

CONSCIOUS RETAIL

Otara Gunewardene is a trailblazer having created the brand Odel and transforming the entire retail landscape in Sri Lanka. Embark is another landmark brand of hers, where she brought great awareness on animal welfare. In her latest endeavor, 'Who We Are', she has taken another step forward to promote small businesses and entrepreneurs to sell their products on a curated online platform. The focus is on being conscious customers living a conscious lifestyle thereby ensuring that people, animals and the environment all benefit. Otara has been supporting Sri Lankan businesses for over 35 years. She stresses that Sri Lanka needs to focus on concept development, brand building which brings visibility, to take Sri Lankan made products to a larger audience.

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What is the concept behind 'Who We Are'?

'Who We Are' is an online platform to sell products, which are all made in Sri Lanka by small businesses and by hopeful entrepreneurs, who produce all their products in Sri Lanka. Generally, many Sri Lankan products are not visible because small businesses and entrepreneurs do not have a place to sell their items. We have created a platform to have as many of them as possible online and to give Sri Lankan made products more visibility both in the country and hopefully at a later stage internationally as well. We have already received some orders from abroad without pushing or marketing the platform, which is a positive sign.

How important is to have a platform such as 'Who We Are'?

This is a great time to have a platform such as this. I have been doing this type of work for the last 35 years. It is very important to support small businesses and entrepreneurs who are manufacturing products in Sri Lanka. Even at my

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previous business, I was passionate about supporting local businesses and products. I have seen in the last few years many talented people struggling to keep their businesses afloat which is why I wanted to provide an online platform to help give them a larger marketplace. Though we just started, we have seen certain products becoming very popular especially the seasonal décor for December. I hope to use my experience, skill and ability to market these Sri Lankan mostly handmade products.

As you mentioned you have been promoting Sri Lankan products and entrepreneurs previously as well. Is 'Who We Are' a continuation from there?

The passion is a continuation, but the format and product ranges are different. This time we are focusing on young entrepreneurs and small businesses and promoting them in a different way. I believe that Sri Lankan products need to have more exposure and visibility. We need to be much stronger in that area as a country. Over the



Otara Gunewardene, Founder, 'Who We Are.'



last many years, that there has been a reverse process to increase the imports, which has made a lot of our products disappear and many have been really struggling to find a market to sell their products. Hopefully we can help with giving some visibility to these creators.

What are the type of products featured on the platform?

We have an expansive range of products. Categories include fashion, jewelry, home, bags, beauty and wellness, food, kids, stationary and gifts, and under those, there are sub categories. We have many products featured but we have much more to upload on to the platform. We have unique products including those produced by the

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indigenous people of Sri Lanka and people who are making things in their home and small workshops. We have products from around the country such as Trincomalee down to Ambalangoda. We have many small businesses from the Western Province on board as well.

You promote a more conscious lifestyle, and conscious consumers. Can you elaborate on this?

This is a very important aspect of 'Who We Are'. There's a global change happening where consumers are being more conscious on how they buy, and what they buy. What we sell reflects the values we stand by. We ensure that everyone benefits, that is the people, animals and our environment.

We do not promote animal cruelty, and we support women entrepreneurs. We focus on selling the products, and the income to directly help the community. We ensure fair trade where the person manufacturing the product receives a fair price rather than the reverse of where they usually get a very little and the retailer gets more.

We are eco friendly, we are conscious that we do not harm the environment and that we don't harm animals. We support small businesses and individuals directly. We support women entrepreneurs, local art and craft, we celebrate Sri Lanka with our range of products, and more. Over the years, we have lost our way in how we buy and shop which often causes so much harm to so many people, animals and our planet. For me the original Sri Lankan way encompasses all these values which is why we promote the conscious lifestyle the Sri Lankan way and why we chose the name 'Who We Are' because this is who we truly are.

Do you believe Sri Lankans are creative?

Yes, and it is improving constantly in the present day because they have more exposure to what is available internationally. Through social media we do not need to travel around the world to see things because we can see everything from our phone. It is not copying but drawing inspiration from what is out there. Social media is also a way to make your talent visible. One can see so much talent from Sri Lankans through their pages. There were times in the past where my input was essential for product development in my retail business but now it is needed much less because people are creating beautiful products by themselves.

What has the response been so far?

The response has been good so far and it is very encouraging. We still have some fine tuning to do with the platform which is ongoing. The most rewarding is that our creators are having the sales on the products. We launched with a fairly small range of items. We are getting more products and we continue to update the website everyday. Many people pick up the goods from the store and we deliver as well, which takes up to one to three days on average.

We are looking for small businesses and entrepreneurs who have Sri Lankan made products and request them to contact us so that

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they can be on the platform. I am looking to expand the product range and I see there is so much talent. People are creative and especially with the shift that is happening, currently with COVID-19 and with the working environments changing many people are leaving work. They are starting their own thing and finding it far more interesting and valuable to have their own business. They are really enjoying it. Those who have been a part of the corporate culture are leaving and starting out on their own because I guess they also know that they have the talent so they prefer to do their own business and they find it very rewarding. It is very interesting and I see the change happening, which is wonderful.

From the beginning you have supported local industries and through your endeavors you have supported many people. They still speak about you. What are your thoughts?

I have supported many people during the last 35 years and many were given a retail place with a lot of footfall to sell their products. I always had a mix of imported and Sri Lankan made products, a larger portion was produced in Sri Lanka. It was very important for me to support local businesses and also give employment to people through the businesses that I have been involved in. Previously to promote Sri Lanka I started with a range of wildlife T-shirts and that is also why I created the souvenir concept Luv SL to promote Sri Lanka as well. Both are still a part of Odel today.

A concept like 'Who We Are' is something I have wanted to do for some time. Many people have contacted me in the past few years where they wanted help to develop their startup business and to improve their products. They were struggling because people were not buying their items and they had no place to showcase their products to a larger audience. I felt the time was right now to create an online platform which would be a good way forward to make their products more visible. I also have a large following on social media so I can make the products more visible through my platform as well to attract more customers. I also use the platforms to create awareness for animal welfare, the environment and other causes and I thought I can use it for 'Who We Are' as well. And of course, as I said before, I like to create concepts and hopefully something will develop that I can build on and grow.

Even in your earlier business you did not focus on foreign brands but created your own. This is something that very few have achieved. What was the thinking behind this?

Together with the Odel brand I created many other brands such as Backstage, Tara, Luv SL and Embark. There were some others too. It's what I love to do, to create brands and concepts. Let's see how 'Who We Are' progresses.

The Government is focusing on traditional crafts and Sri Lankan manufactured products. How will 'Who We Are' fit into this?

It is a timely initiative. The platform will definitely make it stronger with consumers focusing more on products made in Sri Lanka. I have been wanting to do this for the last five years or so but I was able to put it into action only now by aligning with the current situation and other things that have been happening in my life. The whole brick-and-mortar retail is changing in a big way globally and there will be an impact in Sri Lanka as well. We all know that it is essential to have an online platform. People are getting more used to buying online so the timing is right for more online retail to take place.

Batik is seeing a revival these days. But you were promoting the industry from the 1980s where Sri Lanka was exporting Batik at that time. Why did the industry lose its momentum?

The world also changed and moved away from crafts such as batiks and handmade material and clothing. Retail chains and fast fashion became the trend and consumers move towards more affordable and easily accessible fashion choices. It was not only in clothing but also in other types of products as well. But now, the entire process is reversing once again and the trend is going back to authentic and handmade products.

Products such as batiks are more individual and authentic. And, there would be usually one of a kind. It is more specialized and the purchase is done more consciously with thought to its origins and knowing that you are assisting a small business and supporting local craft with your purchase. Now the opportunity is so much greater to be able to reach out with product ranges that are more unique and different.

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What should Sri Lankan small businesses and entrepreneurs focus on specially since we have a Government led initiative?

The way in which you curate the products, how you display it, the whole visual, the concept, the look and feel of the store and the ambiance of the store are all important. This is the same for online as well as brick and mortar. Otherwise, it just becomes a space with a lot of product and it is not interesting and does not attract the customer. People may purchase a few items but it does not become a lifestyle or experience where people spend time, browse through and purchase a product and keep coming back for more. The story of the brand and range is also important. For me it has always been very important to have the right ambiance, the visual, the concept and of course the product has to be good and at the right price as it plays a huge part on the sales and attracting people.

You have to know which products to promote and how to do that. Products, made in Sri Lanka need to be of good quality and should have a concept behind it. Generally, what happens is that products are brought at a very low cost and then the value addition is done by someone else overseas by the buyer who then sells internationally with high margins.

We need to reverse that so that more brands locally can get a higher price by developing a concept, with a good look, quality and strong branding, which are all important to command a better price which bring more revenue back to the country. Value addition should happen in Sri Lanka so that we market the product at a higher rate. Overall we need to be much stronger in the presentation of concept, branding and visual. Only a few brands have been able to be successful locally and internationally by doing this.

You are one person who has built a business from the very beginning and sold at the peak of its growth momentum. Why is that?

I believe that you need to be able to make decisions both business and personal no matter how hard it maybe when you know the time is right for it. Leaving Odel at that time has given me the ability to focus on my work with the environment, animals, Embark and now with 'Who We Are'. I had the time and opportunity to do all that and also to spend more time with my

family, which I sometimes didn't have the time to do while managing a big business. I am also working with a Japanese partner to expand Embark which is ongoing.

I am grateful for the decision I took and the time and opportunity I have had to do all this. I believe I was able to make a big change on the need for change in how we treat animals in our country and how we need to care for and protect our environment. This was one of the main things I wanted to use my voice and platform for and I am happy it has made an impact. Something I will continue to do each day. I also look forward to developing 'Who We Are' and also Embark.

What are the global trends?

The world is changing, and the consumer is changing. It has been happening for the past few years and it is impacting businesses. Many brands that I used to draw so much inspiration from do not even exist anymore. There is a major change happening and I think we need to be aware of that change. Sometimes there is a lag in the trend reaching Sri Lanka, but it eventually does. Even in Sri Lanka the purchasing behavior of customers has changed.

People are more conscious about what they purchase and consume. They are more concerned about ethical processes and behavior. We need to be aware of the trends happening and sometimes I am surprised at how little we are aware of it since we are in Sri Lanka. Businesses will have to really transform to be able to survive this change. This is not the usual change, this one is very different because it is a conscious change; it is a shift of consciousness and I also see this in the younger generation with my sons and their friends. People want to support local businesses and products that are made in their own country. That shift is also happening here in some form. The way people shop and how much they want to buy are all shifting. I have changed so much as a consumer over the last few years only because I have been more aware of the environmental impact and the harm of certain products on animals and the planet. I am not exclusive to that and I am just one of the many thousands that are changing, the way we live, the way we shop and our lifestyles.

Globally in terms of tourism where previously there was a trend where visitors would purchase high brand items from Eastern countries because the cost was less has changed. Because Western



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countries have provided more affordable products and very large ranges for their consumers to choose from. As a result tourists are also looking for more unique and specialized items that are not available in their country. This I believe is a good opportunity for Sri Lanka

Way forward?

I would like to make the platform more accessible to many more people. We already have about 100 creators on board with more to join. I want to encourage people to buy Sri Lankan and to value our own products and make it a priority in the choices they make for themselves, their homes and as gifts all of which directly helps small businesses and individuals. When more money goes direct to our communities we not only have happier people but a strong economy where communities, families, and in the case of 'Who We Are', where the environment and animals benefit too. 