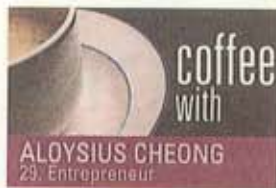


# THE GREEN BUSINESSMAN



*Aloysius Cheong shunned the corporate world after graduating from university in 2000 with an arts degree. He set up his own businesses right away—first a tuition centre and later a marine organism export firm.*

*But he was hit by what he called a "green wave" and after trawling the Internet for ideas, Aloysius and his wife invested US\$20,000 (\$29,000) in a business that manufactured biodegradable disposable cutlery using corn and yam.*

*He spoke to CHEN SIYA (news@newstoday.com.sg) about the challenges he faced in getting Singaporeans and the authorities to use more environmentally-friendly products.*

## **How is your product different from others that use materials such as plastics?**

My cutlery starts to biodegrade 90 days after usage. After 102 days, it will have completely become dust, whereas styrofoam may take about 300 years.

My products can also withstand heat of up to 150°C. Plastics can, but styrofoam can't.

When you burn plastics and styrofoam, you release toxins as well as carbon dioxide. My products are made of corn and yam. When these crops grow,

they take in 10 units of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, when they are burnt, they also release 10 units of carbon dioxide. So, they are carbon-neutral.

## **Why did you start this business?**

I was thinking of the waste generated by Singaporeans every day at hawker centres.

I thought it would be great if we had a biodegradable product that could replace petroleum-based plastics.

I know there are companies already doing this in Italy. But the costs were high, so I went to China to source for this particular product.

## **Do you see yourself as a greenie, environmental advocate or businessman first?**

To be an honest, I am a businessman first, then an environmentalist.

This is my chance to introduce a product to Singaporeans that can actually boost the image of Singapore. Can you imagine tourists coming to Singapore and seeing styrofoam being so wantonly used at Newton Food Centre? Wouldn't it be great if we could switch to something made from such common materials instead? That's how I see it.

## **When you first tried marketing your products to hawkers, what was their initial response?**

Terrible. They gave me a lot of negative feedback.

Firstly, it's not the usual transparent take-away pack, it's beige.

It's almost double the cost. So, their first reaction was: "This is so expensive, don't bother me."

They are aware of what's going on with the environment, but ultimately it's their costs that matter to them. But there were a few angels who were really nice. They have switched to using these boxes at their own expense, without charging the extra costs to consumers.

I also work with distributors who target schools and caterers.

## **What's your business strategy to survive?**

I target catering companies — they use a blend of plastics and styrofoam.

Nobody else can replace disposable plastic forks and spoons, but I can.

## **Are you a very environmentally-conscious person?**

I am still guilty of certain things. I drive — that's the part I feel most guilty about.

But I do recycle paper, plastics and metals. I try not to switch on the air-conditioner as far as I can help it. I also work closely with the National Youth Council, sponsoring their activities.

## **Have you tried lobbying the Government to do more for the environment?**

In July, I sent reports about styrofoam usage and the environment, as well as legislation introduced by other countries, to our Ministers and Members of Parliament.

One of them is MP Ellen Lee of Sembawang GRC and she raised this topic in Parliament in October.

In my letter to the Ministers, I suggested that the Government follow in the footsteps of countries — such as the United States, Japan, Taiwan, Korea and the United Kingdom — that support biodegradable cutlery. In fact, New York is considering a ban on the use of styrofoam.

I believe that one of these days, the Government could make the switch here. It is a matter of time.

## **Do you have any regrets in taking the entrepreneurial path, instead of working for a large corporation?**

One per cent of the time, when times are bad, when I'm alone in this. It's not like working in an office where you have colleagues to go out with for lunch.

When I was in junior college, I was convinced that I wanted to work in a multinational corporation, but when I entered National Service, my mindset changed.

All my family members and many of my relatives run their own businesses and I realised that I could get support and contacts from them.

I wouldn't say which path is the right one. It all depends on whether you are comfortable with your path.