INSIDE

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Philippines

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- Where to get materials for:
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MANAGEMENT EQ: Are you a mature manager?

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DO GOOD, and make serious money

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HOW TO USE CREATIVITY TO OUTWIT COMPETITION

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU RETRENCH

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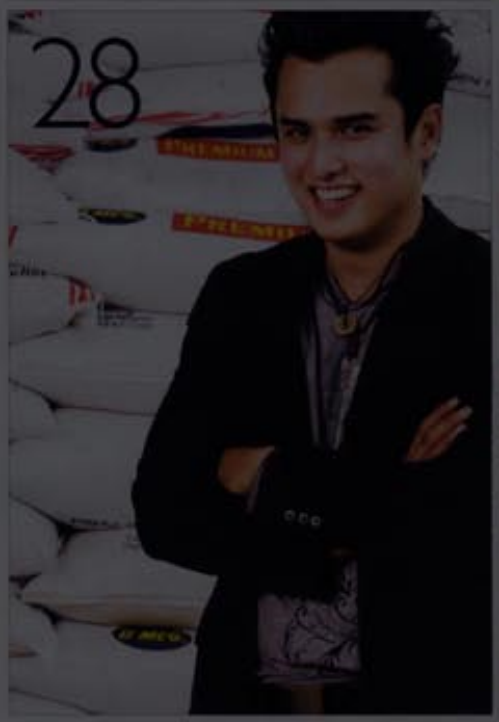

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B.Y.O.B. (Be Your Own Boss)

You think, they ink

Customers of this online store get to say what goes on sale By JC Medina

TRINA SAMANIEGO (above) and RAMON TAYAG (opposite page) sell t-shirts imprinted with frame-worthy artwork chosen by the Inksquad website's community.

Photos: WALTER VILLA

The Philippines has long been recognized as a hotbed for creative work. Through their work in animation companies and in studios that specialize in commercial art production, Filipinos have long showcased their artistic talent in the global stage. The country's creativity, in fact, might as well be its main export.

This prodigious creative output is also very much in evidence on the Web, where a vibrant community of Filipino artists maintain personal galleries of photos, illustration, movies and music. Their cultural affinity with online media—coupled with their innate desire to express themselves through design—has opened new doors for budding entrepreneurs to create a whole new way of shopping online.

These creative marketplaces are everywhere, from the small *tiangge*-type stores that have found both a home and a community on Multiply to specialized websites that sell apparel, furniture and gadgets. Indeed, e-commerce

'We put our artists' community in the limelight, and we promote them through features and blog entries'

is alive and kicking in the country in a very Filipino way.

Having seen this trend, two Ateneo students thought of selling graphic designed t-shirts through a community-based Web portal. With their combined experience in Web technologies and guerilla marketing strategies, founders Ramon Tayag and Trina Samaniego launched online graphic tee retailer Inksquad in 2007.

They didn't take the usual corporate route after graduation. "We both wanted to start a business that gave us both flexible working hours and a place for challenging creative output," Samaniego says.

Starting off with an investment of P150,000, the partners made good used of their background in Web development and graphic design as well as their Internet savvy to minimize their initial capital requirements.

Tayag, who had a computer science degree, developed the website while Samaniego took care of copywriting. Their fully functional website is now capable of accepting payments online and maintaining a decent inventory of t-shirts for their customers.

The Inksquad site is highly dependent on its community to make it work. It asks designers to create an account through which they can submit their designs. These designs are then shared with the community for rating, or, in Web language, "scored."

If a particular design gets enough votes, it is screen-printed, after which the Inksquad team produces the finished products using high-quality materials at market-friendly prices. One of their website's taglines say it best: "What you think, we ink." Their t-shirts range in price from P250 to P490 and are sold by order for delivery within and outside Metro Manila.

Samaniego and Tayag, who are both heavily involved in the company's operations, divide tasks between themselves. They both process design submissions and online orders, maintain the site's e-commerce system, and even manage the website's community. This involves sending direct messages to their customers through Twitter, Plurk, Facebook, comments posted on the site, and e-mail. Likewise, they put out a weekly newsletter.

Since their business is online, the partners can easily examine customer behavior. Explains Samaniego: "You get to know what the online market does—where they go, where they shop, and why they shop there. We see how people react by studying our website statistics."

The founders describe the Inksquad Web community as the backbone of their business. In fact, they emphasize that they are serving the community by making Inksquad as a conduit for having the designs of member-artists turned into sellable products.

According to the site's mechanics, owners of the winning designs are paid P3,000 as an instant incentive, an additional 5-percent royalty for every shirt sold, and recognition by having their name printed on the product. "We put our artists' community in the limelight, and through our website, we promote them through features and blog entries," says Tayag.

To get feedback from the community, they use a third-party application called uservoice.com, which has voting systems that help them prioritize which designs should get printed first.

Inksquad expects to generate P200,000 in monthly revenues. The founders, who have adopted a conservative stance in the business, expect a payback period of two to three years for their initial investment.

Inksquad also had its share of birth pains. "The most difficult part was getting the community comfortable with our business concept and turning them into active members," says Samaniego.

In the brave new world of online retail, the Inksquad team encourages young budding entrepreneurs to overcome their fears by developing a comfort level with the particular business they are engaged in—a process that they say requires continuing readings on startups, innovation in production and product fulfillment, and a keen eye for product quality and sound financial management. These, in fact, are precisely what the Inksquad partners themselves have been doing all this time. ■

INKSQUAD
(www.theinksquad.com)
info@theinksquad.com

Virtual storefronts

Multiply.com is currently home to numerous online stores that sell products ranging from apparel to household items. Originally meant as an online media-sharing service, Multiply.com has been turned by entrepreneurs into virtual storefronts that do the following for them:

- Provide simple but effective ways of displaying their products
- Customize their respective pages to be a true reflection of their brand
- Provide payment options through bank deposits, cash on delivery, and electronic payment services (among them G-Cash, Smart Money, and Paypal).

Check out http://onlinesellersph.blogspot.com for a comprehensive directory of Multiply-based stores.