the network of people involved has grown to become an important resource as well,” Wong said. “Sharing experience helps to create communities of students, teachers, business people and others.” ■