

Plastic ban put a new idea in the bag

LI BUSINESS

SMALL BUSINESS

The Associated Press

Farzan and Jen Dehmoubed, a husband-and-wife team from Carlsbad, California, are the founders of Lotus Trolley Bags. The company and its product, marketed as a sustainable and convenient alternative to plastic bags, were born out of necessity.

After California became the first state to ban single-use plastic bags in 2016, the Dehmoubeds jumped on the opportunity to supply shoppers with a new way to pack their groceries.

The product is popular online, currently on the Amazon's Choice list at \$35 for a four-bag set. Shoppers also can get the bags at grocery stores in California. The company is in talks to offer the bags at Whole Foods and Target stores, and the Dehmoubeds are finalizing



JAMIE SCOTT LYTLE

Lotus Trolley Bags, owned by Farzan and Jen Dehmoubed, markets a sustainable alternative to plastic bags.

a deal with TV shopping network giant QVC.

A unique approach

The idea is to speed up the grocery-packing process by allowing the bags to hang from grocery carts, accordion-file style. But the Lotus adds a few unique design elements to its patent, including egg and wine holders and an insulated bag for cold items.

Farzan, from Toronto, received his master's degree in marketing from Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, while Jen, who grew up in Maryland, got a degree in dietetics from the University of Maryland. Before starting their bag company Farzan ran a marketing company, and Jen was a teacher.

The Dehmoubeds weren't expecting Lotus to become a full-time job. Starting the company as a small, part-time project, the couple expected their first shipment in 2017 to sell out in three months. They ran out in two weeks.

Facing significantly larger demand than anticipated, they realized that properly running the business would require all their attention.

"That was the turning point in our mind that there was a demand for this product," Farzan said. "At that point, we knew it was time to go in full force. We spent every hour of every day on this, and we left our jobs

completely behind."

The decision to pursue a career selling the bags wasn't immediate, they said.

Hard decisions

"It was giving up full benefits and a salary, and that obviously makes you nervous," Jen said. The couple "had to have faith and just make the leap."

The four-person operation sold 20,000 trolley bag sets last year. But the Dehmoubeds expect to more than double sales this year — to as many as 50,000 units.

The bags were designed as a better alternative to traditional plastic bags. Beyond being machine-washable and reusable, they're made from recycled plastic.

"We were both happy when the plastic [bag] ban came into effect, but what we found is that with a lot of families, it didn't reduce our waste," Farzan said. "We were just accumulating bigger, more cumbersome plastic bags.

"Plastic never goes away, and so wanting to do something that made a difference — put a dent in the plastic pollution and help preserve the Earth — was the motivating drive for the both of us."

Lotus is a small but growing company, and Jen said it's important to keep morale high.

"We celebrate the small milestones together. This is exciting, and it's a big part of making it happen," Jen said. "It's important not to lose sight of the small achievements as you go along the way."

Expensive lessons

There's a learning curve for new entrepreneurs, and some mistakes are more expensive than others, Farzan said. For the second round of bags, the couple didn't conduct a quality-control check, and the shipment had to be redone.

"That was probably a \$40,000 to \$50,000 mistake," Farzan said. "It was an important lesson to be learned, and we learned it."

THE ISSUE: DEBT CONSOLIDATION

How to decide if it's right solution for you

MONEY FIX

BY SHERYL NANCE-NASH
Special to Newsday

Habits are hard to break. Americans tamed their use of credit cards post-recession, but they've fallen off the wagon. According to a Lending Tree analysis of new Federal Reserve data, Americans are set to amass \$4 trillion in consumer debt — which includes non-mortgage debts such as personal loans, auto loans and student loans in addition to credit card balances — by year-end. Collectively, they owe more than 26 percent of their income on consumer debt, up from 22 percent eight years ago.

Many people deep in debt are searching for solutions. Is debt consolidation a good option?

With consolidation you combine multiple debts, and ideally reduce the number of creditors you owe and lower your monthly payments.

■ **The pros:** "It's the best way to get out of debt besides bankruptcy," says Milad Hassibi, director of content at financial website CrediRead.com.

Debt consolidation can be helpful if you have one or more accounts with high interest rates, and a lower rate will help you pay off the debt, points out Joe Toms, president of FreedomPlus, a lender in San Mateo, California.

■ **The cons:** "Consolidating your debts isn't a magic fix. You'll still have debt. It's just the first step. You have to change your behavior, whether that means spending less or saving more. The best way out of debt is good money habits," says Joshua Zimmelman, president of Westwood Tax & Consulting in Rockville Centre.

You're not guaranteed a lower interest rate. Says Zimmelman: "Consolidating isn't attractive if you'll end up paying more in interest. Also check if the rate is fixed or just an introductory rate that will increase after a period of time."

Consolidation might not be worth it if your debt load is small enough to pay off within a year or less.

THE WEEK AHEAD

For more events, visit newsday.com

MONDAY

GO GLOBAL | East Hampton

Learn how to take your business or new idea global, 6-7 p.m., East Hampton Library, 159 Main St., free, register, nwsdy.li/goglobal, 631-324-0222 ext. 3.

LEARN PUBLIC SPEAKING | Manhasset

Join the Manhasset-Port Washington Toastmasters, improve communication skills in an interactive and supportive group designed for all levels, 7:30-9 p.m., Shelter Rock Church, 626 Plandome Rd., free for first-time guests, nwsdy.li/toast, 516-474-1402.

TUESDAY

CAREER COUNSELING | New Hyde Park

Consultation with a career counselor offers job-seekers an opportunity to obtain insight into how to improve performance on job interviews and use new and creative approaches to the job-search process; appointments available at 10:30 a.m., 11:15 a.m., 1:15 p.m. and 2 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays, Hillside Library, 155 Lakeville Rd., free, registration required, hillsidelibrary.info, 516-355-7850.

WEDNESDAY

BUSINESS MENTORING | Elmont

Individual appointment offered, presented by SCORE, 5, 6 and 7 p.m., Elmont Memorial Library, 700 Hempstead Tpke., free, register for appointment, elmontlibrary.org, 888-433-3632.

WOMEN IN BUSINESS | Huntington Station

"Small Business Transformation Advancing Women Leadership," hosted by Long Island

Advancement of Small Business, 6-7:30 p.m., Microsoft Community Room, 160 Walt Whitman Rd., #2006B, Huntington Station, free, register, liasb.com, 516-473-7202.

THURSDAY

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING | Hauppauge

Hear how a small or medium-sized business can expand its target audience reach by using proven social media marketing tactics and strategies to increase brand awareness, engage users and drive sales, 8-10 a.m., H. Lee Dennison Building, 100 Veterans Memorial Hwy., free, reserve, scwbec.org, 631-468-7050.

NETWORKING | Bohemia

BNI Meadow's Edge Referral Network breakfast meeting, new members welcome, call to see if your category is open, 7-8:30 a.m., Airport Diner, 3760 Veterans Memorial Hwy., call to reserve, 631-256-7931.

FRIDAY

CREATING THE FUTURE OF RAILS ON LONG ISLAND | Ronkonkoma

Presentation by Long Island Rail Road President Phillip Eng, hosted by Long Island Metro Business Action, 8 a.m., Courtyard by Marriott, 5000 Express South Dr., \$25, register, includes a continental breakfast, limba.net, 631-757-1698.

— GINA TABARUS

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