## COMPANIES & MARKETS

## **EMERGING ENTERPRISE 2017**

## Bynd Artisan updates book-binding for the smartphone age

Old-school trade a lesson in adaptation: profitable from its first year, with revenue in seven figures and still growing. BY KIMBERLY CHAN

EMBERS of the digital tribe work, live and play with their smartphones and digital devices, clicking and swiping through the choices they make. Local brand Bynd Artisan, however, is trying to haul them back to the handwritten word – and it is doing this by injecting a touch of old-school in its reinvented products of paper, bound in leather and love.

The three-year-old book-binding services business is doing creditably; in fact, it was profitable from its first year. Its revenue runs into seven figures and is still growing, the sales target for this year is \$56 million.

Co-founder and chief executive Winnie Chan has 20 years' experience in the trade, from having been the third generation that managed her family's decades-old book-binding business.

But as she wanted to modernise book bindery, she set up Bynd Artisan in 2014 with her husband James Quan, whose expertise lies in corporate gifts.

He said of the company's ethos. "It is a new way to relive that era (of book-binding), but we are modernising it."

Ms Chan added: "Yes we're talking about the heritage and tradition, but we didn't want it to look very old-school. We wanted the feel to be modern.

"That part is very important because we want to reach out to the younger generation. I think they use products with more people."

their phones so much that writing has become – not functional, but is used more when they are reflecting, writing poems, love letters or things that have a personal touch."

The logo for Bynd Artisan speaks to the modern twist on Goy Liang Book Bindery, which was set up in the 1940s. It looks like a flower, but is a graphic representation of three open books, in a nod to Ms Chan being of the third generation in the trade.

The team at Bynd Artisan has grown from eight to 23, and the company just opened its fifth store – in Raffles City – in August.

The company does retail and corporate sales, runs workshops and enters into collaborations, producing items using leatherette from Holland and leather and paper from Italy.

## Bespoke corporate gifts

Half its revenue comes from producing bespoke leather gift items for corporates such as private banks: Credit Suisse, UBS, DBS private bank and UOB private bank are among its clients.

Mr Quan said: "The banks support Bynd Artisan as a Singapore brand, and most of our products are very apt for gifting, so whether it is for the bankers, or for them to give to their high-net-worth customers, our brand is one of the preferred choices."

Ms Chan added: "It's not an ego thing. But it means a lot because it shows that our brand has value, and it's something I'm very proud of. It allows us to share the quality of the products with more people."

The company makes its craftsmen the centrepiece of its branding. Among them is master craftsman Chong Beng Cheng, who, at 74, still conducts workshops.

These artisans are perched on stools in the stores, producing customised items on the spot at their workbenches.

"Everything is done in-house, and done pronto," said Mr Quan.

Establishing brand presence is important to the company, as is delivering products that are unique and of sentimental value.

Bynd Artisan has run many workshops with customers and collaborated with local artists and designers.

Mr Quan described these as "contact points" through which the company showcases the talents of its craftsmen.

The products that come out of tie-ups with local artists and designers typically have small runs.

"Working with local designers, we do interesting things – things that we don't usually do if we were to do the designing on our own."

The latest on the growing list of collaborators is local designer Olivia Lee, who created "Books of Life" with Bynd Artisan

The collection is a set of leather-bound accessories that look like a minimalist stack of books, but actually comprise a magnifying glass, a jewellery box, a coin bank, a letter-writing set and a unisex clutch.

Retailing exclusively at the Raffles

City atelier, the limited edition in black leather has only 10 pieces available, and there are only 120 pieces of these items in other colours.

"Once we sell out a collection, we

Bynd Artisan also collaborated with local singer-songwriter Joel Tan, better known by his stage name Gentle Bones. This was a four-piece capsule collection, comprising T-shirt, cap, wallet and drawstring bag, with the latter two items made of

will not or will rarely re-do it," said Mr

genuine full-grain calf-leather.
"It's something unexpected, because he isn't a designer, but we came together to create a collection together," said Mr Quan.

These collaborations support local designers, and it helps that the company has the physical space to showcase these works, he added.

"It gives them a lot of exposure instead of just collecting orders off Instagram."

There have even been three-way collaborations, in which the items designed become a bespoke corporate order.



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PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

The two co-founders are constantly seeking to innovate. To them, doing so brings opportunities to stand out in the market.

"You need the production and the design capabilities," said Mr Quan.

Ms Chan added: "That's why we never stop working. We are always trying to improve every aspect of our business. We always try to innovate to continue to excite our customers."

Bynd Artisan has already ventured overseas, having opened at two locations in Hong Kong, Dubai is next.

On home turf, the couple say they have the appetite for only one more outlet.

"We're looking for strategic partners with the same mindset," said Ms Chan.



