

FOR THE FUN OF IT

A design product startup wins hearts by creating high on fun quotient offerings. **BY BINITA SINGH**

It's a revolt against convention. Happily Unmarried counters the propensity of marketers to create products in the conventional backdrop of happily married couples and families. The idea is a little unsettling and their products quirkily funny. The result: a loyal clientele and an expanding market.

Though Rajat Tuli, Founder and Director, says that he and partner Rahul Anand launched the company without a business plan, the vision for Happily Unmarried sprang from the “pains” of the two bachelor partners. Recounts Tuli, “While house hunting and buying gifts for friends we discovered that everything in our country is targeted towards families, be it movies or products or holidays. No one was paying attention to the needs of a new class of young Indians who were relocating to take up jobs in different parts of the country—these included MBAs, BPO industry employees and design professionals.”

Tuli and Anand, themselves executives working for a dotcom company that later went bust, were relocating to Hyderabad when they first encountered the pangs of being single in India. They found it difficult to find not only accommodation but also household goods that could appeal to their quirky sense of aesthetics while also being utilitarian. It was here that the seeds of a business idea were planted in the duo's minds.

But why call Happily Unmarried anti-established? Tuli answers: “Happily Unmarried wants to go against the convention in whatever we do—hence the tag.” It was this yen for the offbeat that led the two to realise that “there was a market for a company that could cater to the needs of the new emerging class of young Indians”, and tap it.

The company that expects a turnover of ₹10 crore (US\$ 1.6 million) this fiscal, started out with a seed capital of ₹50,000 (US\$ 797.32) in 2003, through the sale of the company laptop after it



folded up leaving the two unemployed and with six months' salary unpaid. But instead of joining the queue for another job, the MBAs from Mudra Institute of Communications, Ahmedabad, decided to launch their own ship. That they ventured into designing without any grounding in visual arts and made a success of it, is a wonder in itself.



Starting out initially with the vision to provide services like rented accommodation, furnishings and the paraphernalia needed to set up home, to the singles in the country, Happily Unmarried soon shifted focus to pure merchandise.

High on the fun quotient, the company is also on a fast growth trajectory. Commenting on the firm's commercial

success Tuli says, "Well we started with no money. But in about 10 years we managed to get a sizable following. The big step was when we got funded by Info Edge (India) last year (2012). That has given us the wings to fly. We are now about 50 employees strong and hope to be a ₹100-crore company in five years. We are growing really fast and loving it."

According to a BSE filing, Info Edge invested ₹5 crore (US\$ 797,321) in the startup for about 25 per cent of the stake in the company. The revenue came as a shot in the arm for this fun designing and merchandising company. Currently, Happily Unmarried sells its products through its online portal and chain of offline stores in India,

Partners in Fun:
Rajat Tuli & Rahul Anand encashed a quirky business idea and are laughing their way up the ladder.

France, United Kingdom and United Arab Emirates. The product design company retails its brand through more than 47 outlets as also through e-retailers like Koolkart. It has exclusive outlets in Delhi, Goa, Shillong and Chandigarh.

Considered one of India's coolest companies, Happily Unmarried has travelled a long way from its first major corporate client, National Geographic Channel, to find partners in Malayala Manorama, NDTV Good Times, CNBC Awaaz, Radio Mirchi, Britannia, Vodafone, and Scullers among others. It provides branding, communications, interiors and marketing services to these clients.

The going, however, was not all fun initially. "When we started things were a bit tough," says Tuli. Since the company had started without a concrete business plan as its foundation, it was propelled forward through the first few years by the sheer enthusiasm, grit and determination of the young founders. The MBA partners did everything themselves in the early days, as they could not afford to hire full time staff—from conceptualising the idea-

driven designs to getting them turned into concrete objects by artisans across the country.

In fact, the USP of Happily Unmarried is its designs rooted in the Indian milieu albeit with a dose of irreverence and outré. So you have a pair of Bhojpuri shot glasses with the slogan *Daaru Tumhaar*, *Shot Glass Hamaar*, a dish TV shaped mosquito coil holder, 'a very brief briefcase' to hold visiting cards, a *sandaas* ashtray shaped like an Indian squat toilet, and another shaped like the traditional *dhobi* (washerman) iron, tablet covers that have whacky truck motifs like "Horn Please" and "Tata Bye Bye" among many other gift and lifestyle products that invariably invite an involuntary smile.

Continuous innovation was the key to the company's survival. Happily Unmarried worked on making each product design genuinely innovative and fun with a young appeal, distinctly tongue-in-cheek, carving out a niche for itself in the crowded gifting and lifestyle space.

Its earlier efforts at marketing though were through direct selling opportunities at office conference rooms that the partners landed through their network of friends. It was the contract to design and develop corporate gifts for the National Geographic Channel that pushed them into the big league.

With a single designer, Mukul Goyal, who reposed faith in their business idea, Happily Unmarried moved forward with a product portfolio that comprised a variety of funky products like ashtrays, business cards, lamps and other knick-knacks that they soon ramped up with the infusion of funds from Info Edge to more than 120 products. The company now sells bar T-shirts with logos that declare you are a '*nalayak*' and other such irreverent Indian slogans, bar accessories that include *daku* (thief) glasses, *pehelwan* (boxer) *chaap* and *palangtod* (bed breaker) cushions, toilet kit and *inchitape* (measuring tape) bags, kite notepads and *munimji* (assistant) diary, a medicine box that looks like a

dabbawala tiffin box, doormats that say “treat me with respect”, among other things.

For Tuli though, the measure of the company’s success is its happiness graph. Discounting the teething troubles that they went through he says, “But now we are thrilled with the love that we get from our customers.” And the crowning glory? “The good bit is it is not just the single people who use our products. A very high number of our customers are married.”

The appeal of Happily Unmarried products certainly spills beyond the category that the company set out to cater to initially. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for its widening consumer

now is to take each day as it comes, have a lot of fun and keep the customers happy.”

With this company philosophy at work, the founders are out measuring their customers’ cup of happiness and fun—and their own contribution to it. That they have a fan following is no surprise then. And when happy customers send in appreciative mails, they feel their persistence has paid off.

An unusual concept requiring a high degree of creative capital must be hard to sustain. There could also be fears of burnout and running out of appealing ideas. Tuli apparently has no such fears. “We are in the business of selling fun, so we will do anything that involves fun.

magic to happen. The MiH is a traveling festival and we try to do it in a different location every time. Yes, it is a lot of madness and a logistical nightmare, but then we are a mad company,” says Tuli putting it all in a nutshell.

In its 9th edition this December, the festival that attracts audiences from all over the country and abroad, is scheduled to be held in Shimla.

The thread of irreverence runs through all things under the brand umbrella to prove their anti-established status. If the quirky name piques the browser’s interest, the website is a hilarious read and the products are a sure winner. Ranked by *Business Today* as one of India’s coolest



For Unhitched Fun: Happily Unmarried products defy common perceptions of creative aesthetics.

base. Another is the fact that India is a young country of 1.2 billion people with a median age of 24 years.

The fundamental principle that keeps the company thinking young and its spirit gung-ho at all times is best explained by Tuli himself: “A lot of companies take themselves very seriously. They make lofty vision statements and grand plans. We feel there is not a need for either; if you love what you do and do it well, everything else gets taken care of. That has been our guiding philosophy. We see ourselves in the business of selling fun. This in a nutshell is our vision. The plan even

Currently, we do products and music festivals. We have a host of other plans and ideas all involving making the life of our customers more fun.”

So for the fun of it all, “We make products, do interiors projects if we find them really appealing and we also design corporate merchandise for companies,” elaborates Tuli.

Music in the Hills is a brand property of the company that “is something we do for the sheer love of music”, says Tuli. The independent music festival was first organised in 2007. “The idea is to mix a good location, good audience and good music and wait for

companies (2005), Happily Unmarried also found a place in the *Limca Book of Records*. Apart from this, due to its unusual design sensibilities and business concept, it has been featured in various design and business magazines time and again.

But Tuli is not one to rest on these laurels. Talking about the future vision of Happily Unmarried he says, “We want to become India’s coolest company, engage more audiences and have a great time doing all this.”

With such unfettered vision and zest for life, Happily Unmarried is on one fun ride. ■