

Mohd Rodzaidy says most people got into the food business due to an increase in demand for it during MCO. — MOHD RODZAIIDY IBRAHIM

Home baker Boonratana Suphasan doesn't just sell his cakes online, he also prefers brick and mortar stores. — Liberal Latte

Khoo feels MCO has made people kinder and more sympathetic to small businesses like hers. — HabitatKu

Wong Yu Hao says group buys made it possible for him to source the components for mechanical keyboards at a lower price. — WONG YU HAO

Noor Haziqah gets her one-year-old daughter (pic) to model the clothes she makes. — Seri Kids

Noor Haziqah says the modest fashion market has been growing but not the children's segment. — Seri Kids

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Brick and mortar

However, Liberal Latte cafe owner Ahmad Ismail Azhar said though home businesses mushroomed during the MCO, he doesn't expect the trend to continue as more customers are patronising physical restaurants.

He allows home bakers to sell their products at his outlet, which Ahmad Ismail felt is a good alternative avenue.

Cafes are better at introducing people to new products because online users tend to buy what's familiar to them, he said.

"If a product is good, I am happy to support it. But I have to consider that Liberal Latte is the front-end, so my brand is at stake even when selling other people's stuff. If a poor product upsets a customer, it's my cafe that will get the bad review," he said.

He said the recovery period of the MCO is a critical stage for those running home businesses, as they have to decide whether to stay part-time or scale up.

"The Internet is a free market. For home businesses, the question is how to sustain it for the long-term. Beyond clever marketing, they need an SOP (standard operating procedure) to maintain quality as they scale, and potentially even meet regulatory requirements," he said, warning that bigger businesses also invited more scrutiny.

Veestronomy founder Jenny Tey, a single mum who has been an entrepreneur for nearly a decade, said she too wanted to use her cafe as a platform to support home bakers.

She said Facebook groups where home businesses find clients are now over subscribed, with most posts requesting for a cake or catering often getting 200 to 300 replies.

Business at hand

"Only one person gets it, but the other 299 deserve a chance too," she said, adding that she believed that quality was not an issue but it was the steep competition and hard work that dissuaded people from continuing.

"Baking takes a lot of time and not everyone has the patience. You need to have the passion too," she said.

"Money alone won't drive people to keep at it, as it takes experience and the ability to cope with failures along the way."

Passion project

Soy candle store Habitatku founder Valerie Khoo concurred that it was passion that kept her burning the proverbial candle.

She said making candles started as a hobby during the MCO, when she was working at home.

Her two jobs – running a recruitment agency and a music studio – slowed down due to the impact of Covid-19.

She also saw an increase in job applications as many started losing their work which made her want to keep herself busy.

"If I'm not busy, I feel depressed, so working on the candles was a way to feel productive. I didn't initially start with the idea to make sales. I poured 100 candles thinking I'd be happy to sell even two. Instead it sold out in three days," she said.

Khoo revealed that social media proved to be a more effective platform thanks to friends and clients who were willing to give Habitatku a chance and even recommend it to others.

"I feel the MCO has also changed people, they've become very kind and want to help small businesses," she said, adding that customers also preferred the experience of dealing directly with the person behind the business, rather than a faceless corporation.

She has yet to notice a slow down, adding that, "Now people are going out to meet friends and family, they are buying candles as gifts for others."

Another person that turned his hobby into an income is student Wong Yu Hao.

He first got into mechanical keyboards in July last year. After researching and tinkering for six months, he started making them at the beginning of this year using open-source keyboard designs from GitHub and online forums.

Due to the pandemic, his American Degree Programme with Taylor's University was pushed to online, giving Wong the time he needed to turn his hobby into a business.

He kicked it off by organising group buys online for the components needed to build custom keyboards.

This was initially done out of necessity, as component manufacturers had a minimum order requirement, but it also helped lower the prices for parts.

He also preferred this to setting up a social media channel, as he didn't want to do it full time and also preferred working with a community of enthusiasts.

"I put a significant amount of

time into it and earn a decent amount in return," he said.

"But I don't have plans to make it full time. It's more of a personal interest project, and if I make some income at the same time, that's good too."

However, the pandemic threw a spanner in the works, as he sourced most parts from China. Parts became harder to source, cost more and took longer to arrive.

Online services also made it more convenient for him to do business – for instance, Google Forms made it easier to track orders and PosLaju online enabled him to send out shipments without leaving the house.

The business also allows him to be more productive between semesters.

Gap in the market

For Khadijah Shamsul and Noor Haziqah Maslan, the co-founders of modest wear brand for children, Seri Kids, online was their first choice for marketing their products.

The secondary school friends noticed that the modest fashion market has been growing but not the children's segment.

Khadijah said she started the project because she struggled to find clothing that was comfortable yet modest for her nieces.

"Most of the options on the market that are fashionable are not practical at all, like mermaid skirts that children can't run in, and if it is practical, it's really not that appealing," she said.

"I know of mothers who struggle with the same issues, and as a passionate aunty and Haziqah as a mum, we decided to give it a go," she said.

Using their respective experiences – Khadijah's in marketing and design for startups, and Noor Haziqah's in modest fashion – they designed a catalogue and virtual store in under two weeks.

"Shopping online has always been a thing for urban Malaysians, but the trend has really been growing since the MCO. It made sense for us to start online, rather than open a physical store," she said.

