

TECHNOLOGY & DESIGN



Jerry Sarai (left), business development manager of CallFixie and Jaspal Sarai, director of Jaarwis, say their company isn't taking a cut of its Hong Kong business - yet. Photo: May Tse

Start-up's founders tell Mark Sharp their app and website can provide bids from reliable tradesmen for any home repair job

All sorts of things go wrong around the home. Your key breaks in the lock. A water pipe springs a leak. That new light bulb is flickering. Finding a reliable handyman when you need one, however, can add to the headache. Where do you look? When you find one, he may be free only when you're at the office. On top of that, you don't know if he's charging a fair price, or if he is reputable.

So for brothers Jaspal and Jerry Sarai, the CallFixie start-up just made sense. The app, available in iOS and Android stores, and the website connect householders with all manner of tradesmen, be they locksmiths, plumbers, electricians or others.

The customer initiates the job by posting an explanation of the problem, preferably with a photo, along with the location, and the time you'd like the job done. CallFixie then sends an alert to the relevant tradesmen, who will leave a quote if they are available. When bids come in, the customer considers the price options and views the tradesmen's profiles and qualifications, and any user ratings.

"For the consumer, the biggest differentiator is that they can make a value judgment," says Jaspal, director of Jaarwis, an incubator company that is CallFixie's largest shareholder.

"So if someone is charging HK\$20 more, you want to know what you're paying for. It may be that he is highly qualified, has a lot of experience, and has a very good rating."

When the job is finished, the customer closes the deal on the app, gives the tradesman a rating, and payment is transacted electronically.

Gabriel Fong, Jaarwis' CEO, says: "We wanted to have a single platform so the resolution can be swifter. We want to take the equation and simplify it to the point where the customer feels comfortable that they only have one interaction."

Fong and the Sarai brothers believe they have a success on their hands with CallFixie because most of us have a problem finding a safe and reliable handyman who won't come "somewhere between 10am and 4pm", and the model is scalable.

The service was launched in Hong Kong in January, following its December take-off in Australia, where Jaspal lived for 20 years. "Fixie" is Australian slang for someone who fixes stuff. The start-up has expanded rapidly in the country and is now being used in six cities.

Nonetheless, the big differences between how tradesmen operate in Hong Kong and Australia present a challenge, Jaspal says. "Australia was a tough

market because people are used to how they do things. The trades are a very mature platform in Australia; they spend a significant amount of money on marketing, and they have someone to do billing for them," Jaspal says.

He adds that well-qualified tradesmen in the country can earn as much as a doctor if they charge by the hour.

CallFixie makes money in Australia by taking a 10 per cent commission on each job, but Hong Kong is a very different picture, he says. The start-up

If someone is charging HK\$20 more, you want to know what you're paying for

JASPAL SARAI, JAARWIS DIRECTOR

isn't taking a cut here yet because many local tradesmen don't have a credit card or even a professional email address.

Fong says a lot of local tradesmen here don't even have a consistent method of advertising their services.

"To find work, they put stickers on lamp posts or advertise in local papers," he says. It's a promising market, however, because research shows there are about 320,000 registered tradesmen in the city.

While CallFixie works at getting the message out to local

tradesmen, it has assembled a "Swat team" of six handymen with a range of skills and the flexibility to make the trip across town, says Jerry Sarai, CallFixie's business development manager.

Building organic scalability locally, the start-up is also reaching out to corporations to offer a solution for their businesses and customers. Although he won't name any, Fong says that in the case of a furniture supplier, a customer can wait for a delivery longer than they might wish. It may not be a logistics problem, but the lack of a fixie to assemble the furniture.

"You call CallFixie, and our guy can be there roughly half an hour after your furniture has arrived. Or you can pick one close to where you are and jump on the same truck at the same time."

Another area of possibility is building management, he says. "Imagine it's a real estate agency, and they might be managing 1,000 flats and they're always having to get things fixed. They can either run a small team themselves with all the headaches that involves, or just use CallFixie. It's instant and on demand."

A big advantage for CallFixie has been Jaarwis' technology support in the Indian city of Gurgaon, with programmers and other back-end workers the company dealt with on previous ventures. But the next step, to take the start-up into the populous nation, will be its most ambitious yet.

"When you go into India, you go into total chaos," says Jaspal,

a fourth-generation Hong Kong Indian. "Everything you learned from Hong Kong and Australia no longer applies. A lot of companies have gone into India and lost a billion dollars because they tried to handle the country the same way. The unique thing about Jaarwis is, we know Hong Kong like the back of our hand, and we know India in terms of its commercial culture, regulatory framework and knowledge on the ground, which is essential to make it a success."

Jaspal describes the labour force as "one big pile of people who can do one thing or another", adding that the certification process for tradesmen doesn't exist and it's difficult to find one who is fully qualified.

Another reason India will be a hard nut to crack is security concerns among households, he points out. "The main issue is who is coming to your house. With the amount of incidents you hear coming out of India, it is imperative that you supply people with a police check or a residence check, for instance. There are agencies now to do residence checks, and we're going to be focusing more on making it safer for people to engage with these guys."

CallFixie hopes that the start-up will also encourage tradespeople in India to improve their skill levels.

Fong says it makes sense for CallFixie to think big, or at least regionally. With a population of over a billion, India is likely to keep the start-up busy for now. mark.sharp@scmp.com

Innovation in the blood

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Tzelan Ongo lamp by Jessica Corr and Contardi.

You can choose your friends but, it seems, rarely can you escape your DNA.

Alison Chi tried, embarking first on communications studies in Paris, then real estate and hospitality in New York, before being drawn to interior design. Perhaps that is not surprising, considering her father is Tony Chi - influential tastemaker, style virtuoso and inductee into the Interior Design Hall of Fame.

Yet it's not her celebrated dad with whom Alison has joined hands to introduce her new luxury lifestyle brand, Tzelan, but with her lower-profile mother, Tammy Chou, who has held the reins of Tony Chi and Associates for more than 20 years, infusing her own sense of beauty and elegance. As if to play down the link - albeit while sharing hip Manhattan office space with the family firm - the pair maintain that they are "just a mother and daughter on a life-long mission to rediscover integrity in interior design".

Tzelan, in fact, is Tammy's Chinese name, interpreted in English as "a space of purity", which seems fitting with the brand ethos of the company, which is only a few months old.

Alison, as managing director, and Tammy, as brand ambassador, are joined by a team of interior, product and graphic designers who work with them to realise unique designs with "a certain function they can't find [elsewhere]".

"We take a holistic approach to the way we design, thinking about all aspects of a product and not just the aesthetic form or colour, to create a bespoke feel," Alison says.

"A design sensibility that mixes tailor-made [influences] with modern manufacturing process gives our products quite a unique niche in the market."

While aligning themselves with the family's hospitality heritage - some Tzelan designs can be found in the Park Hyatt Shanghai, Andaz New York,

Intercontinental Geneva and Park Hyatt Moscow, with upcoming hotel projects in Singapore, Chengdu and Hong Kong - Alison says the new company's aim is to "push the boundaries" of high-end hospitality design through products people can take home.

The underlying constant is her famous father, whom Alison says remains "the pinnacle of all of our inspirations".

The multifunctional vibe of the New York-fringe Tudor home of her childhood, where her parents pulled down walls to open up the space; the family's assignment in Bali, where visiting the villages of artisans instilled in her an appreciation of traditional craftsmanship; her mother's gentle, tasteful aesthetic, all manifest in Tzelan's collections.

Products are currently available through the brand's partner manufacturers and their distributors, and the new Tzelan House showroom in New York.

Alison is "pushing" for space in upmarket department stores in key cities, including Lane Crawford in Hong Kong. She also hopes to have at least one Tzelan House showroom open in an Asian location this year.

Through Tzelan, Alison is scratching an itch she now knows had been niggling all along. If so, why not just join her father's company?

"The fundamental difference is that my interest has led me towards objects from hospitality, whereas Tony Chi and Associates' legacy is in design and space," she says.

"The two are very much related in a lot of ways - the DNA of Tony Chi runs through Tzelan. But my passion has always been in everyday products you can take home and share with friends."



Alison Chi of Tzelan House.

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If you can't beat it, float it

Alisa Tang

Nestled among hundreds of identical white and brown two-storey homes crammed in this neighbourhood for factory workers is a house with a trick - one not immediately apparent.

Hidden under the house and its wrap-around porch are steel pontoons filled with styrofoam. These can lift the structure three metres off the ground if Ban Seng village, two hours north of Bangkok, floods as it did in 2011 when two-thirds of the country was inundated, affecting a fifth of its 67 million people.

The 2.8 million baht (HK\$667,145) amphibious house is one way architects, developers and governments around the world are brainstorming solutions as climate change brews storms, floods and rising sea levels that threaten communities in low-lying coastal cities.

"We can try to build walls to keep the water out, but that might not be a sustainable permanent solution," says architect Chuta Sinthuphan of Site-Specific, the firm that designed and built the house for Thailand's National Housing Authority (NHA).

"It's better not to fight nature, but to work with nature, and amphibious architecture is one answer, says Chuta, who is organising the first international conference on amphibious architecture in the Thai capital in late August.

In Thailand, as across the region, more and more construction projects are returning to using traditional structures to deal with floods, such as stilts and buildings on barges or rafts. The amphibious house, built over a man-made hole that can be flooded, was completed and tested in September 2013. The home rose 85cm as the dugout space under the house was filled with water.

In August, construction is set to begin on another flood-resistant project - a three million baht floating one-storey house on a lake near Bangkok's main international airport.

"Maybe in the future there might be even more flooding ... and we would need to have permanent housing like this," says Thepa Chansiri, director of the NHA's department of research and development.

The 1,000 square foot floating house will be anchored to the lake's shore, complete with electricity and flexible-pipe plumbing.

Like the amphibious house, the floating house is an experiment for the NHA to understand what construction materials work best and how fast such housing

could be built in the event of floods.

The projects in Thailand are a throwback to an era when Bangkok was known as the Venice of the East, with canals that crisscrossed the city serving as key transport routes.

"One of the best projects I've seen to cope with climate-related disasters is Bangkok in 1850. The city was 90 per cent on water - living on barges on water," says Koen Olthuis, founder of Dutch architecture and urban planning firm Waterstudio.

"There was no flood risk, there was no damage. The water came, the houses moved up and down."

Olthuis started Waterstudio in 2003 because he was

frustrated that the Dutch were building on land in a flood-prone country surrounded by water, while people who lived in houseboats on the water in Amsterdam "never had to worry about flooding".

His firm now trains people from around the world in techniques they can adapt for their countries. It balances high-end projects in Dubai and the Maldives with work in slums in countries such as Bangladesh, Uganda and Indonesia.

One common solution for vulnerable communities has been to relocate them to higher ground outside urban areas - but many people work in the city and do not want to move. Olthuis says the solution is to expand cities onto the water.

Waterstudio has designed a shipping container that floats

on a simple frame containing 15,000 plastic bottles.

Waterstudio's aim is to test these containers in Bangladesh slums, giving communities flood-safe floating public structures. Reuters

The amphibious house is just one solution to climate change in low-lying coastal cities.

