

Bagging the green agenda...

Cornish eco-entrepreneur Matt Hocking, founder of Leap Media, was quick to recognise a new business opportunity when looking into meeting increasing client demand for sustainable bags.

Overview

Working on a growing number of environmental design projects and initiatives through Leap Media, one the UK's first exclusively green design consultancies, Matt liaised regularly with jute suppliers to provide clients with a completely sustainable offering for corporate promotions and business launches. He explains: "I saw the potential in the market place to supply a sustainable alternative to the plastic carrier bags that seem to have taken over the planet, and jute seemed the ideal eco-friendly replacement. Made from vegetable fibre, it's 100% biodegradable and is almost carbon free, as the crop absorbs CO2 while it's growing."

But existing suppliers of jute to the UK sold mainly in bulk and were not always able to respond to individual clients' needs. So with the aim of offering customers more flexibility – whether in terms of order size, delivery timescales or product design, and wanting to be confident of the ethical and environmental credentials of the product, Matt decided to investigate whether he could develop direct links with manufacturers in India and supply his own jute bags. He spent time researching jute producers to ensure that they could deliver a good product and that they would meet social responsibility criteria, for example paying fair wages, guaranteeing good working conditions and refusing to use child labour.

The result was St Austell based 'Go Jute', launched in December 2006. The company has been incredibly well received, with over 100,000 bags ordered in the first six months of 2007. Go Jute can individually brand clients' bags with their own imagery or logo, using environmentally-friendly vegetable-based inks or embroidery.

Clients

Go Jute's client base is growing day by day. It has already supplied bags to The Eden Project, BBC, Good Energy and the retailers Sea salt. In addition, products such as Go Jute folders have been produced for the Cornwall Sustainable Energy Partnership and lap top bags for environmental merchandise suppliers.

To ensure Go Jute products appeal to a wide audience, a variety of colours and bag designs - big or small, long or short handled, for example - and other products made out of jute, such as folders, are available.

Matt says: "Jute is an incredibly flexible product and we are constantly looking at how we can use and adapt it to create new lines. We want to make it appealing and encourage people to get excited about it – it's about time environmentally friendly products became cooler!" Another goal was to make the business Carbon Zero, the overall aim being to ensure all Go Jute's working practices are as efficient and sustainable as possible. So any remaining carbon emitted during the production and delivery is offset through co2balance, a Somerset-based company that supports renewable energy projects around the world. "In Go Jute's case we chose biogas and lighting projects in Africa for the offsetting. We are also working towards attaining fair trade status".

Underpinning the whole project is Matt's unwavering support for Cornwall: "We have found that both businesses and the public are very receptive to new ideas, and because of our location have identified a strong environmental connection. Cornwall is associated with distinction and quality, which supports our products' ethos." He continues: "There is also no other jute product supplier in Cornwall, which is great. Go Jute is working to meet the high demand throughout the county and beyond for affordable, sustainable, well made ethical products."

Workforce

Matt is a Co-Director of Go Jute, with Gary Warren, and the duo are looking to hire further members of staff as the company grows. The business is committed to developing skills and employment in the local area. Matt says: "We are really keen to support the local community, so we are looking to offer a Cornish designer the opportunity to design some Go Jute bags. We can then donate a percentage of the sales profits to charity."

