This Founder Was Inventing a “Touchless” World Before We Knew We Needed One



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Before the pandemic made “touchless” technology a matter of life and death, it was a matter of convenience. But convenience is something that Frank Yang, the founder and CEO of Simplehuman, takes very seriously. Yang, 48, immigrated from Taiwan with his parents in 1981, and started the Los Angeles-based company in 2000. Over the past two decades, Simplehuman has developed a reputation as the “Apple of Housewares” because its designs operate on the principle that technology should enable human behavior intuitively — and look good while doing it. The brand’s star product is its voice-activated trash can, which you can ask to “open” — or “stay open” — from six feet away.

In March, Simplehuman's touch-free wares were "nice-to-haves" that became "must-haves." Sales soared, and Yang quickly realized the role that touchless soap dispensers and trash cans could play in keeping families and frontline workers safe. So he marked down prices on all the touchless products and began donating products to healthcare workers.

Yang's vision for intuitively touch-free, design-centric environments has proven prescient, which is why we included him as one of 137 inspiring entrepreneurs on our July/August cover. You can read all about it in Jason Feifer's editor letter. But since the issue came out, we've been catching up with our cover stars to hear a little more about how this unprecedented year has played out for them. We spoke with Yang about what he did or didn't see coming, how the company handled the surge in demand, and all the places he envisions Simplehuman products becoming a staple in everyday life, post-pandemic.

Before the pandemic, why did Simplehuman think that touchless garbage cans and soap dispensers were the consumer choice of the future?

Yang: We believe everyone loves convenience and less effort to get more done – to be efficient. To us, stepping on a pedal to open the can lid is not as effortless as saying "open can" and having our voice sensor open a lid instantly for you to toss trash from six feet away! It also reacts to a "stay open" command to keep the lid open for longer chores. All without touching. In the case of sensor pumps, we believe the ability to dispense soap without pressing on the often wobbly pump mechanism is not only more effortless but also, more hygienic. Our sensor technology can also dispense different amounts of soap or sanitizer based on your hand placement. When products are more effortless and smarter, it allows you to do more. We believe this is the future.

At what point did you realize that the COVID-19 outbreak was

going to generate huge demand for touch-free disposal and sanitation products?

At the onset of the virus, we saw a tremendous demand for sensor pumps and soap. People wanted to wash hands more often and do it in a more hygienic way – no touch. Shortly after, as people spent more time in their home kitchens, our sensor cans started to see a spike in demand.

What were some of the challenges Simplehuman faced in responding to that demand?

Our supply chain could not have anticipated this level of interest and demand for our products. Consequently, our inventory was depleted. While being remote, we were working around the clock with our key partners to secure key components and fabricate new tools in order to increase production. We also experienced a high volume of customer inquiries compounded by domestic shipping delays. Our customer support team was pivotal in keeping customers updated and informed during this time.

How did the company make the decision to donate products to caregivers?

Our passion is fueled by knowing that our products are helping people, and that people love using them. So, when we realized that our products would be super helpful to healthcare workers working on the frontlines, the decision to donate products was an easy one. By partnering with like-minded celebrities we were able to donate more than 3,000 soap pumps and soap pouches to various hospitals and organizations across the country. As an added layer, we opened the floor for consumers to nominate charities to receive much-needed resources like sensor soap pumps and soaps – all in-kind. Additionally, all sensor and non-touch products were marked on sale as an effort to ensure these solutions were available at a discounted rate for families, homes and communities. We are continuing these

efforts by designing limited edition 6-feet apparel and tote bags as a reminder to maintain social distancing until we get this virus under control. All profits from the first month of sales will be donated to All Clear Foundation – a nonprofit that provides critical resources to improve the life expectancy and wellbeing of first responders and their families.

Has COVID-19 caused Simplehuman to reconsider or reimagine the needs and possibilities of your products? If so, what are some examples?

COVID-19 has brought into clear focus a central benefit of our products in that they contribute to increased cleanliness of the living environment, and an overall sense of wellbeing. Purchase decisions are influenced by the incremental value it will bring to consumers' health and ease of mind. To that end, we are expanding our efforts in touch-free technology, specifically our sensor soap pumps, by finding ways to make them more accessible beyond the kitchen or bathroom sink. We are considering wall mounts and stands to use as a permanent solution for central or high-traffic locations.

What are Simplehuman's priorities for the next year, and looking into the future?

Currently, we're working to improve the digital experience of shopping on our website and upcoming app. While the physical in-store shopping experience is at a halt, we forecast that consumers will be driven to purchase products based on reviews and reputation in lieu of the traditional touch-see-feel model. Additionally, we're always evolving our current products as well as introducing new products in the pipeline. There will be some great things on the horizon.

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