

18 A Beautiful Business: The Case of Pure Fiji

Compiled by Marilyn Carr from information supplied by Pure Fiji⁴⁰

Overview

One of the fastest growing markets in Europe, Japan and the USA is that for beauty and health goods based on natural products, mainly non-timber forest products (NTFPs), many of which are found in developing countries. It is estimated that there are approximately 150 NTFPs of major significance in international trade and that this market is growing dramatically each year (Carr, 2008). While there are some exports without value added, there is an increasing trend towards local processing of a range of more sophisticated goods, and it is important that the rural communities – and particularly the women – to whom these resources belong are able to benefit from this trend.

However, although new economic opportunities exist in this sector, it is not easy for women to take advantage of them. For example, if NTFPs are not processed locally, they yield low returns. If rural communities do not have access to fair markets and market information, they can be cheated out of fair prices. And if expansion of the NTFP sector has no concern for the environment, then it can result in overexploitation and loss of access to the natural resource base (Carr, 2008).

This case study looks at a natural body care product business in Fiji Islands that has attempted to address these problems and ensure that there is concern for the local environment and the livelihoods of rural women and communities, while at the same time establishing a profitable, rapidly expanding company with an international reputation for environmentally friendly botanical products that contribute to the country's export earnings.

Pure Fiji: women exporting natural body care products

Origins and purpose

Pure Fiji is a natural bath and body products manufacturer that caters to the exclusive spa and salon industry and exports beauty products to niche markets in Australia, Europe and the USA. Founded in 1995 by Gaetane Austin and her daughter Andree, Pure Fiji began research, development and production of its uniquely Fijian products around the family kitchen table.

Co-founders and directors, the mother and daughter team were inspired by the beautiful traditions and handicrafts of the island culture they had lived in for their entire lives. They realised its traditions and crafts were being pushed into oblivion with the advance of modern and Western lifestyles and that something had to be done to preserve these traditional skills and make them financially viable for communities. They also realised that these crafts could have massive appeal in international markets, if only they could be quality controlled and creatively marketed.

So it was that Pure Fiji was set up with the following tenets:

- Passion;
- Environmental sustainability – dedication to environmental and socially sound practices;
- Cultural and social sustainability – helping communities maintain their way of life and traditional skills by giving these skills new meaning and making them valuable and useful in the modern world;
- Aid through empowerment – identifying a need in local communities, then educating these communities to use their unique skills in a marketable way (also called proactive product development);
- Aid through education – with island communities beginning to feel the pull of the Western world, it is only through education that the future generation can gain the tools needed to protect and maintain their communities and heritage in a changing social environment.

Development of the company

This pioneering instinct and powerful faith in their vision has served Pure Fiji well. Products are based on the traditions of the Pacific Islands, with raw materials and handicrafts supplied by more than 600 craftswomen and men in rural communities and assembled into the finished product with passion and care at a custom-built state-of-the-art factory in Suva. Many of Pure Fiji's products are still handcrafted and packaged by the 60 staff on site – many of whom sat around the kitchen table alongside Gaetane and Andree in the early days. The latter have been joined in the business by another family member, Alexander, while the youngest daughter, Sophia, manages distribution in Australia. Andree brings to the business the skills she acquired from years working in the hotel business in the USA.

Incorporated in the new factory premises is Pure Fiji's spa, which uses only their products. This supports local community initiatives to provide materials, thus avoiding the importation of goods. It is also a highly effective

marketing tool, as satisfied customers are likely to enquire as to the source of the high quality products.

Locally, the company sells its products through the more upmarket stores and tourist hotels. The factory also sets up a outlet every Saturday to meet the needs of local customers who cannot get the products they want from local distributors. Products are often in short supply in many Suva outlets due to high demand (Frodey and Nada, 2008).

Internationally, the company markets through the internet, in-flight magazines and trade fairs in the USA and other countries; it has also started to use exclusive retail outlets in the USA and in the spas and boutiques of prestigious hotels such as the Ritz Carlton group. It puts a lot of emphasis on international distributors, who are in the best position to estimate demand, and invites them to come to Fiji Islands so that they can better understand and sell Pure Fiji products. Emphasis has been put on luxury goods items targeted at upmarket consumers, and requests from large discounters such as Walmart to carry the product line have so far been resisted (Frodey and Nada, 2008).

A table-full of awards on display at the Pure Fiji factory says everything about the company's pioneering initiatives. Pure Fiji was the first natural bath and beauty manufacturer to realise the numerous benefits of cold-pressed coconut oil. It was also the instigator of the first international standard cosmetic manufacturing laboratory in Fiji Islands. It was the first all-women's company to win Fiji Islands' prestigious Exporter of the Year, Excellence in Tourism, Chamber of Commerce and Business Woman of the Year awards, and the first to be nominated as one of the ten most influential people and businesses in the South Pacific. Last but not least – the accolade that the Austins are most proud of – Pure Fiji is the first company to successfully package island traditions for an international marketplace, while simultaneously supporting local communities. Thus, it has achieved the 'win-win' situation of meeting business objectives and building up export markets, and at the same time creating livelihoods for rural communities based on traditional crafts and skills.

Using local products and skills

Body care products

The foundation of Pure Fiji's range of body products is virgin coconut oil, extracted from nuts only hours after harvesting through a process called direct micro expulsion. This revolutionary extraction process does not require any heat, complicated machinery or chemicals, allowing for truly pure, crystal clear, sweet smelling and long-lasting coconut oil to be produced. Pure Fiji is

thus able to base all its products on the purest virgin nut oils, which are cold-pressed to retain all their inherent benefits.

Added to this are other nut extracts such as *dilo*, *skeci* and *macadamia*. *Dilo*, also known as ‘beauty leaf’, has a unique capacity to help heal and nourish the skin – something the islanders have traditionally used as a general panacea for body and hair. These are also cold pressed to retain their benefits.

The women in rural communities who collect these nuts on isolated remote islands now benefit from a new source of income that has an immediate impact on their standard of living. The access to oils (much of which is pressed at source) has also revived their use in the villages by traditional healers, who are returning to using them in healing those suffering from a whole range of skin and other ailments.

Hand-made paper

Pepa Ni Viti, Pure Fiji’s handmade paper project, was initiated by the company to provide an income to villagers in isolated areas. Paper is made from cellulose found in plant fibre that is literally beaten to a pulp and dispersed in water. This fibre is sourced in different forms from bark, grass and leaves of local plants and trees. Particular attention is given to the use of the outer bark of the mulberry tree, which is normally discarded. This is an abundant and fast-growing tree that has been harvested sustainably throughout the islands over generations. The paper-making project is almost entirely run by the women of these rural communities, empowering them in ways they have never experienced before. The husbands and sons help to gather materials and prepare pulp, and with other operations.

As well as training in paper-making, the women received some basic business training and they took it upon themselves to organise working in shifts so that one group could work while another looked after the children and engaged in their village commitments. Paper-making has become the major income earner for the communities, with Pure Fiji using the paper for packing soap and in the production of stationary items. With the extra income, the women can afford school fees. Other ways in which the income has been used include improving local primary schools, setting up a village store and building additional classrooms for a secondary school.

Basket weaving

Another venture involves a group of women who live outside Suva in an urban settlement. These women are using their traditional skills to weave baskets that are used to package Pure Fiji products. The major claim to fame of this project is that their baskets were used at the launch of Pure Fiji at the

Emmy Awards beauty event. This basket is lovingly referred to as the ‘Emmy basket’ and enabled the purchase of a water tank and payment of school fees for the children.

New local initiatives

Pure Fiji is now branching out into candle-making, which is providing new economic opportunities for women in rural communities. Fiji Islands’ fledgling beekeeping community continues to be developed through Pure Fiji’s creation of a new line of beauty products. The pure honey and beeswax are used in cosmetic products and scented candles. Previously, beeswax in Fiji Islands was often discarded for lack of a market.

The community and the environment

In true South Pacific spirit, Pure Fiji has always believed success can only be achieved if it is shared. With the knowledge and experience acquired through growing up in an island culture, they knew that for all to benefit from the success of their business, they had to reach out to the wider community by providing inspiration and a hand up, not a hand-out. The Fijian people are the custodians of the islands’ unique resources and they too must have the opportunity to actively participate in a mutually beneficial manner.

Many of the communities that Pure Fiji works with to source raw materials could not afford to educate their children past primary school level, even with the additional income earned from supplying the company. Rural communities are often just too isolated and a secondary education means having to pay not only for travel, school fees, uniforms and books, but also for boarding. To help with this, Pure Fiji has set up student scholarships that are awarded to 20 of the most promising children to fund their secondary education and help pay their university fees. Children are selected in consultation with school headmasters and village Chiefs. For many communities, these children will be the first to receive such a high level of education. To date, three have graduated from tertiary studies, two as qualified teachers and the third studying Environmental Sciences at the University of the South Pacific.

Pure Fiji is aware of its carbon footprint and the need to utilise Fiji Islands’ environmental resources appropriately and sustainably. It makes every effort to minimise and, where appropriate, enhance the local ecosystem. As previously noted, the coconut oil extraction process uses no chemicals; in addition, the oil is used to power cars and generators in rural communities, and a tree planting programme is in place. In fact, over 2,000 mangrove seeds have been planted this year alone, as well as 100 *dilo* trees to protect the islands’ fragile coastlines.

Lessons learned and future directions

Major lessons learned from the Pure Fiji experience include that:

- Environmental conservation can only be achieved through full involvement of the rural communities who own the natural products that are used in the business;
- Passion and quality can only be maintained through continued family involvement, long-term employment of staff and full involvement of communities;
- It is necessary to have diverse markets. For example, if for any reason the local market is weak, exports will be the source of funds. Conversely, if exports fall, for example because of the global recession, new markets and development are sought locally.

Pure Fiji's plans for the future include:

- Further diversification of product range;
- Further expansion of international marketing;
- Streamlining of production and processing;
- Sourcing of more local components;
- Investigating the use of traditional plants that after laboratory analysis could be developed for use in products.

Pure Fiji firmly believes in the use of Fiji Islands' plentiful sustainable resources to establish and manufacture a unique cosmetic and beauty care range of products.

References

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- Frodey, C and Nada, Y (2008). 'Pure Fiji Export Limited: A Skin Care Company in Harmony with Nature and Culture', *Journal of Business Case Studies*, 4(2), February.

