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HE WHO GIVES A CRAP

Social entrepreneur SIMON GRIFFITHS is ADDRESSING the messy issue of GLOBAL SANITATION, one roll of toilet paper at a time.

WORDS SERENA RENNER

Sanitation is not on most people's list of fun conversation starters. Even Simon Griffiths, who has spent the better part of four years talking about it, has to giggle out the word 'diarrhoea' through the phone receiver.

"If someone has a cold, they're going to tell you they have a cold," he was saying.

"But if someone has diarrhoea, they're not going to tell you they have diarrhoea." Uncomfortable chuckles follow. Point taken.

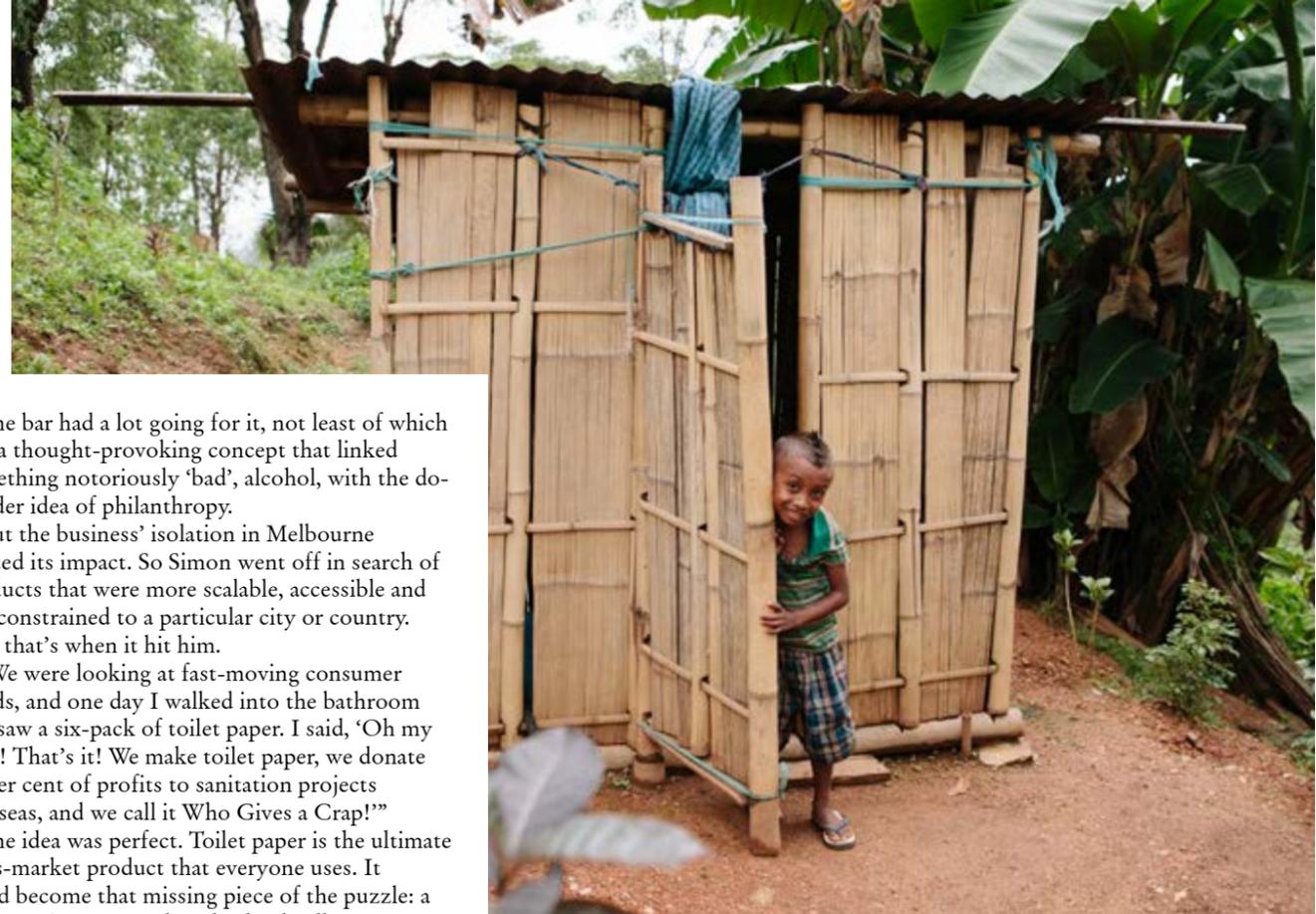
But Simon knows all too well that sanitation is not a laughing matter. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, diarrhoea-related diseases kill 2000 children every day, and across the developing world, 2.5 billion people don't have access to proper toilets.

Despite progress on clean drinking water, current estimates suggest that global sanitation won't be achieved until 2080. Simon thinks the issue is still the elephant in the room at least partly because it's so hard to talk about.

"It's not sexy; it's disgusting," he explains. "You can't market it the same way you can market a glass of clean water, HIV prevention or infant mortality."

Knowing it was something we needed to start talking about, Simon just didn't quite know how to break through the awkward silence.

In early 2010 he developed Shebeen, a non-profit bar in Melbourne that donated 100 per cent of its profits from beer and wine sourced from the developing world to local humanitarian projects.



The bar had a lot going for it, not least of which was a thought-provoking concept that linked something notoriously 'bad', alcohol, with the do-gooder idea of philanthropy.

But the business' isolation in Melbourne limited its impact. So Simon went off in search of products that were more scalable, accessible and less constrained to a particular city or country. And that's when it hit him.

"We were looking at fast-moving consumer goods, and one day I walked into the bathroom and saw a six-pack of toilet paper. I said, 'Oh my God! That's it! We make toilet paper, we donate 50 per cent of profits to sanitation projects overseas, and we call it Who Gives a Crap!'"

The idea was perfect. Toilet paper is the ultimate mass-market product that everyone uses. It could become that missing piece of the puzzle: a conversation starter that also bankrolls real change in the developing world. And there would be no shortage of potty puns.

"All our competitors are all talking about pillows and puppies and feathers and babies, all things totally unrelated to the product," says Simon.

"We knew we could talk about something that's related and we could air a very important and serious issue at the same time. Who Gives a Crap tied all of these concepts together in a really neat little bundle."

By June, Simon and his business partner Jehan Ratnatunga unwrapped that bundle at the Unreasonable Institute in Boulder, Colorado, a start-up incubator for social enterprises. It was there that the duo met Danny Alexander, an American graphic designer who immediately felt like part of the team.

IT'S REWARDING to take something that everyone has always taken for GRANTED, and never really thought about, and turn it into something more MEANINGFUL.

"It was like love at first sight from a business perspective," laughs Simon.

Two years later, Who Gives a Crap launched an Indiegogo campaign to raise AU\$50,000 for its first production run. It was around then that Simon's team realised they were working with, quite possibly, the most boring product on the planet.

They needed some special sauce. They were shooting a promo video that involved Simon sitting, pants down, on a toilet in the company's draughty warehouse when the inspiration came. Someone had the idea that Simon shouldn't be able to get up until all AU\$50,000 was raised.

"Everyone went silent waiting for what my response would be," recalls Simon. "It was just too good. There was no way I could say no."

The public liked the idea, too, so much so that a social media storm swirled around Simon's bare-legged web feed for the first 46 hours of the campaign. >

PHOTOGRAPHY: WHO GIVES A CRAP



It wasn't until 4am on the third morning that the action and accompanying adrenaline fizzled out enough for Simon to fall asleep, on the pot, for two hours. Then electronics started beeping and buzzing and the last few dollars appeared.

The media frenzy surrounding that strawberry-blonde "toilet paper guy" hasn't really stopped since. Once the first orders were delivered, customers took photos of their brightly packaged toilet paper fashioned into pyramids, patterns and dog jumps and posted them on Twitter and Instagram.

It took only five days to sell all the supply in the warehouse, what Simon had thought was three months worth of product. And since July 2013, the company has experienced 23 per cent growth every month.

That has meant significant donations for WaterAid, the non-profit partner that receives 50 per cent of proceeds to build toilets and improve sanitation in rural Papua New Guinea. For every roll sold, one person has access to a clean toilet for a week.

Today, Who Gives a Crap works primarily with one small factory in China to produce its 100-per-cent-recycled rolls that customers can order in 28 or 48 packs, or as part of a monthly subscription service.

From the unusual product to the even stranger campaign, Simon says one of the biggest surprises for him

We knew we could talk about something that's RELATED and we could air a VERY IMPORTANT and serious issue at the same time.

occurred in China just after the company finished its second production run.

"I was sitting in the car with the owner of the production facility," he says.

"The man told me, 'I've been reading the wrappers on your product and it's really interesting what you do. No one thinks like this in China and it's very fascinating.'"

It appears that Simon's goal had been realised. Who Gives a Crap is helping to address a serious problem directly, and that same product has the power to challenge customers, employees and even people countries away.

"It's rewarding to take something that everyone has always taken for granted, and never really thought about, and turn it into something more meaningful," he says.

Now that's something to think about on your next trip to the loo. 🍑

