

Spotlight On:

Felix Böck | Founder & CEO

ChopValue Manufacturing Ltd., Est. 2016

Hailing from a small village in southern Germany, Felix was headed for a career in carpentry after leaving school at 15 to study the trade. Along the way he became the best Red Seal carpenter in south Germany, earned his degree in wood engineering and worked in Ethiopia as head of product development for a startup creating bamboo-based alternatives to wooden building materials. Then in 2014, the University of British Columbia recruited Felix to do a PhD as part of a research collaboration on structural bamboo. Here Felix learned that each year in Vancouver as much as 600,000 tonnes of wood that could be reused for construction ends up in the landfill and he knew he had to do something.

Following a sushi date and an estimation that 100,000 chopsticks are thrown out every day in Vancouver, the idea for ChopValue was born. The company collects used bamboo chopsticks from local restaurants and transforms them into beautiful home décor products. ChopValue's team of builders, makers, designers, programmers, influencers, engineers and scientists have built a viable, carbon negative manufacturing business from 7,000,000+ chopsticks.....and counting.

- What was the motivation behind starting your own business?

The interest came from the opportunity I saw within all of the wood waste in Vancouver – when I moved here it became clear that I always want to leave an impact where I live, and to become more efficient with our resources. I took my frustration and turned it into motivation, to show everyone the feasibility and viability of working with underutilized resources. The idea to upcycle chopsticks fell into my lap as a crazy idea that could be an inspiring story for the bigger picture.

- Who is your mentor?

Two years ago I had said to my girlfriend I wish I had a mentor, someone to help guide my decisions. It wasn't clear to me at the time that everyone around me, who I talked to about my ideas, was doing exactly that.

- How has mentorship or networking played a role in where you are today?

Last year we had the amazing opportunity to be part of a business incubator program that was funded by Coast Capital Savings. It was for four or five ventures that all strived to have social impact and that is where I built my professional network and really got to know mentorship on a much more of a professional level.

- What do you see as your greatest accomplishment to date?

I don't yet know how to communicate our greater goal and lean back and say, yes I'm fulfilled. I think that is a dangerous thing to do because that means you stop learning, you stop innovating.

For me personally, it was when I was 18 and graduated as the best Red Seal carpenter in south Germany.

- What has been your biggest lesson learned about being your own boss?

I think accepting that it is impossible that everyone is going to like you and listening to each and every team member is super important. I care a lot about my team but I sometimes need to separate the personal care from what I expect professionally and take care at how to communicate with a team of all different cultures, especially if I have a very direct leadership style because of my cultural background.

- What has been your greatest reward to date as a small business in the manufacturing sector/industry?

When we launched our product in 2016 we won the Best Prototype Design Award at the Interior Design Show in Vancouver and then just after a year in business we received the national Clean 50 Company Award 2018, alongside winners that included the City of Vancouver and Metro Vancouver – these go a long way to support our impact story.

- What unique challenges have you faced as a small business trying to manufacture innovative and sustainable products and how have you overcome them?

If you look at manufacturing or consumer based product companies these days you will notice that to produce something locally you can't avoid importing goods or working with materials that come from all over the world, so we try to take this into account when we assess our production efficiencies. To remain carbon neutral we are collecting a resource locally and producing it locally. We take all of the touch points into consideration and try to balance it out - how much energy do we capture, how much carbon do we capture in our new product that would otherwise be released into the atmosphere and how much do we emit during production.

To have a balance that stays neutral in the long run, that is a goal. We want to develop an urban impact assessment tool to educate and communicate to everyone on how to achieve this goal and adapt to their own manufacturing processes. We want people to know it's not just a cool story; we did our homework and have the scientific background to develop these tools.

- Looking back, what advice would you give to other aspiring young entrepreneurs from your experience?

You need a professional partner in crime to share stress, challenges and ideas. With growth comes risk and you need to constantly manage your expectations.

- Your motto is?

“Do more, talk less.” ...or talk less – say more.

- Tell us a little known fact about your company.

ChopValue has turned more than 7 million chopsticks into new engineered products; we've captured a significant amount of carbon for how small we are.

- Where is your favourite B.C. destination?

I'm still exploring, but I just love everything in B.C., it just feels like home.

Bottom Line:

- Plans for 2018 include expanding ChopValue's entire concept—recycling, design and manufacturing to three major North American cities, Vancouver, Victoria and Montreal
- National Clean 50 Company Award 2018
- ChopValue employees 18 staff
- ChopValue aims to have their first US city online in 2019