We Are Handsome started building a global marketplace for its swimwear within weeks of setting up a website

The co-founder of We Are Handsome knew exactly who to contact when he had the inspiration for a new swimwear label. Jeremy Somers asked Indhra Chagoury to collaborate on the project. They had known each other for some time and Chagoury had experience producing Oscar & Elvis swimwear, "I had in my head this picture," he says. "I asked Indhra if she could make five swimsuits. It started as a creative project, to see what they would look like."

After their friends and family suggested they begin selling the collection, they created a website and posted images of the range. They were amazed at what followed. "The next week, we secured our first two Australian stockists," Somers says. "The following week, we had international press reporting on us and a week later, we had a buyer from an international stockist." Yoox.com was the first to embrace We Are Handsome swimwear in the global marketplace.

Although they were surprised by their speedy success, they were well equipped with the business skills they would need to accept and fulfil those orders.

Chagoury recounts the challenging nature of those early days when she and Somers were continuing to work in their full-time jobs. "We appointed a UK sales agent who was Australian and was here at the time and instantly got on with them," she says. The sales momentum continued to soar as Net-a-Porter took on the label as well as Harvey Nichols and Selfridges.

"If we had been young designers, aged 20-something, there's no way

around two years ago. Dawn Adams reports.

we would have survived," she says. Instead, they used their accumulated knowledge to cement firm foundations. Somers had also worked in fashion setting up the People Like Us range of graphic T-shirts as well as other graphics-based products. But they also had other skills to bring to the fledgling business. Chagoury had been working in marketing in the hospitality industry and Somers was an art director at a digital agency.

Their combined talents have enabled them to keep their overheads low because they can often take on new tasks rather than employ others,

"When we first started, we had a production manager and then, we decided we could do it ourselves," Chagoury says. "And we don't need someone else to do our graphics requirements."

Locally made

The collection is made in Australia and fabric is sourced from local suppliers, with digital printing also completed domestically. The pair have only recently left their full-time jobs to become totally immersed in the business and they are assisted by three interns who are given responsibility for core business requirements. Somers says taking charge of a particular project is important for the interns to ensure they can use the experience to gain a position elsewhere at a later date.

"We want to continue to make the collection in Australia," Chagoury says. "We help our suppliers and producers to grow and give them as much support as we can."

Somers suggests the quality of finished product the firm is securing in Australia is 'second to none'. "We rarely have anything returned and we get compliments from the biggest stores in the world," he says.

A regular get together with suppliers and producers after each season is also assisting the firm to become more efficient. At the latest gathering, held over a yum cha meal, each person involved in the supply chain was invited to comment about how their job could be made easier or more efficient if certain steps were taken by the previous person in the production line. "They now get to communicate with each other," Somers says.

Chagoury adds: "The only reason we would go offshore is if our production houses in Australia couldn't handle the volume of business." The firm is operating on a controlled growth program that is designed to allow those businesses to develop and grow as We Are Handsome progresses. The idea is that they continue to work together.

Logistics challenge

Chagoury identifies becoming better informed about logistics the next step in their learning curve. As winners of the 2011 DHL Express Fashion Export Scholarship, they expect to be able to focus on this area next year.

"I'm extremely interested to find out about that part of the business because it is so time consuming and there is such a paperwork trail required," Chagoury says. "We have to let the authorities know so many details like the composition of the product and where it's made and they need the information recorded on the right document. In Australia, you can just pack up and send but to get product to offshore locations can involve a two-to-three week process."

She notes each destination has a different set of requirements and the company is exporting to many locations such as the UK, US, Belgium, Iceland, Switzerland, Turkey, Greece, Spain and France. Interestingly, it is not yet exporting to New Zealand.

The label's season four collection is now in stores and plans are progressing for the season eight styles. Somers says they are usually working on at least four collections at once. "One is in stores, another is shipping, another is in the sampling and photography phase while another is being designed," he says. "Sometimes, we're working on five seasons at once at various stages and we're also running the business, are involved with customer service and our extra-curricular projects."

Projects

Those projects are creative endeavours that often involve artists like photographers or DJs or unsigned bands. In one example, up-and-coming photographers from around the world were invited to take images of the label's garments. Some 25 photographers have already been featured on the firm's website while a report on the initiative appeared in The Vine and received 35,000 views. "Projects like that add interest to the brand," Chagoury says. Somers adds: "People like a brand because of what it stands for at its core. Everything runs through our blog, website, FaceBook page, Twitter account and we have good relationships with lifestyle and fashion media."

The label continues to attract accolades that resonate in a global market. We Are Handsome was named as a finalist in the WGSN Global Fashion Awards and was invited to show the collection as part of the Gen Art component of LA Fashion Week in 2011. Planning for that event was completed from Australia with even the casting determined online. "It's a busy time of year for us," Chagoury says.

The firm also presented its first runway show at Miami Swim Show and Chagoury and Somers then travelled to New York for back-to-back press appointments for a week with publications such as Vogue, Harpers Bazaar and Marie Claire. "Our press agents there are very good and we're different enough for people to want to talk about us," Somers says.

The foundation for the label's success remains identified in that original idea that mysteriously appeared like a picture in Somers' mind two years ago. "The idea was not the norm for swimwear, not stripes or plains or polka dots," he says. "We wanted to do something that had not been seen before. One image defined us from the start, the girl with the lion swimsuit, that was the first tipping point. That image went everywhere, it tells people everything they need to know about what we do."