

Material pleasures



The lightest of fabrics create a feeling of space and freedom

The whole world is a mixing palette for the European fabric designer, who finds his inspiration far and wide. Combine this flair for design with the latest manufacturing technology and you've got an impeccable product that keeps customers coming back again and again.

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa



With Acacia, upholstery gets a classy sheen

Back in the day when Acacia Fine Fabrics of Malaysia was selling material bought in China, business was slow. In 1999, however, five years after starting out, they teamed up with the largest converter of furnishing fabrics in the world, a Belgian company with partners across the globe.

The comfort, warmth and beauty of the quality European fabrics began to work their magic, and in just a couple of years, Acacia was the number one fabric provider in Malaysia.

The next step was to expand: after hitting Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar and Brunei, Acacia decided to invest in Sri Lanka, which was when Sameer Yoonus got his cue.

The only Sri Lankan fabric dealer that Acacia had ties with up to this point was Sameer's father, A.M. Yoonus, who worked with stock lot (i.e. in mass quantities) fabrics in the Pettah area of Colombo. In 2014, Sameer was invited to distribute Acacia fabrics on the Island. He decided to give it a go.

A shock came, however, when he was made aware of Acacia's prices. Until then, prices would rarely exceed 500 rupees a metre in Pettah.

"Even 600 rupees was considered expensive. But with Acacia the cheapest fabric

was 1,000 rupees a metre. I said, 'This is not going to work. No one is going to buy'."

The team at Acacia, however, was unruffled. And then the impossible happened.

"People really loved the fabrics," Sameer says, recalling his realization that a certain segment of society is ready to pay for real quality. "It's just that all this time, there was no option. People went for the cheaper product because luxury stuff was not available."

The market in Sri Lanka is not the same as in Malaysia or other more developed locations. For one thing, tastes are different. Sameer explains that Sri Lankans prefer more varied, colourful designs, while in Malaysia and Europe tastes tend towards the simple.

Acacia has three brands in Sri Lanka. Fabric Library, aimed at the mainstream market, is the key brand. Fabric Library designs are described as a more median brand. Acacia, meanwhile, is a much more high-end, while Estelle is the very epitome of luxury and style.

"Though there does exist a market for high-end brands, the mass market in Sri Lanka is between 1,500 and 2,000 rupees," Sameer explains.

As Acacia is wholesale only, the firm's customers are mostly curtain makers and upholsterers. Acacia delivers the fabric the customer selects within 10 days, and delays are rare because the company has more than a million metres of fabric in stock in Belgium at any given moment.

Also on site in Europe are 20 to 30 designers coming up with new ideas. 'Design' involves not only what is visible in the fabric, but bringing out a product that is fire and water-repellent, while also coming unscathed through a number of other tests.

Sameer explains that because quality is of paramount importance some Acacia fabrics go through as many as 40 tests, including rubbing a swatch 40,000 times with a steel apparatus to make sure of its resilience.

Being the exclusive distributor for Acacia in Sri Lanka is easy because it is such a renowned brand, says Sameer. "Foreign architects working on hotels and such projects in Sri Lanka - there are many of them - know the brand so they ask for

it.”

Despite humble beginnings just a couple of years ago, Acacia is already a success in Sri Lanka. So successful that Sameer Yoonus will have to move out of his Wellawatte headquarters to ritzier premises very soon.

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