Share and share alike

Tony Liaw

An umbrella, a mobile phone and a smart sensor – four young graduates of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University have brought the three items together and created Umbrella Here. The project allows umbrella sharing on rainy days.

The sensor has an internal lighting system, connected to the mobile phone via Bluetooth, attached to the top of the umbrella. It can be controlled by an app on your mobile phone. By switching the light on and off, you can indicate when you want to share your umbrella with others. For example, turn it on if you are willing to share it, or off if you are not.

Umbrella Here was originally a project for the Interaction Award competition. Co-founder and interactive designer Martin Tsang Chi-ho said: “The four of us started this project for a competition called Interactive Award, where one of the topics is to design something that facilitates communication between people and communities.”

The solution took the Gold Award for Best Digital Entertainment (Interaction Design) at the Hong Kong ICT Awards 2014.

Tommy Lau Chun-ho, co-founder and designer for user interface and user experience, said: “There were times when we saw people running across the road without an umbrella on rainy days. Many times I'd wished to share my umbrella with people waiting outside the MTR station without umbrellas but I felt embarrassed to ask.”

Lau said the area under an umbrella usually turns into personal space so sharing is difficult. The device can facilitate communication.

“It's just like the light you would see on a taxi,” he said. “When the light is on, it represents that strangers are welcome to come in and share your umbrella.”

Sharing is the main idea of the pair and two other co-founders, Patience Lee Pui-yan and Karen Wan Kam-ting. “It is like another social media platform as the app allows you to keep records of people you have connected with Umbrella Here,” Tsang said. “You can add them as friends on other social networks.”

There is also a weather report tracker that will alert users to bring their umbrellas on rainy days.

Different colors on the Umbrella Here light can also indicate different temperatures and blink if it is about to rain, he added.

There was not even a business plan when the team started developing something from scratch with their specialty – interactive design. “This is relatively new to the industry,” Tsang said. “As mobile devices are getting more popular, interactive design and development will be very important.”

They did not have any experience in business and electronic engineering, Tsang said. “The biggest challenge was to figure out what's the best business model for Umbrella Here and how to design the electronic components of the smart sensor.”

Financially, the team has been gaining enough support. They received seed funding from the university after winning the design award.

“Our families and friends are showing us tremendous support,” the duo said. “Professors, tutors and our schoolmates, they have offered us a lot of help.”

Their project was able to get funded on the Kickstarter platform. So far 1,000 orders have been filed since the Kickstarter campaign. “We are in the final stage to get the items done and ready to be sent out to our backers next month,” Lau said.

He said the community for start-ups has been maturing in Hong Kong, which has given them exposure to other people.

“Meeting and getting different comments from different people is what helped us to bring Umbrella Here to our current state,” he said.

The Umbrella Movement has also given a bit help to the company. “The timing was good as the movement came right after our Kickstarter campaign,” said Lau, who has received requests for yellow umbrellas and smart sensors.

The whole idea is about sharing – and that was seen at the protest sites. Sharing umbrellas is only the beginning, Lau said. “The device will be an indicator showing a willingness to share. Be it an external mobile phone charger, a battery pack, or even some time for a cup of coffee.”

Umbrella Here said in a mission statement that it wants to build a world without strangers.

“It encourages everyone to take part in this movement,” Lau said. “Through personal interactions, it connects people from different walks of life and promotes sharing and caring culture, in a fun and interesting manner.”

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