ENTREPRENEUR

Lord of the flies

The founder of Oricga finds the right stuff in the black soldier fly to innovate in the field of cosmetics, writes **Lamonphet Apisitniran.**

While flies are normally reviled as pests, one particular species — the black soldier fly — is not only a bona fide friend of the earth, but also the source of Thai entrepreneur Chanarong Sangduan's innovative cosmetic products.

The journey towards his enterprise began five years ago when Mr Chanarong began to feel bored at his job in advertising, which he had being doing for nearly a decade. Ultimately, he felt like he was using all of his creative energies to help sell other people's goods and make them rich.

At one point, he began to ask himself: "Why not promote my own products and build up a fortune for myself?"

At the age of 40, Mr Chanarong got to work doing just that. From the get-go, he started by thinking about what types of businesses would be worth exploring more deeply. His attention was brought to cosmetics, which he had not only been interested in for a while, but also recognised as a multi-billion baht industry that is yet to be overrun with competition.

Realising which industry he would pursue, the question then shifted to what types of cosmetics he should focus on.

"My thinking at the time was that I should come up with something new, something that had never been made before. It should be something completely different, something that sets itself apart from other cosmetics you generally find on the market," says Mr Chanarong.

As it turns out, he has had a long-held interest in entomology, having read a lot of books about insects, including foreign textbooks. While reading, he learned about various substances that can be extracted from them and used in medically-oriented cosmetics.

From that point on, his path became increasingly clear.

"I quit my job in advertising and went to Chiang Mai to set up my business," Mr Chanarong says.

In the northern province, he spent three years working with a group of researchers who eventually became his partners.

In that time, he spent 10 million baht bringing his vision to life, leveraging his home and other assets to secure loans in order to keep pushing the project forward.

Luckily, he also got support from the National Innovation Agency, which gave him 2.4 million baht to help with his research.

"In the end, we managed to create an innovative product based on substances extracted from an insect. I was very happy with our work and registered for a petty patent from the Department of Intellectual Property at the Ministry of Commerce," he says.

Mr Chanarong's Oricga products won this year's Thailand Cosmetic Contest. TAWATCHAI KEMGUMNERD

And just what type of insect was it? As it turns out, his new innovation was based off of a substance extracted from *Hermetia illucents*, otherwise known as the "black soldier fly".

Black soldier flies are a common member of the family *Stratiomyidae*. Generally, neither the larvae nor the adults are considered pests.

Rather, black soldier fly larvae play a similar role to that of redworms — as essential decomposers, helping to break down organic substrates and returning the nutrients to the soil.

Black soldier flies are also an excellent source of sustainable protein for aqua culture, pet and human nutrition. As the larvae have voracious appetites, they can be used for composting household food scraps and agricultural waste products.

Based on Mr Chanarong's research, it was also discovered that they are very high in protein and other organic substances that are good for human health, such as calcium, amino acids, folic acid, omega 3, omega 6 and omega 9.

Ultimately, he established his own company, Oricga Ltd, and started producing cosmetics from those substances. His products were similarly branded under the "Oricga" label.

Mr Chanarong says he is also working on registering Oricga for an international patent at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to help growth in the future.

He says Oricga was also granted the "Cosmetic 4.0" award at the "Thailand Cosmetic Contest 2016", since the product represents an innovation derived from natural substances with myriad benefits.

"The best aspects of the substance we extracted from the black soldier fly are its anti-inflammation and anti-ageing properties, which we use as major ingredients in our products," says Mr Chanarong, adding that its organic base will help elevate the product to a premium status.

He says he plans to launch his anti-ageing products next year in various forms, including serums, lotions and edible capsules. Mr Chanarong aims to sell the products at home and abroad.

He has already sealed a deal to allow a department store owner in Myanmar to distribute his products there. Mr Chanarong is also seeking out distributors in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

He is further in talks with Korean and French cosmetics companies to be his marketing partners.

Korea, as it turns out, is going to play a major role in his plans moving forward.

"We plan to do an "Outside-in" marketing strategy by first promoting our products in Korea before bringing them to Thailand later, as most Thais prefer foreign to local brands," Mr Chanarong says.

At this point, products sold under his own Oricga brand are set to account for 50% of the company's business. The other 50% will be generated by serving as an original equipment manufacturer (OEM) for various foreign brands.

"Our target customer group will be people aged 20-35 who can afford cosmetics that cost around 1,000 baht per item," he says.

Mr Chanarong says he plans to spend 15-20 million baht on marketing, planning and expansion.

Regarding the issue of acquiring raw materials, Mr Chanarong says he has a breeding farm for black soldier flies in Chiang Mai. Capable of breeding around one tonne of the insects each month, he says he can produce around 150 litres of the necessary organic substance needed for his products during that period.

"The farm is ready to be expanded if demand rises. We have no problem in seeking feedstuff for the insect, as our farm is located near a food processing factory. Those unwanted agricultural products, in turn, can be turned around to help breed and feed our insects," he says.

Oricga cosmetics contain substances extracted from the black soldier flies. TAWATCHAI KEMGUMNERD