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SMALL BUSINESS / ETHNIC NICHE / T-shirt business capitalizes on South Asian pride with slogans / They wear it well, desi style

By PURVA PATEL
Staff

PANKAJ Patel already has a full-time job as an architect.

And he moonlights on weekends as a wedding DJ.

And he teaches at the University of Houston once a week.

Last year, he started a small business online, Desi Threads, selling T-shirts to young and trendy South Asians.

An overachiever? Perhaps.

But Patel, who has always loved art and music, says he's just good at figuring out ways to make money from things he already enjoys.

"I think I'm really good at turning interests and hobbies into businesses. This actually makes it fun because you're interested in the subject matter already," said Patel, who is unrelated to this reporter.

It's not uncommon for a hobbyist to turn an interest into a business, but nurturing a small business with such time constraints can mean making tough choices, said James Evans, assistant region director of the University of Houston Small Business Development Center.

A lot of people lose money trying to convert a hobby into a business because they lose sight of the costs and time involved, he said. "Until he understands that, he'll keep on picking up things to see if they work," Evans said.

Patel, 36, recognizes the challenges, and he's not planning on giving up his day job.

But he sees a market for his shirts, which play off popular brands and "desi" culture to create humorous slogans and quips for his shirts.

'From our land'

Desi, derived from the Hindi word for "from our land," is a colloquial name for those who trace their ancestry to South Asia, especially India, Bangladesh or Pakistan.

His time constraints have forced him to come up with innovative ways to market and expand his fledgling T-shirt business, Desi Threads.

By using the Internet and focusing his marketing, he's banking that his shirts will eventually appeal to lots of people, not just South Asians.

"I think my time is probably the biggest challenge," he said. "I'm thinking about cutting down on DJing so I can be with my family on Saturday nights and focus more on the T-shirt thing."

Not just for desis anymore

As he expands his business, he's already noticed several shirts are popular with non-desis.

The shirts play off desi culture.

One shirt that says "Desi Queen" spins off the logo for the Dairy Queen fast-food chain. Another states, "I'm famous in Bollywood."

"It's all about being funny and desi, but at the same time not degrading being desi," he said. "It's more about having desi pride. I've been writing these kinds of phrases for the last five or six years but finally had the time to start the business."

The shirts, he said, also seem popular with more than just the young desis. The older set has been buying shirts featuring Mahatma Gandhi, and Hispanics have ordered shirts that state, "Brown on the outside, Sweet on the inside."

"People have also bought shirts because of the word 'desi.' People think it's the word 'Desi' like 'Desi Arnaz,'" he said. "So, I guess it's lucky for us."

Right now he's focusing on sales in the U.S. and Canada. But at the request of customers, he recently added features to his Web site to allow orders from Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

An online operation

Most of the business is run online, from sales to design.

He attempted to get placed with local retail stores that cater to desis, but hasn't had much luck.

"If you know the Hillcroft area, a lot of "desis" go shopping there, and I approached a few stores. But they were so opposed or negative about giving us space," he said. "Maybe

they thought I was trying to take over their store, but I'm just trying to design a funny shirt and sell it. I'm not trying to get into their business selling "salwar kameez".

Patel hoped for more support from those retailers, but he's had more luck with mainstream retailers such as Urban Outfitters and others who have inquired about the shirts. He hopes to be placed in a major retail store within a year.

In the meantime, Patel and his wife, a pharmacist, fill orders from their Missouri City home.

The shirts are printed in Houston, and Patel uses contractors he hires via the Web to help create the shirt designs.

Marketing strategy

The company's marketing efforts have also relied mostly on the Web. His old DJ site, desiflava.com, hawks Desi Threads more than entertainment services. And Patel has bought ads on sites that target "desis" or are popular with second-generation South Asians.

When he can, Patel sets up booths at cultural events around town and even across the country. He had his first booth at Houston's International Festival last year and recently helped sponsor the South Asian Students Alliance conference in New York, where he also peddled the shirts.

And he's counting on some Indian icons to pitch his shirts by wearing them around town or in photo shoots.

Last month, singer Raghav and National Hockey League player Manny Malhotra, both Canadian-born "desis", wore the shirts for an upcoming issue of the South Asian bridal publication "Bibi Magazine".

"I wanted to catch the younger "desi" icons out there," Patel said. "But it's hard to do everything. I'm a one-man show as far as marketing is concerned. But it's working out OK so far."

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