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Rhea Singhal

Ecoware products are so designed that they do not contaminate the food in any way since they have no chemicals or other toxic raw materials used for processing them. They are also 100 per cent biodegradable. This unique product line is made by Rhea Singhal of Delhi who has used her experience of marketing with an MNC to catapult her company into the top league.

Ecoware was founded by Delhi-based Rhea Singhal on the belief that people should eat healthy while remaining conscious of their responsibility towards the environment. While there is reams of information dedicated to healthy foods, there has been very little attention paid to healthy packaging.

As we eat more outside our home we have less control over the quality, hygiene, and safety of the tableware in which we are served. All benefits from a healthy meal can easily be negated if the serving dish has not been cleaned properly, is re-used, or contains chemical additives that are harmful to human consumption.

Besides, plates, bowls and glasses made from plastics such as Thermocol or PVC do not biodegrade and are extremely hazardous for the environment. Ecoware is India's first and only manufacturer of 100 per cent biodegradable and

compostable tableware. These products are completely hygienic and affordably disposable; they easily compost into the soil very quickly. Excerpts from an interview with the company's founder, Rhea Singhal:

Could you give us some details about yourself ?

I was born in Mumbai and grew up between Dubai and London. After completing Pharmacology (Hons) from the University of Bristol I worked as a senior marketing and sales executive in London (UK) for Pfizer Inc. At Pfizer I was ranked in the top 5 per cent for achieving the highest sales revenue recorded nationally. In 2009 I moved to Delhi and started Ecoware.

What made you think of branching out as an entrepreneur?

I always knew that I had the skills to start a venture but was waiting for the right opportunity. Moving back to India after a rigorous stint with Pfizer in the UK, I realised that this was the right time to use some of the sales and marketing skills acquired. Ecoware products are a lot like pharmaceuticals. It is a consumer/healthcare product that is non-cyclical and whose sales are greatly impacted by key opinion leaders, in this case our mothers.

Why did you choose to start with eco-friendly products?

Simply because none existed. Having used similar products in the UK, I was looking for them in Delhi and realised there was a gap in the market. I leveraged her father-in-law's expertise in the sugar industry and after much R&D produced a product that is durable and caters to varied Indian food types.



What were the initial challenges you faced after setting up her business i.e. funding, customers, marketing, etc?

The first was about educating people. When you introduce a new improved version of existing incumbents, especially one that sells at a premium, then it's all about educating users about the benefits and advantages of using your product.

Secondly, since this is a mass-driven consumer goods product, we required finding KoLs who could help us voice the benefits of our products.

What strategy did you employ to make the business grow?

I created distribution channels across India for wholesale and retail and online sales. I engaged with schools such as American Embassy School, Vasant Valley and Shri Ram School to create awareness through children and teachers. I got into tie-ups within HORECA (it is the sector of the food service industry that consists of establishments which prepare and serve food and beverages), including Haldirams, Cinnabon, Gloria Jeans, Oberoi Hotels, Taj, Dusit, etc. We began to participate in events like CWG 2010 and the Delhi Palate Festival. The entire focus was on selling, selling and more selling.

What is the status of your venture as of today?

In 4.5 years we have two production units and employ over a 100 people. Ecoware is present across India and now the UAE and Australia as well. We have posted annual revenue of Rs 10 crore and have both online and offline retail presence.

Could you elaborate about the product? How are they made and what are the raw materials, etc?

Ecoware products are manufactured by high temperature moulding of biomass (plant extract or residue) into the desired shape and size using precisely designed moulds. The heatinduced pressing gives structural strength to the

product and the inter-fiber bonding gives it water and oil resistance. These are 100 per cent biodegradable with complete consumption by microorganism and return to compounds found in nature. Put very simply, if you throw an Ecoware product on the ground, it will degrade into natural compounds and disappear into the soil in 30-60 days.

Ecoware has only one ingredient - biomass pulp of plant origin. It has no binders, additives, coatings or fillers. The product is nontoxic, harmless and healthy with no plastic or wax lining, no pesticide or chemical residue and does not impart colour, odour or

taste to food. Biomass products have an estimated shelf life of two years. Products should be stored in a cool dry area to achieve maximum life expectancy. Ecoware can be used to serve both hot and cold food items. They can be used in a microwave oven and refrigerator. The sustainable temperature range is not lower than -20°C and not higher than $+140^{\circ}\text{C}$.





How do you intend to expand her business?

We will do so by entering new markets, develop relationships with KOLs to help promote Ecoware, look for businesses that don't compete with us but which have the same target customer and thereby develop cross-promotions, and diversify our offerings by introducing biodegradable disposables for medical and industrial packaging.

What is your vision for this venture?

We want to be a one-stop shop for all biodegradable disposable packaging and to see Ecoware being used by the roadside 'chaiwallah' as well as in the best fine dining restaurants in hotels.

As a woman entrepreneur, did you face any special challenges?

Being taken seriously by the male-dominated business industry – from the labourers in the factory to the distributors and purchase managers – is a large test of business stamina for any woman entrepreneur.

What kind of customers do you target and why do think this class of customers will grow in the future?

My target groups include mothers and children who will influence each other and bring about the change we require for future generations to come; event organisers to help create zero waste events; and the HORECA industry where Ecoware provides a safe nontoxic alternative to your traditional disposable crockery which is beneficial to their customers and the environment.

What would be your advice for budding entrepreneurs?

Choose an area you are passionate about. When you start your own business you have to live and breathe it for at least the first year while you get things up and running. If you are passionate about your products and services this will also come across when dealing with potential investors and clients, making them more likely to want to work with you or buy from you. Hold yourself accountable and ask for help when you need it. Perseverance is also very important. No matter how

hard you think it's going to be, it will be harder. Be open to change. Your ability to adapt across cultures is one thing that is going to play a major role in building a global career.

What is your personal vision for your business activities?

Make Ecoware a household brand synonymous with safe food packaging, similar to what Dettol means to hygiene or Google mean to search online.

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