

Every Brand Needs A Story



She is a pioneer and entrepreneur who enabled change in the retail landscape of Sri Lanka. She is a thought leader creating awareness on matters such as the conservation of the environment, animal welfare and personal well-being. Otara Gunewardene, Founder, Odel, Embark and Otara Foundation is today focusing on creating socially conscious brands that will preserve the natural heritage and distinctive identity of Sri Lanka. She believes in new concepts, niche ideas and doing it all with passion.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe and Keshini De Silva

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After Odel, what's next?

I have been focusing on animal welfare and developing my brand Embark. I have also been more involved in the work that happens through Embark, including treating the injured and sick dogs as well as organising sterilisation and vaccination programmes. In terms of the Otara Foundation, I have been engaged in activities relating to creating awareness on the importance of protecting the environment, wildlife and forests and projects relating to these areas.

After being in business for 25 years, one of my priorities was to go back to my roots and help the animals and the environment. This was my childhood dream!

What are your thoughts on retail in Sri Lanka?

There are many more players in the market now and a much larger number of stores and new brands as well as concepts. Not only in Colombo and the major cities, but also across Sri Lanka. As a result, there are many options for consumers, especially in terms of fashion stores. With these new options there are many choices for the customer. In the last three years the retail sector of Sri Lanka has definitely evolved. There are many new and interesting niche brands and concepts that have come up too.

Will you come back to retail?

I am still in retail with Embark, but on a much smaller scale of course. Hopefully, I will be able to grow it further and I am looking at different options to expand. There has been a lot of interest for the brand from overseas as well, therefore it is an option I will look at in the months ahead. I just need to look at the best way to expand the brand. I don't want to go back to the same format of business I was a part of. Embark is a socially conscious brand. I started the brand to make the street dog fashionable and to give them a platform to be seen and heard so that change can be created for the otherwise ignored, unwanted as well as often abused animal. It also reaches out to the community to not only help the dogs, but to help the people who don't have access to vet care for their pets, for sterilisation and treatment programmes, rescues and also adoptions. I want to consider how the brand can be expanded while being conscious of all areas we touch and this includes the footprint we create.

I strongly feel that in the world today, we need to change how we do business, to consider protecting our planet and all our natural resources, for the future generations. So let's see how it progresses!

As a pioneer of the industry, there is much that you can contribute to the sector as well as the country. Can you elaborate on this?

I have been trying to create awareness in the country on aspects that I feel require a difference as well as change for the benefit of all people, animals and our environment. I believe there are many areas in which things should be improved. There is still so much to be done to uplift lives of both people and animals. Both go hand in hand, which so often gets overlooked. It is why I campaign for animal welfare so strongly. We cannot forget one segment of life if we are to be a nation that shines globally. I believe no country or society can live by merely focusing on profit and continuous growth anymore.

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For us in Sri Lanka, our natural heritage is such a great asset and it is something we

should work very hard to preserve. There is a huge ripple effect. Everything is linked, from our water sources, to the wildlife to the forest. Especially, because we are an island, all these natural elements are linked to our rainfall and our ground water, which is essential for our farming community and more.

We are nearing a tipping point, where, if we continue to use too much of our environment, we will not be able to go back.

Advice for the youth entering the fashion or retail industry?

The world is changing, and I believe it will continue to change having an impact on many industries, corporates and brands. Many people are becoming more conscious about how we eat, how we shop, the footprint brands and companies create, and many are far more conscious about how we treat our animals. Consumer behaviour and purchasing power is changing and is definitely going to continue to change. The internet is wiping out some businesses, especially brick and mortar establishments. The consumers themselves have changed and the millennials in particular are a different type of consumer. They are not that interested in consumerism or continuous buying. They are socially conscious and are more interested in the story the brands have to offer, how the brands affect lives and its footprint on the planet.

What the people look at today and in the years ahead will be different, and with new brands these things should be taken into account. I see so many new interesting concepts and I also see some of the bigger older ones, many that I used to follow closely and admire struggling to stay afloat.

You need to understand the future customer and the changes taking place in the retail sector globally. I believe it creates great opportunities for youth who can cater to their like minded customer base.

With new labels coming in, what is your advice to them?

It is not easy to develop a brand and develop a business. It is quite difficult and involves many different segments including a good understanding of your customer right through to the marketing of the product. The product in itself is important. If you don't get the product right, you don't get the customer. If you have a niche, I

feel you can move ahead in the market that you are trying to penetrate. I feel that you will see how new brands, be it in fashion or cuisine, those with a slight difference or unique aspect are the ones who have that special customer and those who keep coming back. It is tough out there, to compete amidst so many new options and offers, and to also compete in a market that is not growing as fast as it used to. It is a challenge, but also a positive challenge.

Opportunity favours those who have that edge to make a difference and those who have a passion. I really believe you must have passion linked with whatever you do. I always believe that passion is what drives concepts with a difference, thus creating a following, which influences the passion in others as well.

You introduced creativity into the industry. How did you do it?

People buy stories, concepts and visually attractive things or good basic products at a good price, of course the quality has to be good too. But there has to be a story behind it. Even with Embark, I believe it has a story because it is about my three dogs as well as the street dogs of Sri Lanka. I believe every brand needs a story that people can relate to, something that touches the people's hearts. It is easy to keep introducing things to cater to people's minds; and these do sell, but when you touch the heart, someone's passion or great love then you make a great change.

In the case of Odel, when I started and for many years there after, all I wanted to do was to raise funds to help the wildlife and protect the environment and get people involved in the change. Recently I saw my campaigns from the 1990's or so for Galle Face beach clean ups and tree planting programmes. Besides the fashion aspect and the creative interiors campaigns and displays I truly wanted to do as much good as I can for the country I live in. The business part was not really important for me for many years.

Do you see that same creativity in the sector?

I do see many nice concepts coming up in the country. I like the smaller brands and the small concepts that are unique. I see a lot of creativity in terms of dining and some in terms of fashion too. That is good to see. I do believe that for those who want to start a brand or concept, creativity and creating a difference is important.

The retail landscape of Sri Lanka is changing with new luxury malls coming in. What are your thoughts?

It is an interesting time for the retail sector in Sri Lanka. I hope the malls will have a good mix of the unique Sri Lankan brands and concepts because I believe it is important today to be strong in our own product ranges, concepts and brands. I believe even the tourist or traveller would rather purchase something Sri Lankan as international brands have saturated markets overseas and it is hard to compete with price, range and also the ultra-fast stock turns of those brands.

Each market is different, and I believe we do not need to strive to be a Bangkok or a Singapore. We are Sri Lanka and we are unique and special, and we have so much to offer. We must get strong again in things made in Sri Lanka under our own brand names. I am happy to see more Sri Lankan brands receiving prominence and I truly hope it continues to grow.

You are also involved in nutrition; can you elaborate on this?

Yes. Osu Kutiya is a new programme that we have launched and it combines all that is close to my heart.

I want to make people understand the suffering that we put animals through, in the food, milk and meat industry, and I want to create awareness on what animals go through for our food. Once you witness it and see the truth behind what goes on, it is difficult to un-see it. This is the reason slaughter houses and most forms of animal farming have very little access because if people see it many will stop eating meat. Vegetarianism and veganism is a growing trend globally, mostly because of an awakening of consciousness and also because people do not want to be a part of contributing to a cruel industry. It also creates a huge impact on deforestation both for farming as well as for animal feed.

Everyone should try their best to live their life without harming another life because this is possible and every form of nutrient is available in plant form, especially in the world today with so many options that are available. Most of all even if we eat meat, we must understand the suffering we create for these animals. We also need to start learning more on the impact it has on our health. There is so much information available now and several good movies and documentaries made on the effects of a

meat based diet.

Osu Kutiya Was Started For Many Reason. For Healthy, Tasty, Compassionate Cuisine As Well As For Promoting Sri Lankan Vegetables And Fruits...Sri Lanka Has So Many Good Things To Offer. The Superfoods The Globe Is Talking About Grow In The Backyards Of Many Of Our Homes.

Osu Kutiya was started for many reason. For healthy, tasty, compassionate cuisine as well as for promoting Sri Lankan vegetables and fruits. That is why I decided to introduce these cruelty free dishes that everyone can enjoy at home whilst obtaining all the protein and nutrition required.

Sri Lanka has so many good things to offer. The superfoods the globe is talking about grow in the backyards of many of our homes such as; jak fruit and moringa (murunga). We have over a 100 types of greens, each one with specific medicinal benefits. Same goes for our vegetables. Our food, if combined the right way and prepared the right way is extremely healthy. However, we are being pushed to lose all of that and get into commercialised, processed food and fast food. We are losing so much of our native fruits and vegetables, which are being replaced by imported or foreign varieties that are now grown here. These do not have the same nutritious or medicinal values of our own original vegetables. I believe we should not lose sight of the amazing cuisine and nutritional fruits and vegetables of Sri Lanka.

Together with Mount Lavinia Hotel and Chef Publis Silva, Osu Kutiya promotes eating fresh, nutritious and compassionate food. We do not harm any animals. It is one of many that I have been doing over the months and years. In Sri Lanka, our traditions and way of life are valuable and we should not lose them.

Future plans?

One thing that never changes is my constant desire to do new things!

I will of course continue to do as much as I can to be a voice for the voiceless

animals and also for the people who are not often heard and to contribute in anyway that I can to protect our amazing natural heritage, which we are blessed with. The rest I will see how things progress. It is a whole new journey for me and unknown journeys are always exciting.