

What is Up-fuse?

Up-fuse is a lifestyle brand and social enterprise that makes bags and accessory products out of upcycled plastic bags *and sustainably sourced materials. Our main purpose is to promote sustainable lifestyles while highlighting the originality of each and every person involved in the process*

Who founded Up-fuse and what's the idea behind it?

The idea started in 2013 as a final semester university project. It began to gradually develop and evolve, becoming a startup, then, a well-established business in 2015. Up-fuse's founders are Rania Rafie and Yara Yassin who, both, hold a bachelor's degree in product design. During Rania and Yara's semester abroad in Berlin, they were inspired by the idea of making something that's functional out of waste material.

The seemingly mundane fact that plastic bags - items that are readily available and heavily used in Egypt – had to be paid for in places like supermarkets, etc. started a spark. It occurred to them that since they can't change the laws in Egypt to reflect the degree of awareness they witnessed, they can take matters into their own hands and actually create something out of one of the top waste materials in Egypt – plastic bags. And so, the idea of Up-fuse was born.

Later Lama El Khawanky joined Up-fuse as a partner.

What's upcycling?

Upcycling is another form of recycling that upgrades the quality of the material being used. The process is easier and consumes less energy than regular recycling. It can also be easily taught and learned, and doesn't require high-tech machinery or technical skills to be learn and applied.

Why plastic bags?

We use plastic bags in particular because they're very heavily consumed in Egypt. Plastic is also a very useful material; one that's light, isolative, and protects what's inside of it. We wanted to take advantage of these qualities to create something that's functional and helps reduce the impact of the current, worldwide, plastic crisis.

How did you start?

The Founders used to do the upcycling process themselves, and arranged with workshops to sew the bags and finalize them. Afterwards, they partnered with NGO's, training youth and women in the upcycling process.

Up-fuse has its own in-house workshop at Up-fuse, which helped us monitor our production and maintain quality levels.

What's the process that the plastic bags go through till they become a final Up-fuse product?

The process starts with the women from the NGO buying used plastic bags from Garbage City, Manshyet Naser. The plastic bags then go through a cleaning and sanitizing process. Afterwards, they are compressed and turned into a new material - "Sabi" - which is taken from NGO to our in-house workshop where it's cut and sewed into Up-fuse's designs. It's important to note that we don't dye the plastic throughout this whole process to avoid dyes' harmful environmental impact and preserve the uniqueness of our products. *That's why each bag produced is only made one of a kind.*

What's your ideal customer profile?

They are aiming to create a difference, are outgoing, don't blindly follow trends, and have a strong personality. They respect Earth and people and are constantly doing what they can to positively contribute to the various environmental challenges that are facing us nowadays.

How did people initially react to/receive your products?

Things were challenging in the beginning because the majority of Egyptians aren't really interested in eco-friendly products; most of our products were initially being bought by expats. People also didn't really understand our pricing, thinking it's too expensive for products that are locally made, and out of plastic bags. They weren't really aware that the process which the plastic bags have to go through is actually expensive, especially that everything is ethically handmade.

What are the challenges that you faced while starting out?

We faced several challenges.

There were many ones that had to do with production. Firstly, we didn't have an in-house workshop right from the start, so we faced some trouble convincing workshops to sew and work with our upcycled material because it's one that's new to them and which they never worked with before. Dealing with workshops was also challenging for us in terms of producing a high quality finished product. The very fact that we wanted to make products on a small scale was challenging, as workshops normally operate by producing large quantities.

Another challenge was our lack of background in business; we didn't have the knowledge needed to do basic things, like: writing a proper business plan, marketing plan, making pricing decisions, etc. Moreover, creating demand for our products was a major challenge because our products cater to a very niche market that the majority of Egyptians aren't necessarily familiar with or interested in.

Funding was another obstacle, but having applied to and won competitions gave us much needed support.

How did you get around these challenges?

Building our brand was the key. We had to make it a priority to make products that are actually appealing - aesthetically speaking - rather than capitalize solely on the environmental cause behind what we do. With that in mind, we made it a point to reach out to more people and put in more efforts in our marketing.

Putting our customers in mind, prioritizing their demands and what they're looking for took us a very long way. Directly meeting Up-fuse customers during on-ground events, and getting to know more about what they're looking for through other means such as surveys for example, helped us better understand them and cater to their wants and needs. This helped us gain their loyalty as a brand that values its customers and takes their opinion into consideration.

Another key element for us was raising awareness about our upcycling process and the stages that the plastic bags go through to be eventually turned into Up-fuse's final products. Highlighting how this whole cycle supports multiple members of the community was very important as well.

How do we buy your products?

You can order our products online through our website, *where we can sell locally and internationally*. You can visit our in-office showroom in New Cairo, and you can check retailers that stock our products, like: Virgin Megastores, ABn'G, in addition to others that you can find on our website.

We also collaborate with businesses for custom-made B2B products. On demand, we customize products for businesses. We have collaborated with several brands like: Goethe Institut, DAAD, UNIDO, DELL Technology, Nestle life, and Johnson & Johnson, in addition to others that you can also find on our website.

Thoughts on the sustainability market in Egypt...

It's a market that's growing very fast on a global level, but is moving more slowly here in Egypt. We think that this global growth will gradually encourage its growth/development over here though.

That being said, it's still a very niche market that's limited to a certain social class in Egypt. For the most part when it comes to sustainability, people here are primarily concerned with food and cosmetics. Furniture and handmade fashion or home items then follow with only a small percentage. We are hoping that things will develop over time even if it's just within the small niche that makes up the market over here.

To anyone who wants to start his/her own business...

Having a passionate team is vital. They are the one who are going to be with you through all of the ups, downs, bumps, and bruises. So, make sure those are going to share the journey with you are as “all in” for it as you are.

Patience is a must. Any entrepreneur has to be open to trial and error, and patience is key to achieving that.

Planning and resourcefulness again and again. Use your budget smartly. Since you definitely won't be able to invest in fancy banners and magazine advertisements, invest in building direct relationships with your customers. Be there on ground; attend events, bazaars, give workshops. All of these activities will familiarize your customers and other companies in the same field with your brand, and help build it, giving you more worth and potential customers! Take part in competitions. Apart from winning and how the prize can help with your funding, the application process itself will help develop your business idea, as you'll have to work on basic things, such as: budgeting, business model, etc. which will help validate your business plan and overall idea. It's those seemingly simple, but smart actions that can make all of the difference for an entrepreneur.