



Amazon founder Jeff Bezos famously remarked that he thinks that the best entrepreneurs are missionaries rather than mercenaries. The comment clearly points to a growing belief that entrepreneurs need to be driven by a fundamental desire to make the world a better place. This is certainly the case for Jesse Tran and Son Chu, the co-founders of sustainable shoe company Rens Original.

The pair, who were both born in Vietnam before moving to Finland to study, wanted to combine their love of sneakers and desire for a more sustainable world in their new business.

"There are sustainable sneakers on the market, but we didn't think they were as high quality as they could be," Jesse explains. "We wanted to create a product that isn't just great for the environment but is also great to look at and is really high-tech."

There are an estimated six million tonnes of coffee grounds [sent to landfill](#) every year. As the grounds decompose, they release methane into the atmosphere, which has a significantly greater impact on global warming than CO₂. Rens strive to prevent those coffee grounds from going to landfill and instead make it the central ingredient in their sneakers. With 21 cups of used coffee going into each pair, Rens hope to make a lasting impact one sneaker at a time.

Providing a launchpad

The journey began at the [EIT Climate KIC Launchpad](#) in 2018. The company managed to win the country final of the event in Finland before going up against 132 teams from across Europe in the Global Grand Final in Edinburgh. While the team was not successful in winning, the experi-

ence was invaluable in helping them test their proposition and pitch it before a global audience.

The process also started an enduring partnership with the EIT Climate KIC, and the node in Finland has provided an invaluable sounding board to help test and develop their proposition.

EIT Climate KIC has provided us with so many lessons that have helped to really focus our proposition and pitch it to investors, industry partners, and potential employees," Jesse says. "Without their support, we wouldn't be where we are today."

A major milestone on the journey was a successful Kickstarter project that saw over 5,000 backers pledge over \$550,000 to help bring the product to fruition. At the time of writing over 6,000 pairs of sneakers had been delivered to customers from around the world.

Developing the business

This initial success has largely been possible because of the strong industry connections both founders developed while working on a previous startup that aimed to connect western companies with sustainable factories across Asia. This prior experience also cemented in them the desire to use entrepreneurship to make a positive impact on the world.

"I'm not someone who complains, I would rather use our talent and knowledge to create something and practically

make a difference to help the environment and to help the world," Tran says.

Finding the right founding team has been crucial not only in complementing one another's skillsets and challenging one's ideas but also in uniting behind a common vision for the future. This extends beyond creating a sustainable business from an ecological perspective and into doing business in a sustainable and just way.

"Our brand stands for sustainability, and this doesn't just mean environmental issues but a sustainable future for all of society, and so we want to use our voice to support the right causes and better society," Jesse continues.

The company released a [short film](#) to highlight the continuing challenges, stereotypes, and discrimination women experience in society to mark International Women's Day 2021, which has been chosen by AdWeek as one of the top 5 campaigns on IWD2021. While the company's workforce is approximately 40% women, there is a clear desire to use their position to go further and change society for the better. If the best entrepreneurs truly are missionaries, then Jesse and Son are certainly on the right path.

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