

What Works

She's Crafty: World of Good brings female artisans' wares to global markets

By Leslie Berger

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From 1933 to 1947, Dr. Jayanti Mitrasen Mahimtura was among the legions of Indians who joined in her country's struggle for independence from Great Britain. She took time off from medical school, did jail time twice for acts of civil disobedience, and wore only khadi, the hand-spun cloth that Mahatma Gandhi used as a symbol of India's self-sufficiency.

Today, Mahimtura's granddaughter, Priya Haji, is a rising star in the fair trade movement. Haji's company, World of Good, connects artisans—mostly women—in poor countries with trendy consumers in the West. The company first ferrets out handmade items from far-flung villages across Asia, Africa, and South America. It then cleverly displays the wares in affluent urban stores throughout the United States. Though Haji, the CEO, declines to release sales figures, she says gross revenues have doubled every year since 2004, when she started the company with two classmates from the University of California, Berkeley's Haas School of Business.

Boutiques selling ethnic crafts like earrings, scarves, and bowls are ubiquitous in gentrifying neighborhoods. But Haji thinks bigger: Her company works with 150 organizations in 34 countries to source enough wares to stock mainstream retailers such as Whole Foods, Wegmans, campus bookstores, and, in a new venture, eBay. By the end of this year, she says, her company will employ 15,000 women around the world.

Mahatma Gandhi may have been pleased to know that by Christmas, eBay's 250 million worldwide users should be able to furnish their entire homes in some form of khadi. "We're building the world's largest people-positive marketplace and educational community," Haji says of the eBay project.

eFree Trade

The eBay Web site has already launched an interactive introduction to fair trade—the philosophy that producers in poor countries, whether they grow coffee or sew caftans, should receive just compensation from consumers in rich countries. The free trade movement started in Europe as early as 1860 with the publication of an anticolonial novel titled *Max Havelaar: Or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company*. During the 1960s, this tale of a disillusioned plantation master in Indonesia found its way into the popular counterculture. Today, its fair trade message—like so many formerly radical notions—has inspired a growing market niche.



A customer shops for World of Good baubles in a Whole Foods store. Borrowing a Hallmark tactic, World of Good sells its fairly traded housewares and apparel from stand-alone displays.

For now, visitors to the developing eBay site can chat online with like-minded shoppers, or they can click on reports about human rights violations and what it means to go green. In coming months, they'll be able to peruse wedding registries and seek gift suggestions. And for every item displayed, they'll be able to see a photo of its producer and read about the place it's from, its cultural significance, and its social impact.

"So you're not only shopping for the physical attributes of that product, but also the values embedded in that decision," says Robert Chatwani, eBay's general manager of the project.

Chatwani, another Haas graduate, met Haji through a mutual friend in the San Francisco Bay Area. Both are historically minded, first-generation Americans of Indian descent. Both are in their 30s. Both have traveled widely. And both believe that privilege comes with responsibility. "We realized right away we had a shared vision, that we could use commerce as a force to alleviate poverty," Chatwani says.

Product Placement

The eBay venture is just the latest example of strategies that have rocketed World of Good to the head of the fairly traded apparel, gifts, and housewares industry. One of the company's first innovations was its clear and smartly placed displays. In Whole Foods, for example, World of Good kiosks



can be found at the ends of aisles or the entrances to departments—the coveted “endcap” placement that patrons can’t miss. Alongside racks of over-the-counter reading glasses so popular among aging boomers, the kiosks offer jewelry, scarves, and purses. And World of Good housewares, such as ceramic dishes and reed trivets, punctuate the aisles of gleaming fruits and vegetables. “That’s how Hallmark sells to Walgreens,” she says. “All the cards and gifts and holiday items are in one aisle. And World of Good is an ethical Hallmark.” Podcasts about the products may start airing at the kiosks by the end of the year, a Whole Foods spokesperson says.

World of Good merchandise is not only prominent, but also fresh. The company constantly rotates its inventory both to tempt shoppers with new items and to accommodate the realities of shipping handmade goods from remote areas. “We need to flex for the vulnerabilities in the supply chain,” Haji explains. For example, “when we were launching our housewares program into Whole Foods,” she says, “there was a big flood in Guatemala and it affected many families, washed out entire villages. People died. We had a producer group that was making handwoven place mats for us and they weren’t going to make it here. But meanwhile, we wanted to make it work with Whole Foods so we were able to substitute in other products. The place mats came a month and a half later.”

For its part, Whole Foods loves the diversity of merchandise. The national chain prides itself on its decentralization, which gives individual store managers wide discretion in what they display and how. And World of Good has tailored its merchandise to different regions, says Jeremiah McElwee who, as Whole Foods’ senior global whole body coordinator, oversees the chain’s nonedible products. For instance, the company is more likely to ship silk scarves to Miami and Austin, Texas, but handloomed wool scarves to Boston and New York.

At the same time, McElwee says, World of Good makes stocking and swapping easy with its uniform pricing system—the company charges the same price for, say, bowls of a certain size, or for beaded bracelets of a certain style. “Products and service—you can’t go wrong with that,” he says.

MAKE FAIRNESS MAINSTREAM

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Many observers say that World of Good’s marketing is superb. “Priya, above anything, is a phenomenal salesperson,” says Will Rosenzweig, who wrote the 1992 fair trade bible, *Republic of Tea*, and was one of Haji’s professors in business school. “She’s so smart.”

The Right Price

Industry watchers also agree that World of Good broke new ground with its online fair wage guide, a data bank and pricing tool with comparative information from almost 100 countries. Buyers can calculate whether their intended payment is higher or lower than the local standard and then get a suggested alternative price. Producers, in turn, can find out whether they are receiving fair hourly compensation. Even competitors can access the pricing tool because Haji and her partners decided it should be shared—a natural extension of their company’s greater good philosophy.

“When we first started,” Haji says, “we observed that while fair trade has grown in popularity, the standards and systems were still evolving, similar to those of organics 20 years ago. For consumers to buy with confidence, and for producers to really benefit, you must have clear standards for ethical trade that any company can implement.”

Leaving the wage guide open source grounded the company’s social mission and set it apart from others interested only in their own gain, says Rosenzweig. Similarly, the eBay Web site will offer goods brought to market by other fair trade dealers. “Even if the products don’t come through World of Good, we don’t care about that,” Haji says. “We just want our overall mission to be accomplished.”

World of Good has pressed its agenda even farther by returning 10 percent of its profits to its artisans’ communities. Its nonprofit arm awards modest grants for onetime expenditures that improve communities’ health or education. In Coimbatore, India, for example, a free clinic used a World of Good grant to buy a blood analyzer so that it could make quick diagnoses on-site, instead of sending blood samples off-site. The grants have also made possible clean water systems in Kenya and Guatemala, and refurbished schools in Vietnam and Indonesia.

“One of the great skills of our company is to partner, partner, partner!” Haji says. “There are great initiatives around the world, whether they are funded by the Peace Corps or whatever, and we’ve decided that what we can do best is create more marketing and distribution for these products.

“We’re not the controller or the creator,” Haji continues. “We are merely the bridge.” □