

YAHOO! NEWS

The Brand Great Women built



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The ECHOSi Foundation's partnership with the Philippine Commission on Women in launching the 'Great Women Brand' pushes forward a new direction in women economic empowerment

The Philippines may very well be on the rise towards becoming Asia's new economic tiger, but it does not come without its set of challenges-especially for the small women entrepreneur.

The Filipinos' rise in spending power has attracted a number of foreign-owned corporations into the local market, bringing with them a slew of brands and services that were previously unavailable to local consumers. Given such a competitive environment, there is an urgent need for local women entrepreneurs to step up their game to meet these big players head on.

According to Pacita Juan of the ECHOSi Foundation, the non-profit development arm of the ECHOstore Sustainable Lifestyle retail brand, Filipino women own almost half (45 percent) of business enterprises in the country and are quite active in starting new businesses (69 percent) and running their businesses within the first 3.5 years (51 percent). "Most business ventures owned by women are in the distribution, commercial and retail industries," Juan says. "33 percent of businesses operated by rural women entrepreneurs are in wholesale and retail, which is where our popular sari-sari stores, gift shops, etc. come in," she adds.

There are around 900,000 small and medium businesses in the country, and Juan reports women run more than half of these. "From that figure, 83 percent of women-run businesses are sole proprietorships, probably because 1) the husband is working, and 2) putting up a corporation is sometimes unthinkable, if not impossible, for some. A start-up or a sole proprietorship is the easiest option," she informs.

To most rural women entrepreneurs, scaling up their business to export may seem like the only solution to sustain the business. But Juan shares that "there are pocket opportunities that are manageable on a start-up level. Scaling up isn't the solution all the time. There is a space for smaller players to compete in a global level."

The GREAT Women Brand

In a bid to further advance women's economic empowerment, the ECHOSi Foundation has partnered with the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW)- through the latter's Gender Responsive Economic Actions for the Transformation of Women (GREAT Women) Project-to launch the Great Women Brand (GWB).

"A lot of our women entrepreneurs are those na natuto na lang maging entrepreneur, and we realized that there is really no institute in this country that takes care of these women," says PCW Chairperson Remmy Rikken. Because of this, PCW embarked upon the GREAT Women Project in 2006 to promote and support a gender-responsive enabling environment for women's economic empowerment, particularly micro-entrepreneurs. The five-year project, which was provided with technical and financial support by the Canadian government through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), eventually led to the partnership with ECHOSi Foundation in launching the GWB Program.

The ECHOSi Foundation saw the need for one consolidated brand, now called the "Great Women Brand", which MSME (micro, small and medium enterprises) women groups could use. Through this one brand, a marketing platform and brand position can strategically bring the products to niche or specialty markets.

The GWB program takes the form of a public-private partnership, wherein both ECHOSi and the PCW step in to fill the gaps for product development. According to ECHOSi's Jeannie Javelosa, the countryside is teeming with good products created by women micro-entrepreneurs, but need product critiquing and development to create products specific to specialty, niche or high-end markets. "When it comes to a niche or high-level product range, you need to bring in an intangible aspect, and this is design. We saw that product design and creation was something we needed to look at," Javelosa says. "We decided to be the thread to weave in these gaps-we look at what's wrong, what's lacking, and then we call in someone within our network to help us tie the gaps in, so the whole loop is tied," she adds.

More than design and product variation, among the issues women-led MSMEs face include market access, product certification and micro financing. Being part of the Great Women Brand links them to retailers, designers, product developers and merchandisers, and even microfinance institutions. "At the end of the day, the GWB Program's goal is to place all worthy women-produced community products that do not have the benefit of branding in one identifiable brand that represents quality," Javelosa says. To date, they have developed and up-valued products for women community groups with the first set of provinces being Quezon, Davao, Iloilo, Naga, Leyte and Bohol. Products include food products, home textile accessories, couture and fashion accessories, and home décor pieces.

The brand isn't without government support either. The GREAT Women Project has been funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) since 2006, and while this grant is coming to an end, His Excellency Christopher Thornley, Canadian Ambassador to the Philippines, says of the GWB program: "What we're really seeing with this project, which is so encouraging, is that it's market- and demand-driven. We have great people producing wonderful products, but maybe not as linked to the final end market as necessary. We always ask ourselves at CIDA, how do these projects tie to this market? How do we ensure its success? And really, that's what I see here. We see the value chain, we see the key to success because products are being developed,

refined, and improved to ensure they meet the demand that's out there. Our funding may be coming to an end, but our involvement won't. This project has been a success and has surpassed any of the expectations that were set. We never conceived that it would end with something like this—a brand, a store, products being sold...but the bottom line is that what this really means is that women are being economically empowered and are improving their own prosperity, the prosperity of their families and their communities."

Ambassador Thornley ends, "I don't know how we were able to get people involved in this—people with so much energy and imagination—but I hope we can find more people like you because this is where the future of the Philippines lies. With people who are creative, who have ideas, small businesses that are going to become big businesses and can work together, and really meet the goals that the President has set in this time of great prosperity for the Philippines to become the next Asian Tiger. The Philippines is the next powerhouse economy, and powerhouse economies are powered by people."

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