

Creativity saves the day



By **BAVANI M.**

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EVERY successful entrepreneur has to start somewhere.

The journey isn't easy for most, who usually begin from scratch, be it conducting business from a tiny room or starting an online platform with little or no financial and technical support.

It may take years for a business to become profitable, only for the entrepreneur to lose everything in a matter of months if external circumstances changed.

This is sadly proven by the extended lockdowns brought into effect by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many entrepreneurs, big and small, have experienced devastating losses at some point or another and have had to make sacrifices to sustain their operations.

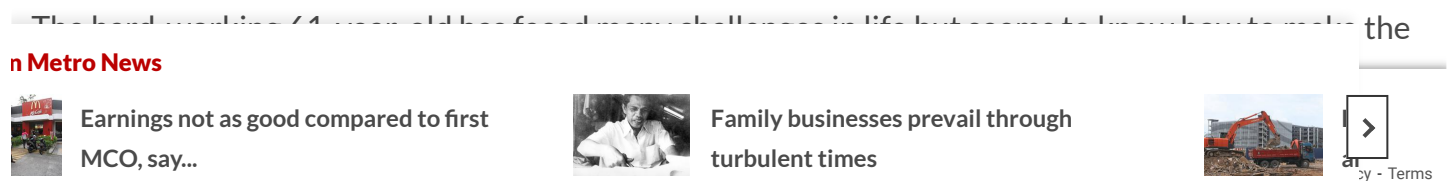
Some downsized their operations and terminated employees to save on operating costs.

Others have managed to turn around their business venture even though it meant stepping out of their comfort zone and embracing change.

StarMetro spoke to four entrepreneurs, who have done just that to avert financial disaster, and these are their stories.

Pak Abu, jack of all trades

From banker to wedding planner and cookie seller, Abu Faizul Abu Bakar (fondly known as Pak Abu) is a man who is not afraid to embrace change.



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Pak Abu with some of the cookies and crackers made by 35 single mothers and housewives who share the income.

Pak Abu started off as an office boy in a bank and worked his way up to the position of vice-president.

He left the banking world after 27 years to jump to wedding planning, but with the pandemic putting the brakes on wedding events, Pak Abu decided to venture into the food business.

His cookie and tidbits enterprise, called Pak Abu Selections, is not only helping him to sustain himself during the pandemic, but also helping 35 single mothers and housewives from rural areas earn an income from making cookies.

"I provide 35 varieties of cookies and snacks and each type is made by a different person," he said.

"Each lady is tasked to make only one variety to ensure that quality is retained."

For instance, for his Peria Legend snack (fried bitter gourd), one of the top sellers, the oil used to fry the bitter gourd is changed for each batch.

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"There is no mass production.

"This way, customers are happy, the women get to make some money, and we get to share the 'cake'."

When asked if it was difficult coping with the effects of the ongoing pandemic, Pak Abu said: "The pandemic is not my enemy.

"One of my biggest pet peeves is chasing after clients who refuse to pay for services rendered," he said, referring to his wedding business.

"It takes the joy out of the work when you have to constantly chase after people for money."

"I find this situation worse than Covid-19," he highlighted.

With weddings and similar events on hold, the cookie business gives him and the women income.

"I have a small kiosk in Bangsar Village 1 and I have maintained a good relationship with the mall management," he said.

Pak Abu's cookies are available at Level 1 Bangsar Village or WhatsApp your order to 011-5666 6159.

From local guide to global traveller

When the pandemic ended all tourism activities, instead of calling it a day, Jane Rai, a 62-year-old tourist guide from Kuala Pilah, Negri Sembilan, decided to embrace digitalisation and took her tour guide business to the next level virtually.

Jane is the founder of Free Walk Kuala Lumpur Unscripted, a heritage walk tour in Kuala Lumpur.

The frequent lockdowns last year meant she was no longer able to conduct walking tours.

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Jane has reinvented her tour guide business to offer virtual 360-degree travel outings. — Photos: YAP CHEE HONG and AZLINA ABDULLAH/The Star

So Jane decided to embrace the world of virtual tours, which was getting popular worldwide.

She traded in her sneakers and umbrella for a camera and tripod and dove into the virtual scenario from her flat in Jalan Imbi.

“I had to adapt.

“It was like a baptism of fire.

“I already had the content, all I needed was the (technological) skills to bring that content to the world,” she explained.

She already owned a laptop and had good Internet service, so she only bought a microphone and some lighting equipment to take on the new challenge.

Jane collaborated with a company called LokaLocal VR, which uses virtual reality, 360-degree videos

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"Due to the time difference, my tours start at midnight.

"It can be a group of 10 or just two people," she said.

"One of my guests from Dubai wanted to experience the sights and sounds of Kuala Lumpur and he watched the virtual tour of Chinatown on his TV screen with his two-year-old.

Jane takes all the photos herself and records the videos on her mobile phone.

"It has been challenging, but I am glad I picked up these new skills as it will only make me better at my job," she said.

To visit Jane's website, log on to www.freewalkkualalumpurunscripted or call 019-699 2668.

Amu the bride whisperer

Operating out of a small room near YMCA Brickfields way back in 1987, Amu Krishnan started her business offering facials, bridal make-up, saree-tying and hairstyling.

Her business flourished all through the 1990s and by 2000, she had moved into a three-storey building in nearby Jalan Tun Sambanthan and opened another salon in Bangsar.

She included studio photography in her services.



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With help from her three sisters, this entrepreneur turned Amu's Academy of Bridal and Beauty into one of the most successful bridal businesses in the country.

But then the pandemic came and it hit service providers like herself, who were forced to downsize.

"There are no brides to do make-up for or dress, no facials and no commissions to be earned from personal sales of cosmetics products to clients," said the 63-year-old veteran beautician.

"There has been practically zero income for many of us during these past 15 months."

Amu moved from her three-storey building in Brickfields to a bungalow-style premises in Bangsar and later, to another outlet in the city for a less hectic lifestyle.

"I started winding down after 2019," she said.

"Of course then, we had no idea of the pandemic that was looming and the three lockdowns that were going to test our endurance to the limit.

"I had a studio full of equipment and gadgets, and hundreds of beauty products and accessories as stock, but I gave most of them away to my staff, who were stuck at home without a source of income.

"To me, I was in a better situation than my employees and if they had these items at home, they might be able to serve customers who called in on them when allowed."

As the months wore on, Amu found that it was just not feasible for her to continue having a studio to run her business.

"I decided to close both the outlets despite the relatively lower rental I secured from the building managers," she said.

"With no walk-in customers, it just didn't make any sense to continue things the way they were."

That, however, does not mean she has wrapped up the Amu brand name.

"I still get phone calls almost every day from brides-to-be, telling me that they have postponed their big day to this date and that date.

"My sister Sue also gets calls from customers still hoping to get their facials done once the lockdown is lifted," she said.

"So, we are down, but not out."

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Daljit the saree queen

Daljit Kaur, 51, started her online business Shimmerz Styles in 2008, offering exclusive designer sarees, kurtis and custom-made Indian-inspired jewellery.

Her business became so popular that she opened a small boutique two years later in Bangsar, renting space with a beauty outlet.

The business expanded and she took on a bigger retail space a few years later.

She was even featured on reality show Say Yes to the Dress: Asia in 2017.

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While her online platform saved on rent and labour costs, the Bangsar outlet brought in walk-in customers, who were willing to pay for good products.

But then along came the first MCO, followed by several lockdowns.

It put a dent in the business, which prompted her to go back to running it online.

"It's like coming full circle and returning to your roots," Daljit said.

"I have been operating from home, back to how I started 11 years ago."

She is still holding on to her shop, though.

Currently, Daljit focuses on wedding attire because there is still demand for it and people want the best for their special day.

"We had to do something different.

"So, we have shifted our focus to providing customers with exclusive one-off design pieces," she said.

Previously, Daljit would travel to India three times a year to source for materials. Now everything is done online via Zoom meetings.

"We also eliminated the middleman and correspond directly with manufacturers and designers.

"This ensures that the quality we give our customers is in line with the quality Shimmerz is known for," she said.

"This has also enabled us to keep a close eye on cost, which translate to savings for our customers.

"So, if you cannot go to India, we will bring India to you.

"We turned around this unfortunate situation to allow us to provide exclusive pieces that are only available as handmade, individually tailored designs for each customer."

Daljit explained that this industry was all about client relations, adding that "Prompt replies to enquiries are key.

"An increase in social media marketing and online purchase options has been our biggest saviour."

Daljit can be reached at 012-939 9275.

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