



Let Yourself be Wooed

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"I CAME TO VIETNAM 10 YEARS AGO to work for a development center. I saw that there was a lot of talent and resources in the country, but I also saw that many people did not have access to opportunities or markets," says Saskia de Knegt, founder and CEO of luxury lifestyle brand WOO ("WOO" stands for "world of opportunities"). This observation drove her to create a brand that would empower disadvantaged people, while also being socially responsible and environmentally friendly. "In creating our product we strive to impact the lives of people engaged in our brand in a positive way; to empower them, to educate them, and to be good for the environment," she adds. Products range from candles, to perfumes and diffusers, all finished with a European-inspired design. Based in both Amsterdam and Vietnam, WOO (woocares.com) is a global company with a focus on creating employment opportunities across Vietnam and opening up real markets to Vietnamese people. WOO products are currently available to purchase in The Snap Café (32 Tran Ngoc Dien, D2), with a shop opening next year in District 1.

Instead of looking at people who are not yet completely

engaged and empowered as only liabilities, it's about seeing their essence," Saskia explains. WOO is committed to creating opportunities using the market as a means of pulling people out of poverty, and promoting the interests of the workers who are a part of WOO's production process. "We use as little machines as possible so that it's handmade. Because when it's handmade, it includes the hands of many people who need opportunities." Every step of the production process is tailored to ensure that the maximum number of people are benefitting from such employment opportunities. Even the cotton bag packaging for WOO's candles are out-sourced to NGOs in Vietnam who employ people with disabilities.

So how does Saskia ensure that WOO is fully committed to being environmentally friendly? The brand sources its ingredients sustainably. This includes visiting bee farmers to establish optimum results coupled with positive impact for the farmers when procuring beeswax for their candles. WOO's dedication to being eco-friendly is exemplified by the use of one particular ingredient in their candles: recycled bottles. Ranging from water bottles to wine bottles and vodka bottles, these recycled products are used to create candle holders. WOO liaises with restaurants, hotels and garbage collectors to get them. The emphasis on being 'green' is central to the brand. "Being socially aware is our mission: it's the DNA of our company," Saskia reiterates.

However, she stresses that while the components that make up the products are sustainably sourced and made of recycled parts, the results are of the highest quality. "We don't do a concession for quality." After searching for premium candle wicks in both Vietnam and Japan, WOO now imports them directly from Germany, as Saskia maintains that "Germany have the best candle wicks in the world." A testament to their quality is the company's guaranteed that their candles will burn for 100 hours. ■