



Product Lifetime Extension Case Study: SWANE-Design

Company name: SWANE-Design ([website](#))

Sector of activity: Decor and design

Implementation area: Global (office headquartered in Wuppertal, Germany, and operations in Senegal)

Business strategy for product lifetime extension: Upcycling

Upcycling

According to the *Seung (2015)* upcycling is a “process in which used materials are converted into something of higher value and/or quality in their second life”. This represents the process of converting old or discarded materials into something useful, giving an item a better purpose from one cycle of use to the next one. Its principles are associated with the circular economy concept, which means the continuous re-use of products and materials in biological and technical cycles, returning them to society with a higher value than the original one.

History

The initiative named “Swane Design” was created as a business oriented attempt to raise awareness on waste issues, aiming to bring sustainable consumption a reality. Swane Design was motivated to begin its work when it realized the high amounts of non-organic waste found on streets in Senegal, and high costs associated with its treatment as well as health risks.

The upcycling process adopted by Swane Design has created job opportunities for a few unemployed young Senegalese, engaging them from the very beginning of their adult lives.

The core business of this initiative is to combine fine design with upcycling in order to produce beautiful furniture or house accessories at lower environmental costs and in line with a more responsible way of consuming and producing.

One of the company’s key success factors is their selling strategy. Being based in Germany, Selly Wane, the Senegalese project creator and manager, was able to access a market that is more accustomed with finding alternative ways to solve the waste generation problem, since Germany is a leader when it comes to re-using waste¹².

Operations

Swane Design’s work consists of buying required materials that had been previously discarded from consumers, such as plastics and metals, from resellers and submitting them to a process that converts them into something beautiful and useful, adding value from one cycle of use to the next one.

The German consumers then request the pieces on demand - according to options available in the company portfolio - through phone or e-mail contact provided on the website, and the Senegalese team is responsible for the production of the piece. They work on demand because they have only a few pieces in stock due to their small size. After the products are done they are sent to Germany in containers.

Swane Design has been operating for eight years - since they started mobilizing people to work with upcycling in Senegal. Now they have three employees responsible for producing the furniture pieces and according to Selly, their understanding of waste has changed dramatically.

The sales operation in Germany started in a café format, with a small group of faithful clients, but their reach needed to be expanded. It has been a very long journey to develop a consumer base in Germany. The strategy adopted was

Source of information: 1 [Deutschland.de](#) | 2 [WeUpcycle](#)

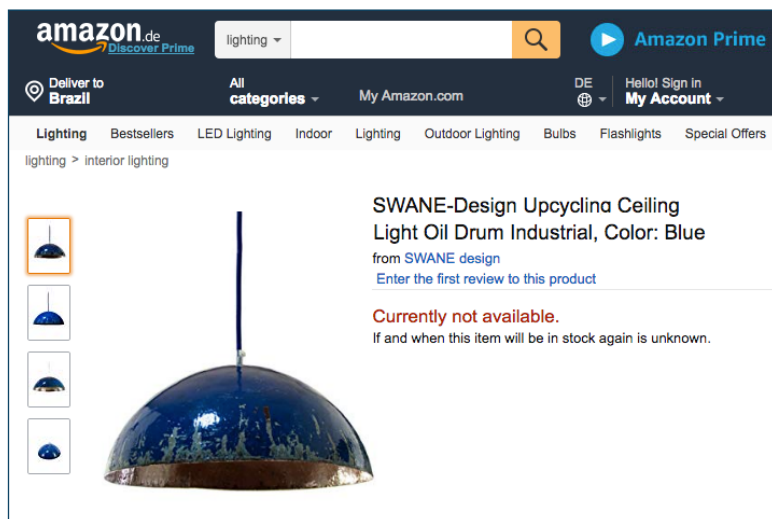


Figure 1. A Swane Design product sold on Amazon

to build a network of German resellers that have been involved with this market for a longer time, by offering them the upcycled products and explaining its positive aspects, in order for them to sell these products on their channels.

The main channels used for selling their products consist basically in partnerships formed with retailers from Selly's own personal contacts list, but they also spread their work through online German marketplaces, such as *Fairmondo*, platforms managed by resellers, such as *Amazon* (Figure 1), and their own website.

Barriers

Even though their business dynamic is very efficient, Swane Design faces a few difficulties that demand improvements, such as the size of their team. The company has not expanded in staff since it was founded; in fact, the Senegalese base became smaller in number of employees due to issues associated with the distance from Germany.

According to Selly, the lack of awareness towards the benefits of this production strategy in Senegal and some developing countries around the world makes it harder to develop similar initiatives, since the general public often still associates "recycled items" to old and worthless products. This is one of the reasons why the products are only sold in Germany and not also in Senegal.

She also believes that a change in their strategy is needed to make these products attractive in Senegal and the best way to achieve this is through good marketing, which involves new design projects, posts on social media and work with influencers and multipliers. Although, something to be kept in mind is that it's necessary to increase scalability parallel to strengthening the business, that is, to generate demand, one must be prepared to comply with it.

The Senegalese government does not present any regulatory hurdles against selling upcycled products, but does not encourage this kind of business either. Education in sustainability is necessary in the country in order to develop a proactive mentality, so that people feel like they also have a role to play in creating a more sustainable future.

Results and next steps

Approximately 3,000 pieces have been sold during the 8 years this initiative has been active, and it helped to increase awareness of upcycling amongst people both in Germany and Senegal.

According to Selly, sustainability is not sufficiently present in schools or in government strategies in Senegal, which discourages people to become fully engaged in it, and this fact restricts their empowerment and willingness to 'make it happen'. This is one of the reasons why there is so much waste generation on a daily basis and a certain lack of concern about giving the waste a proper destination.

When facing these issues, it's noticeable that general changes in infrastructures and education are necessary, as well as extra support for upcyclers. Initiatives like courses in upcycling and design, and the creation of physical spaces to share knowledge, aim to capacitate people towards this business and strengthen networks, since there's a growing number of people working with alternative business and production models, but in many instances they are isolated from one another.



These issues are part of the backdrop for the next steps of Swane Design, which consist in increasing their presence in Senegal. There is a big interest in applying the knowledge acquired in working abroad in replicating and expanding this business model that is already successful.

How to get involved?

Everyone can contribute to a more sustainable design value chain. Consumers have a double role, both when deciding what to consume, looking for more durable products depending on their design and raw materials, but also when choosing products from companies that address key issues of the value chain, passing through raw material extraction and labor relationship, and that allow an adequate end-of-life management of the product, ideally extending its life or reinserting it into the chain.

The Long View Report

This case study is related to *The Long View Report* in two main aspects:

- Improvement of waste treatment infrastructure, reducing the problem of big amounts of garbage found in the streets of Senegal through upcycling.
- Recognition of the full potential of the informal sector, empowering upcyclers from developing countries and raising awareness of Senegalese people towards the positive aspects of this business model.



Product lifetime extension in developing economies

Improvement of waste treatment infrastructure

In many economies a formal, environmentally sound and safe waste management system is needed. In order to make such a system function properly, public education on how and where to dispose products is required.

Recognition of the full potential of the informal sector

Informal economic sectors that revolve around trading, repairing and regaining materials from redundant products currently lack access to investment capital and information to make repairs energy efficient, safe and environmentally sound. It is recommended to recognize these professions and offer them social rights, official status, and training.