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9 to 5: How a Singaporean Computer Science Major Started Her Own Jewellery Label From Scratch



From selling her creations outside a McDonald's outlet to the booming international brand it is today, here's how Amanda Koo created a jewellery empire with a background in technology

9 to 5 is a weekly series in which Tatler speaks to influential individuals about their unique journeys and what keeps them going.

When Amanda Koo first started selling the jewellery she made herself, she had no brick-and-mortar store. Instead, she launched her business from a little set-up she created outside a McDonald's outlet at Shaw Centre; she was also heavily pregnant and was working as a one-man show. Today, the mother-of-three has a gorgeous boutique in Ngee Ann City and has seen a 500 per cent year-on-year growth in her company in just a matter of years. Here's how she did it.

Don't miss: Meet Patricia Ho Dowen, the Woman Redefining the Bounds of Design With Her Firm, White Jacket

Growing up in a family of gold jewellers, it was only natural for Koo to find herself venturing into jewellery. As a child, she would help her family count gemstones and tally that number in the stock books, participate in discussions about jewellery trends and even keep an eye on competitors.

"I remember when I was around seven, my father's store was located between two other jewellery stores. I would run between the stores, compare the number of customers, and report that back to my father," Koo said with a smile. "Once, I noticed one shop installed a new set of hi-fi speakers playing Christmas songs and a new Christmas tree. I ran back to my father and told him. He very calmly said, "Don't worry, it may not be a good idea. The customers can't hear them properly when they play Christmas songs so loudly." I was instantly consoled."

However, despite her childhood, going into jewellery herself was not Koo's first choice.



ABOVE Photo: Eclarity

“When it came time to pick a course for university, I was shortlisted for a number of courses including Business Administration, Chinese Literature, Psychology and Computer Science,” Koo explained. “I decided that Business, Chinese and Literature were things I could learn by reading and observing. Computer Science, on the contrary, was a subject that I had no basic knowledge of,” she said.

After graduating, Koo went on to Citibank where she got to explore the technology side of banking. “It started out as an internship and then I continued to work for them over the school holidays,” Koo said.

Later, she went on to work for M1 as a project manager. Here, Koo thrived and even launched a messaging chat, did coding for their website and more. However, after a few years, Koo decided she wanted to branch out.

“I loved my work in technology and it was great that we were creating things that would impact a greater audience. But I always wanted to run my own business. And diamonds have always had a special place in my heart,” Koo said



ABOVE Photo: Eclarity

At this point, Koo had just gotten married and was beginning to start her own family. “I wanted a job which would allow me to be present for my children and provide them with a comfortable life, and starting a business that I was confident in felt like the right way to go,” she said.

It was then that Koo decided to enrol herself in the Gemological Institute of America to get herself certified. “It was incredible studying gemology in New York and I got to visit so many exhibitions and diamond showcases in Manhattan,” Koo said. “To sustain my expenses in New York, I sold jewellery on eBay. I remember the profit margin was very small. But I managed to sell a little, and that was very encouraging for me. So after graduation, I went straight back into jewellery,” she said of the beginning of Eclarity, her jewellery store.

However, Koo quickly found herself in trouble with her business when she returned from the United States to Singapore. “In the US, people were just more receptive to online buying. In Singapore, many people wanted to see the product before they bought it,” she said. This was the beginning of Eclarity as a store. “I wanted to cater to my customers and so I almost stationed myself permanently at the Shaw Centre McDonald’s, where I just met with customers and showed them the pieces I had,” Koo said. She added that she worked almost 24/7 during this time and would cater to all her customer’s needs.



“I just brought my babies to work with me honestly. I was also breastfeeding them at the same time so it was really very difficult,” Koo shared. She confessed that she actually went back to work after just five days of confinement.

When Koo was finally able to set up her store, she found that most of her first customers were all friends and family. “Call it a stroke of luck but I was about 25 then and all my friends around that age were also getting married or buying commitment rings and engagement rings. That really helped,” Koo said. She added that from then on, news of their business spread through word of mouth which really boosted sales.

Today, the company is thriving and even has many regular customers.



Most recently, the company also launched its first diamond database in an attempt to create a system to track the diamonds available in-store and online.

“Diamond stocks move very fast so it was a great system that updated diamond availability every 30 minutes. It definitely helped that I come from a computer science background, which put my tech skills to good use,” Koo said.

Today, the system works with some of the biggest diamond providers in Israel, Hong Kong, and New York to create this real-time diamond database. “Instead of just having 5,000 diamonds in-store, we now also have 20,000 diamonds online, Koo said with a smile.

Koo is also working on growing her new jewellery rental subscription service, The Sample Line, while raising her three boys and managing Eclarity. Below, she tells us how she does it all in her own words.



AGNE Photo: Eclarity

What is a typical morning like for you?

Amanda Koo (AK): On a typical school day, because I am a mother of three boys, I will wake up early to prepare their breakfast and make sure that I get them up. When they were younger, I used to do some morning readings with them but now it's a bit harder so I make sure they go through some of their homework every morning before driving them to school. Then I will head home to start my work.

For a non-school day, I will wake up in the morning and turn on Audible as I prepare for the day and drive to work. I'm on three books now—*21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, *The Psychology of Money*, and *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, and I choose them depending on my mood for the day.

What do you usually have for breakfast?

AK: Believing that my digestive system needs a break, I skip breakfasts from Mondays to Thursdays. On Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, I indulge in a hearty breakfast which includes my favourite tamago sandwiches from Grand Jete Takashimaya, bread from Donq Takashimaya, roti prata, fish congee or dim sum.



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What does a standard work day look like for you?

AK: In the most compressed manner, I segregate my time in the office into these three essential hours.

The first hour is spent meeting up with the sales and production teams. Together, we run through special enquiries and quotations, and bespoke orders received the previous day, highlighting the most important details to the production team.

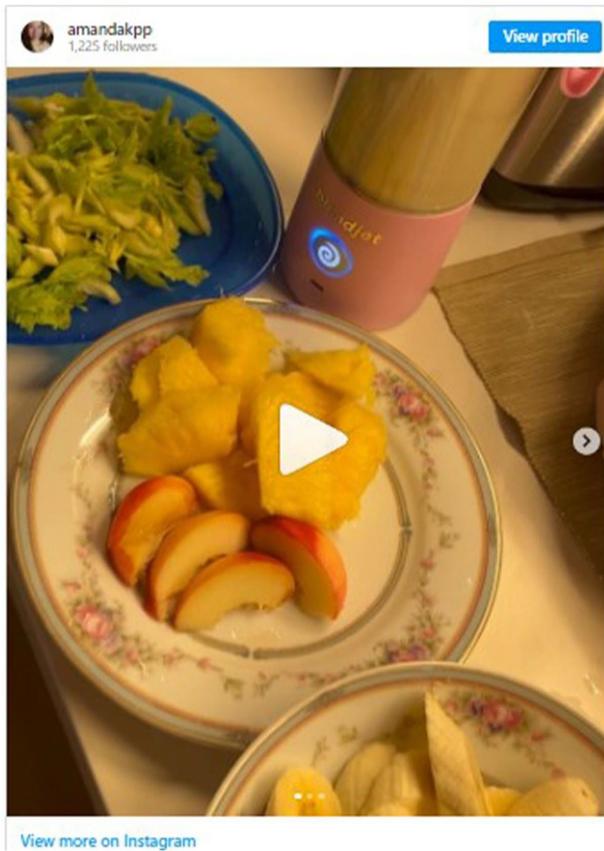
The second hour is spent concurrently with my marketing, platform sales, and business development teams. We update social media content, craft new ideas and work on partner collaborations. The third hour is dedicated to accounts and operations, for investment and human resource matters.

How would you describe your working style?

AK: My working style is logical, structured, cooperative and idea-oriented.

What time do you usually have lunch? What do you usually have for lunch?

AK: It depends on whether I am meeting any external parties for lunch. If I am not meeting anyone, my lunch is usually *you mian*.



Free time: overrated or underrated? Why?

AK: Free time is time that we have control over. It is not a time that we are not doing anything. I believe everyone wants to be able to spend more time doing the things we like, work included, for as long as we want, with whoever we like. So free time is extremely important. It is the main source of joy in life.

How do you achieve a work-life balance? How do you set boundaries?

AK: I can never achieve a work-life balance. What I achieve is work-life integration. I integrate work into my life and life into work. For example, my sons work at my office during their school holidays. My eldest is in marketing, the second one in is in production and the youngest one does sales. I discuss work issues and opportunities with my kids too.



How do you chase your dreams?

AK: Start with the end in mind. Keep tweaking your ways until you get to the end.

Risks: should you take them? Why or why not?

AK: It depends on how much I want the outcome. If I really want a positive outcome, the risk is low because I would have already set up plans in place to make sure it turns out successful.

How do you deal with your shortcomings?

AK: I can be emotional at times. And I am shy in front of the media. Sometimes, my attention span can be short and I am not the most detailed person by nature. But being aware is the first step and then I can take steps to improve myself like recalibrating my thoughts when I get emotional, learning to multitask and building up confidence.



What is one failure business-wise that you have experienced and what did you learn from it?

AK: We ventured into online fashion apparel a few years ago. The reason we failed was probably that it wasn't important enough for us and we went into it because we believed it could be lucrative. It wasn't coming from our unique strengths and therefore did not succeed.

What is the best piece of advice that you have ever gotten?

AK: Be the Elon Musk in everything that you do. [When] you think of electric cars, you think of Elon Musk. It inspires me to think of myself as the Amanda of diamonds.

What is an idea/thought that you heard recently, that you thought was interesting?

AK: AI for diamond-grading and NFTs for diamonds.



How do you unplug?

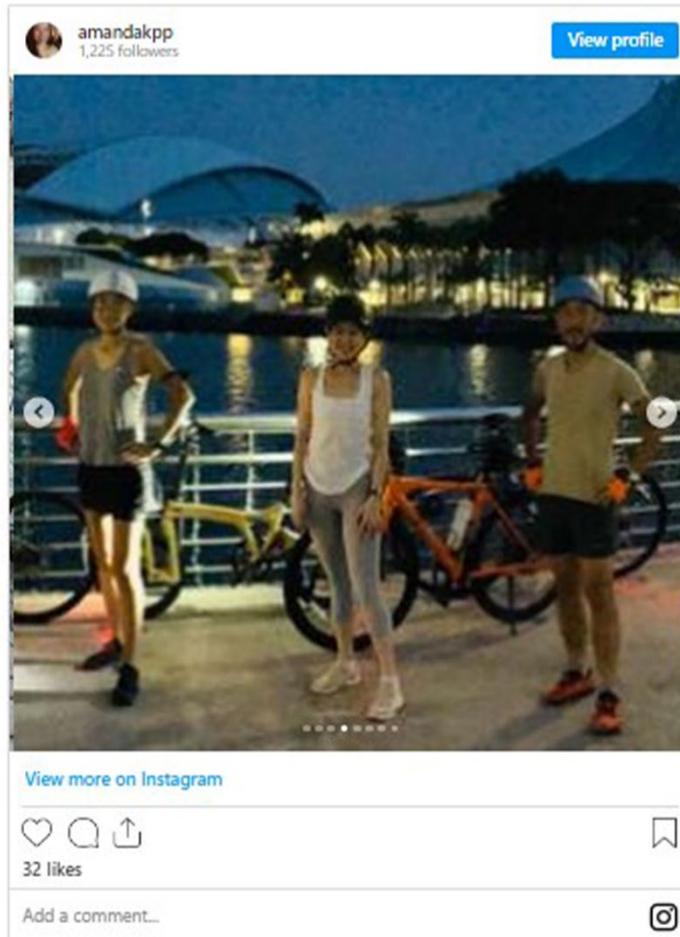
AK: Listening to audio books, taking a shower, chatting with friends, dancing, listening to songs, or watching a good film.

How do you stay grounded?

AK: The question is how do I stay less grounded? I'm naturally a very grounded person. I am learning to enjoy life a little bit more now.

How do you manage stress?

AK: I think of the end goal and know that the worst-case scenario is never as bad as it might seem.



How do you stay motivated?

AK: I have to keep having new ideas. My motivation comes from my children. It keeps me chasing new things.

What is one item that has changed your life for the better?

AK: I bought a weekend house in Malaysia 15 years ago. It has become a small haven for my children and me.

What is the last thing you do before you go to bed?

AK: I will watch the news, shower and do a 30-minute dance every night.