

Turning sea shells into hard cash

JASON LOW speaks to an enterprising undergrad who makes a very decent living selling sea shells online

MOST undergraduates live on parents' allowances and part-time job salaries, but not Choo Koon Po. The 22-year-old business undergraduate from Singapore Management University (SMU) survives on shells. Well, almost.

Koon Po has been operating his online sea shells business for three-and-a-half years now. He said he entered the trade by accident following a vacation in 2005.

"During my holiday trip to Bintan three years back, I picked some beach shells with the intention of using them as craftwork materials for a birthday present," Koon Po explained. "Having some shells left over after that, I decided to list them in a set of seven beach shells on eBay for fun."

Whether it is sheer luck or miracle, Koon Po managed to sell the set to an American lady for US\$10. "It was then that my interest in shells was ignited and I began reading and researching more in-depth into sea shells," he added.

All that reading and researching has certainly taken Koon Po places – literally. In the last two years, he has visited more than 10 countries, including the United States, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Taiwan to source for sea shells for his business. And most of the trips were funded by his online business earnings, a sum he estimates to be around US\$2,500-3,000 monthly.

Money aside, what really kept Koon Po going in this business was the myriad of opportunities to interact and communicate with the outside world, and learning about their different cultures.

"Many of the sea shells are endemic to their geographical region and I see these shells as a representation of the unique beauty of each region and country," Koon Po said.

"Further, I have always been interested in finding out more about the different cultures and countries in the world. And being in this business allows me to do just that – through interaction with shell collectors and dealers from different countries."

Today, Koon Po has a global network of customers, dealers and collectors from all parts of the world. Treating all his customers and sea shell traders as friends and trusting them right from the start might be his unique formula to success.

Koon Po revealed that he personally writes a postcard to every first-time customer. This is certainly no simple task, considering he



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– Koon Po (with Sandy and her husband in the picture)

has chalked up more than 3,500 transactions from 600 different customers in 40 countries since the start of his online business.

His customers come from all over the world, including exotic places like Iran, Tahiti, Argentina and Cyprus. In some instances, Koon Po knows his customers so well that they host him at their homes when he visits their country during his school holidays. The most memorable trip he has been on was the one to the city of Middleton in the state of Idaho in the United States, where he visited his regular customer Sandy.

"It was particularly memorable mainly because it was one of the first few times that I had met an overseas customer face-to-face and I had a great experience exploring places in Idaho together with Sandy and her family," he said.

"In fact, we visited the breathtaking Yellowstone National Park together and it was certainly something different visiting it with a customer who has become a very good friend over the years.

"I was also presented with a very different view of the American way of life. I always

thought that life there was fast paced and very urbanised but my visit to Middleton certainly brought a different light. Life there was way slower than in Singapore and I really feel that Americans know how to appreciate and enjoy the finer things in life better than most Singaporeans."

Such relationships fostered with friends across the world enabled Koon Po to further diversify his sea shells inventory. All in, his US\$15,000 supply comes from no less than 30 countries. In fact, besides buying his goods from suppliers located in Indo-Pacific countries, he also regularly trades his surplus Indo-Pacific shells with foreign shell traders from countries like Portugal, Israel and South Africa to increase the range and variety of the shells offered at his online store.

'Gem' grade shells

He revealed that there are more than 1,000 different specimens in his inventory to date, the most expensive being the *pleurotomaria bayerotrochus philpoppei*, a very rare species originating from the Philippines – going at a whopping US\$5,999.95 on eBay.

He explained: "The price (market value) of the shells is based on its rarity, location, supply and grade. Generally, a shell from, for example, Australia is more valuable (because of its lower supply) compared to a similar one from the Philippines. And the grade of a sea shell depends largely on the size, coloration, pattern and condition of the shell. Thus the most expensive shells will be the ones which are rare and of 'gem' grade – fully-grown specimens without any blemish or flaw."

Looking ahead, Koon Po intends to build up his knowledge in investments and start investing in the markets soon as he sees it as a viable way to grow his wealth.

And starting another business of his own when he graduates is something that Koon Po very much wants to achieve. "I believe that this experience of running my own online business will put me in good stead for setting up future businesses."

Terence Lim, a long-time friend of Koon Po commented: "His online sea shell business is nothing short of unconventional, but to date, the success with which he has built his business has undoubtedly proven to others that he has a sharp eye for opportunities in the business world."