



Australian Government

women

entrepreneurs

18 INSPIRING TALES
OF SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS





Australian Government

© Commonwealth of Australia 2007

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without prior written permission from the Commonwealth available from the Commonwealth Copyright Administration, Attorney-General's Department. Requests and inquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to the Commonwealth Copyright Administration, Attorney-General's Department, Robert Garran Offices, National Circuit, Canberra ACT 2600 or posted at <http://www.ag.gov.au/cca>

DISCLAIMER: Switzer Group prepared the information in this publication about 18 women in small business in Australia. It draws on information, opinions and advice provided by a variety of individuals and organisations, including the Commonwealth of Australia. The Commonwealth accepts no responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of any material contained in this publication. Additionally, the Commonwealth disclaims all liability to any person in respect of anything, and of the consequences of anything, done or omitted to be done by any such person in reliance, whether wholly or partially, upon any information presented in this publication.

CAUTION: Material in this publication is made available on the understanding that the Commonwealth is not providing professional advice. Before relying on any of the material in this publication, users should obtain appropriate professional advice. Views and recommendations which may also be included in this publication are those of third parties only, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Commonwealth, or indicate a commitment to a particular course of action.

Copyright Commonwealth of Australia reproduced by permission.

ISBN 1-921-13031-8

In many areas of Indigenous Australia it is considered offensive to publish photographs of Indigenous Australians who have recently died. Readers are warned that the publication may inadvertently contain such pictures.



MINISTERS' JOINT FOREWORD

Women comprise one third of small business owners and operators in Australia. This represents a significant contribution to the Australian economy, as ninety five per cent of all businesses are small businesses, employing 3.3 million people.

The Australian Government supports increased opportunity and choice for women. Small business is one area where women are increasingly demonstrating their ability to be innovative, creative and professional with significant benefits to themselves, their families and to the community and economy.

The Australian Government, through the Office for Women and the Office of Small Business, commissioned the development of *Women Entrepreneurs: 18 Inspiring Tales of Small Business Success*.

Women Entrepreneurs profiles 18 inspirational small businesswomen, highlighting the great diversity that exists among women small business owners across Australia. Reading their stories will give you an insight into what it takes to run a small business. You can learn from their experiences. You will share their joy, passion and struggles. You will celebrate their success. You may even be inspired to kick start your own small business.

Women Entrepreneurs contains the key message that determination, with strong operational and management skills, can enable women from all walks of life to be successful in business. Good business planning, an innovative approach to running the business, and an entrepreneurial spirit are essential ingredients for a sustainable business. In sharing their stories these women tell how they used business networks to advantage, sought expert advice when needed and developed succession planning at an early stage.

The strength and resolve of these women is evident in their stories, and it demonstrates that women are successful business owners, are pushing through barriers and succeeding against the odds.

We recommend *Women Entrepreneurs* to any woman in Australia who has started or is thinking of starting a small business.

JULIE BISHOP

Minister for Education, Science and Training
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women's Issues

FRAN BAILEY

Minister for Small Business and Tourism

Women

entrepreneurs

18 INSPIRING TALES OF SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS

Acknowledgments

Palm Consulting Group conducted the initial interviews. Follow up interviews and stories were written by Maureen Jordan, of the Switzer Group.

Maureen Jordan is a solicitor, who found her niche in publishing to survive the hectic world of career and family. Maureen is an inductee in the Australian Business Women's Network's Hall of Fame for her achievements as a woman in the world of business.

We would like to thank the 18 women featured in this book for their contributions, time and inspiring stories.

Contents

INTRODUCTION	2	ELISE PASCOE	58
		Elise Pascoe International Cooking School	
JODIE MORRISON	4	MELINDA YOUNG	64
Steppin' Out		Mortgage Simplicity	
SONJA BERNHARDT	10	SAM DENMEAD	70
ThoughtWare		Island Cycle Tours	
DENISE LAWUNGKURR GOODFELLOW	16	MONICA MORSE	76
Denise Lawungkurr		Belinda's Business Centre	
Goodfellow (Natural History Guide)		KATE JAMES	82
SAMANTHA SIMPSON-MORGAN	22	Total Balance Group	
Rarified		MELISSA BOOT	88
LISA MESSENGER	28	Kimberley Boab Kreations	
Messenger Marketing		PATRICIA WILLIAMS	94
LORRAINE MANCE	34	Williams Advertising Management Services	
Westhaven Dairy		SARAH BENJAMIN	100
ABBIE MARTIN	40	Simply Rose Petals	
Lifestyle Elements		ANGELIKA PYKA	106
JULIET BOURKE	46	41 Degrees South Aquaculture	
Aequus Partners		APPENDIX	112
LESLEY GARNER	52	A list of information sources on women and small business	
Gulf Mini Mart			

Introduction

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS DO US PROUD

Catching a water snake in a crocodile-infested billabong is a somewhat unusual initiation for a businesswoman. For Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow, the founder of a birdwatching guide business for ecotravellers, the dramatic event gained the confidence of Aboriginal elders and set her on a path to opening the thriving tourism and publishing operation she runs today in the Northern Territory.

Women Entrepreneurs: 18 Inspiring Tales of Small Business Success, captures the journey of a remarkable group of Australian businesswomen, including Goodfellow, as they have shrugged off floods, redundancy, health problems, family traumas and a myriad of other challenges to succeed in their chosen fields. They cover the gamut of business sectors: niche farmers in Tasmania, a shoemaker to the stars of Broadway, a rose-petal grower in Victoria, a store owner in the Gulf of Carpentaria, a renowned international chef and an innovative IT expert, among others.

The book highlights some of the key challenges that women, in particular, face in everyday business and, more importantly, how they have overcome adversity.

Goat farmer Lorraine Mance tells how she has defied medical diagnoses to set up as a multi-award-winning producer of goat and cow cheeses and yoghurts in Tasmania. Now in her late 60s, she has overcome polio and rheumatic fever as a child and ongoing adult ailments to achieve business success. Mance's only regret is that she did not start earlier: "One of the things that has sort of held me back has been other people saying 'you can't do that'. You have to be convinced that you can do it, despite all the predictions. If you believe in yourself ... then that is the way your business should go."

Elsewhere in the book, chef Elise Pascoe explains how she has graduated from the family kitchen to become a global culinary leader. And fish farmer Angelika Pyka reveals how the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster in the Ukraine inspired a change of country and business success. There are those stories and more.

The book is a combined project of the Australian Government's Office for Women in the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and the Office of Small Business in the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources, and underlines the Australian Government's commitment to small businesses and the people who operate them.

The Hon. Julie Bishop, MP, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women's Issues, says the publication serves as an inspiration for all business people—women and men—as they strive for success in the hard-nosed corporate world.

And the Hon. Fran Bailey, MP, Minister for Small Business and Tourism, says the book highlights the value that the small business sector brings to the Australian economy and community.

Women Entrepreneurs provides some brilliant information for all businesses: pricing and cash-management advice, recruitment and retention tips, business planning and leadership strategies, staff management guidance and suggestions about tapping into government support services.

Self-confessed 'serial entrepreneur' Lisa Messenger gives an insight into how to be successful in business while still maintaining a focus on happiness, and cycling-tourism entrepreneur Sam Denmead

shows that fitness and business achievement can go hand in hand. Above all, the publication outlines some of the characteristics that are required for any businessperson to prosper—spirit, drive, teamwork, flexibility, creativity, balance, leadership, innovation, ambition, strategy, precision...

The women in this book display all of these qualities and more. They are running small businesses that have big goals. They have treated formidable barriers as a mere bump along the road to their business dreams.

Women Entrepreneurs has been compiled by publishing house Switzer Communications and is available in electronic and hard-copy formats from the Australian Government website at www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/publications/index and also at www.industry.gov.au



precision

Value your workers rather than treating them
as a cost to the business; in return you will gain
their respect, loyalty and a better performance

JODIE MORRISON
Shoemaker



Breaking the mould

If the shoe fits, then Jodie Morrison, a shoemaker for the stars of Hollywood and beyond, is probably the one to thank

There is love, and then there is money.

For most people work is all about the latter, but after almost 30 years in small business there is little doubt that the former has kept Jodie Morrison afloat. A bespoke shoemaker, Morrison is passionate about her craft and provides something of a template for small business operators on how to survive in a market with small profit margins.

If the accounting number-crunchers had their way, this celebrity shoemaker would be charging \$3000 for a pair of her custom-made shoes. In New York or London, such a bill for hand-made, hand-fitted shoes would be considered reasonable. Morrison's soles, however, are firmly planted in inner-city Sydney, where the 20-odd hours of labour she and her team put into each pair of shoes fetches only about \$700.

"In London, for the quality of what I do, I could be charging £1500. But who wants to live in London?" Morrison asks.

Walking with the stars

Let us not feel too sorry for Morrison, though. Her business, Steppin' Out, has given the former economics student a lifestyle over which most would drool.

She travels the world as a shoe consultant and counts Hollywood blockbusters *Moulin Rouge*, *King Kong* and *The Piano* among her credits. In Australia, she has played a key costuming role on *The Boy From Oz*, the hit show about the life of entertainer Peter Allen that stars Hugh Jackman. And theatre productions including *The Lion King* and *The Phantom of the Opera* have led to 'starring' roles for her shoes. It is Morrison's craftsmanship that is on show when those iconic crocodile boots step on to the screen in *Crocodile Dundee*, and her handiwork is responsible for the shoes that the Can-Can dancers don in *Moulin Rouge*.

Names such as Baz Luhrmann, Barry Humphries, Naomi Watts and Gough and Margaret Whitlam fall from her lips as Morrison explains why she has kept going all these years.

“I’ve got fantastic job satisfaction,” she says. “I get a lifestyle. I did great travelling last year through Africa, and to China and to New Zealand. I think as an artisan, the fact that I’ve survived in business for 27 years is really good. At times, it’s absolute feast, and at times it’s absolute famine. Sometimes I’ll be working on several shows at once, and it’s just going mad, and then it’s like there are no musicals coming up.”

An AusIndustry grant promises to provide valuable financial assistance to Morrison’s team. The program is designed to help fund more mechanisation of footwear production at the business, allowing Morrison to maintain her niche market in the entertainment industry while also targeting new sales for medical grade footwear products.

Morrison’s entry into the world of showbiz began with an unglamorous battle to be accepted into a TAFE shoemaking course, where she focused on pattern cutting and design for footwear. As the first woman to ever sign up for the course, the college’s main angst over Morrison’s enrolment was that it had no female toilet.

That battle won, in 1976 Morrison, aged 22, left the relative comfort of the public service and stepped into the poorly paid world of shoe factory worker and TAFE student.

“It was a traditional trade at that stage,” she recalls. “You could be employed in a factory. There was an appropriate course at the TAFE. Now I believe there’s no appropriate course at TAFE in Australia.

“In my day it was structured, working in a factory, and I did one night a week for four years, pattern cutting and design diploma.” She also did one day a week for two years for a footwear manufacturing certificate.

Morrison quickly realised mass production was not her future and took up a position working with an orthopaedic shoemaker at Bondi in Sydney for six months while concurrently doing her TAFE studies. Not only was it a fertile ground for learning about shoes, Morrison says much of her business approach was formed during this time.

“I learnt a lot about how I wanted to run my business by how he was running his business. It really served up my ideas of how I didn’t want it to be. He was very poor with time management. I wanted a level of customer satisfaction that was with the product rather than the talking about it.”

Within six months, Morrison began working from home doing small manufacturing runs that were just sold to shops. Demand soon created a need for space and by 1979 Morrison had rented a cheap studio in Redfern and installed sewing and grinding machines.

Plying a worldly trade

She quickly realised, however, that her business was not sustainable as a one-person operation. “I could make maybe one pair of shoes a week, and that would not make me any profit ... Then I employed somebody to work with me as a subcontractor. He came from Ecuador from a village where they hand-made shoes, and so he brought his Ecuadorian finesse to the situation, and taught me some things.”



Breaking the mould

When Morrison discusses her employees and sub-contractors it is a veritable United Nations of craft workers. There was the Greek man who was steeped in traditional shoemaking techniques, then a Chinese shoemaker, a Uruguayan clicker, a Hong Kong Chinese upper machinist and a Serbian who trained in Belgrade at the famed National Opera and Ballet Theatre.

Morrison is the first to concede that their talents have helped mould her skills as a shoemaker.

“One of the things that seemed to be really lucky with me is that these people do turn up in my life when I need them. They come knocking on the door asking for work just when I need that particular skill,” she says.

As she recounts her early days, Morrison concedes a lack of start-up capital has taken a huge toll personally and professionally. She believes anyone entering business should make sure they have the finance they need behind them.

“It was just too damn hard. I have never actually felt financially secure enough to have children. (At the start) I had no capital, which is a hideous way to start anything. You’re always behind the eight ball. But perseverance brings rewards. I had good support from friends, so that was really necessary.

“I had the drive. I just had no capital. I’d been working in a factory for very minimal wages, there was no way to raise any money, and on that level of trade, it’s low. You’re just making ends meet rather than going, okay, I’ll put some money in that.”

Respecting your team

While she may not be in the business of wealth creation, Morrison's ability to keep her company alive reflects a tenacity from which other small business operators can learn. The key, she says, is to value your workers.

"It's so important to respect the people that you work with, not just see them as a cost to the business. You have to actually see that they are essential to the business," she says.

This attitude is reflected in a low staff turnover and a succession plan that will eventually see Morrison drop out and hand the business to her trainees. She also believes a business must be flexible enough to meet the highs and lows of demand.

"You have to accommodate the needs of the market so that if there is a lot of work on, you still get it done. You want to be the first person that people ring. You don't want them to think, you're too busy, I won't ring her. You need to have that flexibility which really goes back to having a team."

A crucial part of that team is her network of suppliers. Morrison says fostering close relationships with suppliers has been critical to her success because securing materials is the key to ensuring orders are met.

In some respects, the long-term future of Morrison's business and her trade is out of her hands.

"What's really difficult is will we be able to get the (materials) that we need to make our products in the future? Getting the materials to do the traditional craft is getting harder and harder."

One suspects that Morrison's creative and resilient nature will overcome such problems. With three decades in the business, she is a survivor and continues to thrive in a niche market that has linked her name inextricably with the arts and performers. The point is reinforced with an amusing anecdote Morrison tells about a dancer in the stage show *The Producers*. Morrison has made her shoes for years since crafting her footwear for a production of *Sunset Boulevard*.

"She went, 'Jodie, can you make my wedding shoes?' And I went, 'Your what? Have you got a fiancé?'" "No! I just wanted to make sure you could make my wedding shoes'.

"There are all these people that I've worked with on different shows and whatever. I'm part of something. I have a tribe."

And, in Morrison's eyes, that is worth a million dollars any day.



Generosity and flexibility around maternity leave
for staff fosters strong loyalty and productivity—
so the mother and the business win

SONJA BERNHARDT
Technology Entrepreneur



Photograph courtesy of Adam Head-Courier Mail

flexibility



A business angel

If she ever runs into the man who made her redundant, tech whiz Sonja Bernhardt will shake his hand and offer him a big thank you

Sonja Bernhardt is used to succeeding. So when she was made redundant from a high-profile executive position in 1999, the experience shook her up. Not for long though.

Within a month of losing her job, she had established her own company, ThoughtWare, and was working as a consultant in project management. She is now considered one of the nation's most influential women in the Information and Communication Technology sector, and is the first Australian to be inducted into the Women in Technology International Hall of Fame following a Silicon Valley ceremony in 2005.

Bernhardt looks back on her redundancy as one of the best career moves of her life.

"I've often said, if I ever bump into (the man who made her redundant) again, I would just be joyous," she says. "I'd just want to shake his hand and say, 'you have no idea what a favour you did me'. I never grew up as a kid with a burning desire to be an entrepreneur, to have my own company, and that's why I'm grateful and happy that I was put in a situation where I then went hell, I will do it."

It is an admission on Bernhardt's part that without the forced break from the corporate world she would never have thought of moving out on her own. Yet once thrown to the lions, she has proven to be a true gladiator of business.

Food for ThoughtWare

From humble beginnings as a consultant, Bernhardt has built ThoughtWare into a respected IT company that is now selling software programs for small and medium-sized businesses that she believes have the potential to bring in "mega-millions of dollars".

The great leap for her in business has been a realisation on her part that she had to stop "working in the business and start working on the business".

“That’s a huge step,” Bernhardt admits. “It took me years to work out how to do that. A lot of people struggle with that because they’re terrified that if they stop earning their business falls apart.

“If you seriously want your business to grow and to be sustainable beyond your own skill–base, or sustainable beyond a couple of trusted, other consultants that you may use, you have to consciously stop spending your time consulting into the business. Even if it means that for a number of months you’ll have reduced money coming in. Then you can start focusing on seriously putting together an appropriate business plan to nut through all of the ideas.”

For the past two years Bernhardt has been following her own advice, focusing on research and development and pulling two employees out of money–making roles to assist her.

The result is her new line of software for small businesses that helps them ensure they are meeting all government and employee rules and regulations. As part of this research and development process, Bernhardt has also become something of a convert to the idea of market research and is adamant it is something small business needs to embrace more.

“Over the past five years when I’ve tried stuff, we’ve (said), ‘This is a great idea, this is good, people will love it.’ We go and invest in it and we try to do it and it fails. This is the first time we’ve invested in market research. We changed so much as a result of that market research and, now that we’ve got it (done), it’s proving to us that that’s the way to actually do it.”

Other resources can help, too. Bernhardt is a fan of www.business.gov.au, a government service providing information on planning, starting and running a business. For the latest on business regulations, grant information and business tips, it has been an invaluable tool for ThoughtWare.

An ethical approach

Bernhardt’s approach to her business has strong philosophical and ethical underpinnings that influence how and with whom she works. An example of this is her decision not to get a large corporation to undertake her market research.

“I specifically engaged another small business. I wanted to help—I engaged another female–owned small business, which is what I try to do. I try to form alliances.

“It helps to promote and grow the other small businesses as well. And you get better service, you get cheaper prices, you get all the passion and involvement and commitment and you get unbelievable communication.”

This somewhat organic view of business is also reflected in her attitude towards employees and their working conditions, which must be among the best in Australia.

Bernhardt explains: “In my company, we don’t have formal leave at all. We don’t have any rules or regulations about sick days or leave, or even hours that you work or days that you work. My offer of engagement says we are not hiring you for the hours that you spend on the job, or even where you are when you are on the job. We are hiring you for



A business angel

your skills and experience, and your adult ability to be an individual and be responsible for knowing what is your work and what you need to deliver.

“Within that, you don’t have to ask us if you want to go to the airport to pick up somebody, or if you want to take leave here or do this or that. We do not time-clock. We don’t gather people’s hours. It’s a completely different shift towards deliverables. We don’t have a corporate headquarters. All of my people work from client sites or from their homes, and we’re using technology tools to keep us well communicated.

“Every single person in my company has a reason to not work full-time, and I almost deliberately hire them because I want to be able to offer them the ability to fit all those other things in for their lives.”

This flexibility translates into maternity leave. Staff decide how long they will take off and are paid an amount during that time that they estimate will be required to cover their bills.

From a business perspective, Bernhardt says her approach fosters strong loyalty and productivity—she has yet to have a staff member not return from maternity leave. And those on maternity leave often remain involved in the company, providing input at meetings without actually having to do hands-on work.

With almost 20 years in the Information and Communication Technology business, Bernhardt’s commitment to a flexible workplace is influenced by her own experiences as a working mother.

“I think it’s because I was a single parent for 11 years with two young children, and I was working in corporate companies, and I lived continually with the guilt of the stress of meeting the corporate requirements and picking my kids up from child care and not being able to spend enough time with my kids. And I just had that mother guilt and work guilt stuff. Very, very heavily, and as a single parent it was just really, really stressful. So when I started my company, I deliberately did not want anybody else that worked for me to feel that.”

Advantage women

Just as her experiences as a mother have influenced her business approach, Bernhardt sees many benefits of being a woman in a field dominated by men. Among them is that she is often asked to join government and corporate bodies, boards and committees.

“Sometimes it’s only driven by the fact of tokenism, that they want to have a woman on there, and sometimes I recognise that. But then, it gives me an opportunity to strategically get engaged in various conversations about policies and strategies of state and federal governments.”

Bernhardt is obviously driven by a passion for her business and the field in which she works. Her profile and achievements make it worthwhile noting what she regards as the keys to succeeding in business.

Above all, she says, you must believe in yourself as it is only this confidence that will allow you to push through the inevitable down times. Almost as important is to recognise the skills you do not have and be prepared to buy them in. Bernhardt believes businesswomen need to take this attitude into the domestic side of their lives.

“I outsource everything I possibly can at home. Ironing, housework, gardening, childcare. Don’t feel guilty about paying money to outsource something that needs to happen, but it’s better for your time to be spent doing something on the business instead.”

Where there’s a will...

While Bernhardt shows no signs of easing up she has already written out a will that allows for her son to take over the business and is establishing her new products in such a way that they can be sold off, once successful, to larger companies. This has meant establishing all the branding, logos and Information and Communication Technology needs up front.

ThoughtWare will increasingly shift from being a services-driven company to a product-based company “to ensure sustainability and improved profit margins”.

Bernhardt says: “We have used the past six years’ experience to work out where our strengths lie and invested into research and development which we are now (using) to develop our next stage.”

She says the technology sector is such a fast-moving animal that it “demands a culture of risk-taking and an ability to be able to have a number of possible pathways on the go”.

One thing she has ruled out of her future is a return to the corporate world. Instead, Bernhardt says she would like to become a business angel and invest in other female companies.

There are many colleagues and contemporaries who would argue that Bernhardt is already wearing wings.





pioneer

The best form of advertising rarely involves paying for it—highlighting your credentials through free means such as public speaking, books and news media is often more effective

DENISE LAWUNGKURR GOODFELLOW
Tourism Operator and Natural History Guide



A rare breed

Whether she's killing buffaloes or guiding birdwatchers in the Top End, Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow gives it her best shot

With the name Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow, you just know she is going to have a story to tell.

Goodfellow does not disappoint. Describing herself as a music teacher, snake-catcher, biologist, nature guide, lecturer, cross-cultural consultant, author, illustrator, former buffalo shooter and “friend to nature lovers around the world”, she forgets to mention former politician (she served as an alderman in Darwin in the 1980s).

It is as a birdwatching guide for ecotravellers, however, that 59-year-old Goodfellow—her indigenous relatives call her “old lady”, a term of endearment—is best known. With 24 years in the business and as the author of some of the most respected birdwatching guides in the world, she is a one-woman marketing dream.

Her career has been chaotic, but it is all part of the tale.

“It's not just the birdwatching,” she says. “Everything I do is linked. I actually have a career path like a mad-dog's dinner.”

No shades of grey

Growing up in the Mallee country of South Australia, Goodfellow was seen as a “whitefella”, although she later learned she was part Aboriginal.

It was only some years down the track that the name Lawungkurr would be bestowed on her by matriarchs of the Ngalanbali clan of the Kunwinjku people of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Since moving to the Top End in early 1975, Goodfellow has not been tempted to leave. Her first job in Darwin, as the city recovered from the destructive forces of Cyclone Tracy months before, was in a fibreglass business. Then, she made a characteristic dramatic switch to work in a classical guitar and flute school.

It was one night at a party, though, that changed her life. “A friend asked me if I would like to go out for the ‘social shoot’ the next day. And I said, ‘What?’ And he said, ‘buffalo’.

Well, so I went off to this cattle station with my friend and I was holding this big gun. So here I was with this great big gun and I said, 'Look, I think I need some practice shots.' So, the men lined up these half a dozen beer cans, quite some metres away. And I shot holes in them all."

For a while she shot buffalo and went to work in the bush as a biological consultant. A love of flora and fauna blossomed. Elected to Darwin City Council as an alderman in 1981, Goodfellow set about representing Aboriginal people and, in an attempt to win their trust, accepted an invitation from an elder to catch a water snake in a large crocodile-infested billabong.

"I thought, well, if this is what it takes to win their trust so that I can represent them, then this is what I'll do. So I went out to a huge billabong. I took one look at the big crocodile tracks but, anyway, I went into the water with him and after four hours I caught a snake."

The courageous act won over the indigenous people, who made her an honorary "whitefella-blackfella" after she was threatened with prosecution for catching protected wildlife. An elder was so worried Goodfellow would end up in jail that she burst into tears. The episode led to a close relationship with the Aboriginal community that has been a crucial part of her success in ecotourism. She is still the clan's snake-catcher today.

Best in the business

In the early 1980s, Goodfellow began guiding mostly American birdwatchers who also wanted to see and learn about snakes, butterflies, plants and Aboriginal culture.

Some years later she found a ready market from Australian families, older people and others who wanted to reconcile with Aboriginal people through meetings with Indigenous families and children.

Goodfellow met a birdwatching guide called Hilary Thompson (the first of four husbands) and they started a biological consultancy and, in 1987, published their first book, *Common Birds of the Darwin Area*. Today, she is widely regarded as one of the world's best guides. So highly respected is she that in 2000, Goodfellow was contracted to work as interpreter-transcriber on the Lonely Planet guide to Aboriginal Australia. Enthusiasts visit the Top End to take part in her tours, and her latest book *Birds of Australia's Top End* has confirmed her standing.

Befitting Goodfellow's colourful personality, her business challenges go beyond the everyday human resources and technology dilemmas that confront most organisations. She recalls one night on the job near Pine Creek, 220km south of Darwin.

"I returned to camp after birdwatching in a nearby gorge to find a huge buffalo with a two-metre spread of horns standing beside my tent. I was unarmed. I crept down the hill in the dark to the other side of my tent, judged how far those horns could reach, and then jumped up in front of the beast's nose, yelling as loudly as I could. It turned and ran."

She has had her run-ins with authority, too. The experiences have steeled her resolve to do the right thing, even if it has drawn the ire of others in the tourism industry. A popular trick some Top End tourist operators



A rare breed

performed in the past to impress their international guests was to 'ride' crocodiles with boats in Kakadu National Park to make them jump. The practice appalled Goodfellow, who started a national campaign that ended being heard in respected international outlets such as *The New York Times* and BBC wildlife bulletins.

"The upshot was that I was 'black-listed' up here by the tourism industry. But what happened was that my reputation with ecotourism both here and internationally grew," Goodfellow says.

Fighting off copycats

It is this integrity that has been at the heart of Goodfellow's approach to life and business. With ecotourism and birdwatching growing in popularity, she and other reputable guides and tourism operators have faced increasing challenges from operators just out to make a buck.

"These days, birdwatching is a buzz (term). They just add birdwatching tours to their websites. Many of them don't know anything about birds. So what's happening is that most birdwatchers and natural history enthusiasts leave trip reports on the internet."

These reports have been crucial to enhancing Goodfellow's reputation and promoting her business. The web-based reviews invariably sing her praises and word of mouth has enabled her operation to quietly prosper.

Goodfellow has always looked at innovative ways to promote her business. That includes shunning advertising.

"What's the point of putting a brochure in a travel agent up along with 10,000 others? How am I going to differentiate myself?" The answer—referrals aside—has been books and lecturing. Four books have been penned, with the latest, *Birds of Australia's Top End*, earning rave reviews in *Birdwatchers Digest*, arguably the most influential birding journal in the US.

The breadth of Goodfellow's projects acts as its own form of advertising. "But it's advertising with depth, it's advertising with integrity," she says. "I've had these higher principles and those higher principles were supported by my ... birdwatching friends because they start out as clients and they end up as friends."

A hard act to follow

Goodfellow has come a long way since the early days of her business.

“When I first started out, there was really nobody else who was doing what I was doing, but that also left me isolated because it meant that the tourism authorities just didn’t understand what I was doing.”

Now, as she approaches 60, her thoughts are turning towards a succession plan. Her intimate knowledge of Aboriginal culture has helped distinguish her business but it also makes her hard to replace.

“It’s definitely a market advantage, absolutely. The trouble is that it is also isolating because it means that there are very few people who can do what I’m doing. And one of the ways I’m trying to get around this is by training my Indigenous relatives as guides and hosts so that when I eventually drop out, they will be able to take over ... I believe it’s really important, for a number of reasons, to have Aboriginal people working on their own country.”

Among those reasons is the need for meaningful work that will help the Indigenous community prosper and turn around shocking statistics revealing that Aboriginals in the Northern Territory on average die about 20 years earlier than other Australians.

“The number of funerals I’ve been to is absolutely mind boggling,” Goodfellow says. “And they’re usually younger people and what is happening is that the tourism, the type of tourism I’m introducing, is actually helping people stay on their country. It’s empowering the women and the families. It’s validating their value system and their existing skills and knowledge.”

People before profits

With two biological children—one is a respected apprentice chef and the other a world-class singer and “hundreds of Aboriginal ones”—Goodfellow admits family and friends have come before business profits.

“I’ve not made a lot of money ... not in a huge way, but if you take the books, the writing articles and so forth, plus the guiding, plus my lectures—yes I’m making profit. I won’t be wealthy, but yes ... it’s certainly sustainable.”

Reflecting on her achievements, Goodfellow is proud of her role in helping to put ecotourism on the map in the Top End. And bringing communities together has been a great source of satisfaction. “Booting that black–white divide is, I think, one of my achievements.”

Goodfellow admits that, in a business sense, she may have been her own worst enemy sometimes courtesy of her outspoken nature. Asked if she would do anything differently if she had her time again, she comments: “I think, try and function within the rules a little more.”

Not that she is finished just yet. Goodfellow is lecturing at the University New South Wales Study Abroad Program, she is writing a book on insects and has just submitted a PhD proposal on Indigenous tourism, and an autobiography is in the pipeline. She is also running a project, called Baby Dreaming, which trains “semi–traditional” Aboriginals in Arnhem Land about sustainable tourism.

There are no plans, either, to completely abandon her first love: guiding.

“Oh no! I’ll probably continue with limited guiding until I drop dead. You know, it’s great exercise.”



Have a vision, pursue it with confidence
and do not let nay-saying friends, family
members or associates sway you

SAMANTHA SIMPSON-MORGAN

Picture Framer



artistic



The big picture

Picture framing is the perfect creative outlet for Samantha Simpson-Morgan—and it is a great business too

Pictures and artwork dominate the existence of framer Samantha Simpson-Morgan, yet it took a book to change her life.

After reading *Foreign Correspondence*—author Geraldine Brooks' quirky tale of a young suburban schoolgirl who enlisted pen pals so she could discover the world—Simpson-Morgan had the urge to start writing letters herself. She registered with an online pen-pal site and, in 2000, started to correspond with John Griffiths, a Briton. Little did she know that it would transform her career.

“We bonded very well over the net and the emails flew thick and fast between us, detailing our hopes, dreams and views on our worlds. At that time I managed a picture-framing store for another businessman, yet harboured dreams of having my own business one day.”

Now the owner of Rarified, a picture-framing gallery in the Australian Capital Territory, Simpson-Morgan credits her British friend's visit to Australia in 2001 as a turning point. On a trek through Namadgi National Park in the Australian Alps, they discussed their lives and dreams.

Griffiths could sense Simpson-Morgan's passion for the world of art and business, and offered to finance a loan should she get serious about setting up her own retail outlet. Simpson-Morgan called in the favour two years later when she was having a tough time at work, during which she was also diagnosed with a repetitive strain injury.

“I was confused and upset and didn't know what my future held,” she recalls. “As I went through rehabilitation, I realised I passionately wanted the chance to start my own business. I had a strong vision of what it would be ...”

“I decided it was to be all or nothing and sold my apartment at the height of the real estate boom so that I could start the venture with as much cashflow and as little debt as possible and set about making Rarified become a reality.”

The art of business

Opening the doors to the Dickson business in 2004, Simpson–Morgan admits she was nervous: “I was so full of fear in the beginning and lived on adrenaline for quite a while.”

Together with two staff members, she has set about creating a business that prides itself on producing beautiful frames (Simpson–Morgan believes everything is worthy of framing).

Rarified combines a gallery space with a custom picture–framing service. Using acid–free materials, the emphasis is on style, creativity and customer service. The store also stocks a wide range of art prints, framed prints, art and design books, greeting cards and ready–made frames.

The gallery perfectly combines the interests of art and sales for Simpson–Morgan, who studied art in her 20s and later developed a fascination for retail business. A part–time photography business she ran in the late 1990s had given her some insight into the world of small business, but Rarified—the word means ‘elevated in content or style’—has appropriately taken things to a new level.

Simpson–Morgan explains the choice of business name: “I wanted an evocative word that could be used for future branding and expanded with the product range. I loved Rarified ... and it was available!”

Opening her own store gave Simpson–Morgan a chance to put her own stamp on a business. She had worked at a framer’s previously with highly intelligent and creative people, but did not share the same business vision as her boss.

“I wanted to create a picture–framing gallery that was between a shop and a gallery space so that clients had access to original and non–original work. I wanted an emphasis on style and creativity and I wanted us to inspire people and to be friendly and non–intimidating.”

Being her own boss has been a joy.

“I really love being the sole person in charge. I value my creative and business freedom and prefer to employ consultants rather than go into a business partnership.”

Part of the Rarified blueprint has been to use the business space to hold fundraising exhibitions—something “a bit quirky, innovative and fun and can involve the arts community to raise funds to give back to the community”.

Happy to get help

Simpson–Morgan insists on surrounding herself with great people. She relies on accountants to improve her business, and has used a life coach, a bookkeeper, a psychologist and a business mentor and business coach at various stages over the past few years.

“I realised early on that I didn’t want to make mistakes I saw others making and didn’t want to burn out,” she says. “I know my strength is in being creative and wanted to lean on others where I had weakness. I also recognise I have a very low boredom threshold and want to keep myself inspired and fresh to work on the big business picture.”

She initially drew heavily on her business mentor, Paul Coker of Something Ventured, a Canberra business



The big picture

advisory service. And she admires entrepreneurs, philanthropists, adventurers and great thinkers and artists, and seeks inspiration from them.

“Richard Branson I love for his vision, cheek and incredible business savvy. In philanthropy, I love what Bill Gates is doing, as well as Oprah Winfrey. I really admire people who overcome physical adversity and people who give.”

She also looks to other businesses for motivation, with the Taschen story—an art bookshop founded by German Benedikt Taschen that is renowned for making art books more accessible—a standout.

“I like their cheekiness and business savvy, as well as their style. I think they are a very sexy company and like the way they do things their own way.”

And not forgetting her customers, of course; they keep her turned on and drive her need for constant creative inspiration.

“I love them. They are like family and I treat them as such. We see their precious items to be framed and form quite intimate relationships with them. We have had clients in tears many times over their private stories, concerning their framing. I feel very privileged to be a part of this and to make their works look fantastic.”

Regrets—she’s had a few

Like all small business owners, Simpson–Morgan has made mistakes—for one, mixing her personal life with business.

“I fell in love with a man who lived interstate in the first month of being in business! That was incredibly difficult to balance a yearning heart with a baby business. I cried a lot during this time. I used to cry at night driving the 3km from the shop to home. I wondered if people wondered who the ‘mysterious crying woman’ was at the traffic lights. In retrospect I wouldn’t let a difficult love like that come between the business and me again.”

Upon reflection, she might have tweaked a few others things, too. She wishes she had started with more cashflow. She wishes she had joined more business groups. And

she wishes she had taken greater advantage of women's networking groups.

"Yet it's all been a great journey and I wouldn't go back and change things because I learnt very valuable lessons."

And those lessons?

"Get advice, and use it. Use a psychologist or life coach so you understand yourself and others. Stay open to learning and turn failures and mistakes into a positive. Check that your life values match what you are doing in your business. Outsource to specialists to alleviate your weaknesses. Do not be afraid of going against the grain. Stand your ground. Take calculated risks. And know your risk/comfort level."

Simpson-Morgan adds: "Have the confidence to pursue your vision and don't let friends, family or associates sway you. Enjoy your business and make it give you what you want."

Where to now?

Growth has been steady at Rarified. The second year of business produced a net profit and plans for further expansion are in play.

Simpson-Morgan says: "As we grow, we can add and train new staff and are looking to develop future income streams from selling branded Rarified products via our website and in-store and also by moving sideways into image publishing through collaborative work with local designers."

The future is not quite mapped out. Simpson-Morgan wants to stay put for at least the next three years and grow the business. In the long-term she may sell but would "prefer to use the business as a tool for investment and creativity and to branch out into other businesses."

Her dream is for a steadily growing business that allows her to concentrate on sales, design and the big picture, while creating the opportunity to go off on creative projects.

"To have a global brand would be the ultimate!"

Above all, Simpson-Morgan wants to follow her heart and she advises others to do likewise.

"If I hadn't been inspired to get a pen pal all those years ago and then to ask for his support for business funding, I wouldn't be where I am today. I continue to use those principles in my business dealings and I think if your heart is open and follow it with care, then absolutely amazing things can occur."





strategic

Attitude, passion and self-belief are essential for success—if you don't have the latter why should others have faith in you?

LISA MESSENGER

Publishing and Marketing Consultant



Happiness Inc

Lisa Messenger can't dwell on her success as an entrepreneur and author—she is too busy dreaming up other business ideas

With Lisa Messenger's track record, it seems certain that her latest business venture—a book to empower 'intrepreneurs'—will be a success.

Aged 35, Messenger has worked extensively in conference and event management, sponsorship, public relations, marketing and publishing. Her focus has always been on unusual campaigns for clients such as the Taronga Zoo and the Australian Defence Force. One campaign, for food manufacturer Goodman Fielder, saw Messenger secure a sponsorship deal for The Wiggles' end-of-year tour that ended up with the children's entertainment group's image on eight million loaves of bread each week.

More recently, publishing has become Messenger's focus, and her innovative publishing model helped a client pre-sell about \$460,000 worth of sponsorship for a book prior to going to print. Along the way, she has also achieved a long-held dream in building up two of her own businesses—Messenger Marketing, which she has run for five years, and Messenger Publishing, which she has owned for two years.

"With Messenger Marketing, for the first two years I didn't take any risk financially and didn't borrow any money and still managed to expand," she says. "I literally started with \$4000 and within six weeks of start-up had offices and a full-time staff member. I just thought big and, luckily, won every client I pitched for."

The publishing side of her portfolio is on the rise. Messenger has self-published her own tome, *Happiness Is...*, a photographic coffee table book that brings together 300 subjects and the work of 65 photographers. The unique publishing and distribution approach has led to Messenger becoming a finalist in the 2005 and 2006 Telstra Business Woman of the Year awards.

She has also co-authored a business book, *Cubicle Commando—Intrepreneurs, Innovation and Corporate Realities*—which is a guide for intrapreneurs (internal entrepreneurs) to empower them to work within the confines of corporations. She is also working on a novel. So much, so soon.

"I am in the business of promotion and strategic partnerships," Messenger says. "We have a number of strategic partnerships and strategic alliances and constantly look at new and non-traditional ways of tackling markets."

A can-do philosophy

Raised in Coolah in rural New South Wales, Messenger takes a "nothing's impossible" approach to life.

"I have learnt many lessons and these have carried through to (my businesses)," she says. "One of these is that there is much more to success than money."

She is also wary of the popular notion of work-life balance.

"I most certainly believe in it but do not like that phraseology. I think it positions work as the enemy—I believe your passion, values and vision should flow through all aspects of your life."

To own so many businesses at such a young age is impressive, but Messenger admits there have been potholes along the way, with rewards and headaches associated with growth.

For instance, she was forced to wind down the sponsorship side of Messenger Marketing when clients started tightening their budgets after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. But she says the profile she developed through writing magazine articles, and joining the public speaking and networking circuits meant there were still a number of small businesses wanting her help with non-traditional marketing solutions.

"Without a clear strategy for the change, I was becoming everything to everyone, over-servicing and undercharging and largely losing the systems and focus I had so clearly developed when I began," she explains. "As a result I was sharing myself too thinly and not being profitable. It is a trap that is easy to fall into and a valuable lesson that I think I had to learn in order to refocus and get to where I am now."

To address the over-servicing, under-charging dilemma, Messenger has learned to appreciate commercial realities. "I became so passionate about all projects I took on that I gave too much away to the detriment of myself."

Messenger was told by a good friend and colleague at the time "you have so much passion but it's time to be true to yourself and develop a product of your own". She took the advice.

By the book

After scaling back her full-time staff and taking on freelancers, Messenger had more time to think of other projects she wanted to do. It was March 2004, and by the end of that month—using the knowledge she had gleaned from her experience about product feasibility—she was putting together a book that would become *Happiness Is...*

The book took just five months to compile, and Messenger managed to attract finance more than 100 times her \$800 starting fund. She formed alliances and pre-sold the book so it could be underwritten and make it to the printers quickly.



Happiness Inc

Along the way, Messenger drew on her networking skills, tapping into the talents of some capable people. They included Bradley Trevor Greive, the best-selling author of the *Blue Day Book*; Dr Timothy Sharp, CEO of The Happiness Institute; and Russell Jeffery, a former Harper Collins creative director.

The end product was that the title sat at No. 8 of 2000 titles released with her distributor within two weeks, and it is now in more than 900 retail outlets across Australia. A portion of the proceeds is given to the Kids Help Line, a telephone counselling service for 5 to 18-year-olds.

"Happiness Is... evolved so quickly I didn't have time to think about it. It might sound strange but it's almost as if I didn't choose to do this project—it chose me," Messenger says.

As a result of the book's success, Messenger has developed a strong business model for funding and distribution, repositioned Messenger Publishing to become a business that teaches how to publish affordably, has been approached by many publishers and authors for advice, and is currently developing the *Happiness Is ...* brand internationally.

"Happiness Is... was a dream. I knew exactly what I wanted the outcome to be and never questioned what I was doing—I just had sheer determination and a belief. As a result the serendipity, synchronicity and the people it attracted were astounding.

"Every day felt like Christmas. For me it was proof that anything was possible and I wanted more of this for myself and others."

Tips of the trade

There is a wealth of other advice Messenger wants to pass on to would-be entrepreneurs:

- always think big;
- create strategic alliances, aligning with corporations and those with a larger distribution network than yourself;
- follow up and maintain relationships with all the people you meet;
- remember the importance of staff culture and team morale;
- have systems and procedures in place; and
- believe in yourself.

It is the last that resonates most strongly with Messenger.

“I’ve had a lot of challenges in business but overcoming them is all about a belief in yourself, an attitude and having passion for what you do,” she says.

“I have achieved extraordinary things in my years in my own business—from having no publishing experience to finding \$80,000 to produce a book which became a bestseller ... I have also overcome a number of personal obstacles and proved that I have the strength to do anything I put my mind to.”

So what is next for the Sydney-based woman?

The innovation that has taken Messenger to where she is today is set to continue through Messenger Marketing and Messenger Publishing. “Our business is based on innovation,” she says. “We teach other businesses and individuals how to be innovative and think either as an entrepreneur or an intrapreneur. Our motto is to always prove that there is more than one way to do anything.”

Messenger plans to keep authoring books and writing for a number of magazines. In her rare spare time, she sits on the board of the Australian Business Women’s Network; and actively supports charities such as Kids Help Line and Opportunity International.

Business is her blood

The future looks rosy not just for Messenger and her businesses. Ideally, she would like to base herself in Byron Bay, commuting to Sydney regularly, travelling, having “a beautiful family”, exploring lots of industries and enjoying life. Above all, however, she will always be a serial entrepreneur.

“I have several businesses and business ideas and am always on the look out for opportunities,” she says.

“When I know what it is that I want, I have an uncanny knack of never giving up, and I make it happen. Three years ago I didn’t even envisage writing a book—it’s been on the shelves now for a year and a half and I have four more almost complete.

“Sometimes just knowing what it is that I want is the hardest part. I have so many dreams and never ever want to close myself off to any opportunity. I suppose that is the true essence of an entrepreneurial mindset.

“My brain works a million miles an hour and there is always some new crazy project that I am thinking of creating or working on.”



Time is money, so get funding up–front to acquire or fix your business infrastructure rather than getting bogged down trying to do it all in the mistaken belief that you are saving cash

LORRAINE MANCE
Dairy Goat Farmer



drive



Doing it her whey

A lifetime of ailments has been the catalyst for Lorraine Mance's very healthy business supplying goat milk products

Lorraine Mance is a walking advertisement for the notion that a vice can be a virtue.

If, in her younger years, the 68-year-old had listened to those around her she would either be dead or, at best, in a wheelchair. Instead, she has defied medical diagnoses and nay-saying friends to become the founder and director of Westhaven Dairy, a multi-award-winning producer of goat and cow cheeses and yoghurts in South Launceston, Tasmania.

Mance's entry into the business world came as a result of an unusual motivator: illness. Afflicted with polio and rheumatic fever in her childhood and, later, a sufferer of severe allergies, asthma and arthritis, doctors predicted she would be in a wheelchair by age 45.

Undeterred, Mance sought empowerment through reading and, after seeing repeated appraisals of the health benefits of goats' milk, realised it could play a role in easing her and family members' allergies. Although controversial, many scientists believe goats' milk is more digestible than cows' milk and that goats can more efficiently digest a protein called beta-lactoglobulin, one of the causes of milk allergies. The purchase of Mance's first goat about 30 years ago led to a love of the animal and the development of a goat dairy.

"Going back a few years, the image of goats was just so bad," she muses. "Everywhere we would go people would say, 'God, you've got goats' ... But dairy goats are different, lovely animals. They never make a mess in the milking shed."

Mance's unconventional path to business has been strewn with critics. She was too old. There would be too much competition in the dairy sector. And at her age shouldn't she be at home enjoying her grandchildren?

Stubbornness in the face of such stereotyping reinforces, in Mance's view, the philosophy that success is about believing in yourself. If she has any regrets, they are around not having had more belief as a younger woman that she could do business in a man's world.

“One of the things that has sort of held me back has been other people saying ‘you can’t do that’. You have to be convinced that you can do it, despite all the predictions. If you believe in yourself ... then that is the way your business should go.

“I didn’t start my factory until I was in my 50s. By then I was hearing I was too old to do this, there were too many other cheese factories—especially wanting to make goat cheese, that is even worse.

“Then I started off and it was a real struggle. Some of the powers that be said, at your age, you should go home and forget about it. That is the sort of thing that can really get to you.”

Going it alone

Through it all, however, Mance held fast to her vision. A cottage industry making farm products and goat milk products led to on-selling excess milk to a cheese factory. When problems getting payment for the milk led her to a Victorian company, Mance decided it was time to crank up her own production.

“I thought, this is crazy because they were making a Tasmanian cheese in Victoria, and I said ‘Right, this is it, we are going to do this ourselves right from the beginning.’”

With the aid of her husband Geoff, Mance converted an old ice-cream factory into a cheese producer and Westhaven Dairy was born. While goats inspired the business, Mance was pragmatic enough early on to realise diversification would be the key to survival.

“When we started with the factory I knew we couldn’t have a whole business just on goat cheese because it wasn’t as trendy then as it is now. And the way that the milk comes, it comes in the summer and then it falls off in the winter, so I looked around for other products.

“It caused us some problems when we started making cows’ milk yoghurt because everybody presumed that it was made from goats’ milk when it actually wasn’t, so we had to do a big education program.”

Although Mance refuses to allow age to be a barrier, it has forced her to make concessions about expansion that a younger entrepreneur would not have to make. Succession planning is a concern.

“Our sales are growing all the time and while we have had a little bit of product go over to Hong Kong and Singapore, normally we just can’t do it because of the milk limitations, and also the fact now that the factory is too small. And that is a major thing for me because, at 68, do I go out and borrow money, or do I just say well that is stupid, stay how we are?”

Sweet succession

Central to this dilemma is the lack of interest from her children in taking over the business—which Mance admits is more about a lifestyle than a living—and her husband’s reticence to outlay more money to grow the business.



Doing it her whey

The latter issue is one with which Mance has been dealing for some time, and has curtailed the company's growth. It is a lesson she thinks is worth sharing with other would-be small business operators.

"What we should have done in the beginning is borrowed the money, spent the money, got the equipment we needed and progressed. But (Geoff) didn't want to do that. He wanted to do it as we could afford it, but that made the business grow a lot more slowly than if we had have gone out and got right into it."

Mance cites an example where her handyman husband insisted on installing a filling machine for the yoghurt himself.

"It took my husband 12 months to get that thing running, and he couldn't see all the wages we paid and what it had cost while he fiddled around getting that going, when he could have got somebody in, got it going, first week. 'Oh, but I've done it myself, I've saved money,' he would say. No you haven't, you've cost money by doing it that way. He couldn't think that way. So that has been a bit of a problem because obviously you can't fire your husband."

Her marriage has survived the business, but Mance has had other partners fall by the wayside. Experience tells her that the qualities needed in a business partner are, in some respects, the same as those required in a marriage—trust, commitment and equality.

And managing cash-flow can also make or break a business. Mance says controlling budgets has been one of her toughest tasks: "I am not good at collecting money, and I hate (it) because a lot of people that you deal with are small business people, too, and they have cashflow problems, so they are waiting on somebody to pay them. (But) you have to call (and say), I need the money now."

She also yearns for a day when men and women, and people within the dairy industry, pull together.

"It is the same with farmers and I think with cheese factories, they are all very individual people. They don't work well together, they feel that you are a threat to their business, whereas my idea is the more there is, the better it is. It's all about getting together in the street."

Although many have shown interest in Westhaven Dairy, Mance has until now been reluctant to let her baby go. However, a recent expression of interest from someone wanting to buy the factory and a share in the company could be the perfect business match as well as her “exit strategy” from the day-to-day work.

“It is basically in a sense what I have thought about—selling shares in the business, not too many. But the people that have been interested in maybe buying the business would buy a share in it, and that would be a really good exit for me because I can still have a hand in running it but not have to actually work in the business. And it is not for me to get a campervan and go touring around Australia.”

Management pays off

Mance warns that while her story may read like a fairytale of good fortune, she has stumbled on the way and has survived due to good management, not good luck. Her tips for success are pure common sense—an undervalued business trait.

First, ‘wannabe’ business operators need to research and understand their market as “it is no use going out and doing a product and looking for a sale for it. Which is what a lot of people do. They make a beautiful thing but then they can’t sell it.”

Second, know your market and talk to people within the market, such as suppliers, so that once you start producing “you can continue producing”. And third, make sure you employ the right people for the job.

She may have started on the business road late in life, but for Mance the rewards have been many and it is not only her health that has blossomed.

“I am doing something I was told in the beginning I would never be able to do. So that makes me feel really proud that I was able to do that. Business takes you out of what maybe your life would be if you didn’t have it ... I was quite a shy person because of always being sick and not really being out much, so as you go along, and if you feel your business is growing and you are making a good job of it, it is a great feeling.”

And there is the added bonus of working with goats: “They are just ... people think ‘Oh, they are evil, they were on the left side of the Lord, cloven hooves’. Such wonderful animals.”





ambition

Develop long-term relationships with suppliers and other small businesses to fill knowledge gaps and give your business the clout of a larger organisation

ABBIE MARTIN
Lifestyle Manager



No more chores

Managing other people's lives is a full-time—and rapidly growing—business for lifestyle manager Abbie Martin

Abbie Martin had always imagined herself as a career executive in the company of fellow suit-wearing colleagues.

Straight out of university, with a marketing degree under her arm, she strode out into the world of business to turn her dreams into reality. Reality, however, proved something of a shock.

"When I got in there, I realised I just didn't want it," says Martin, now the director of her own business, Lifestyle Elements. "It wasn't me. It wasn't my atmosphere, the politics and all."

Martin believes her negative reaction to office culture is a product of her upbringing as the daughter of a farmer.

"I always had in my mind I would run my own business, and thinking back I think it stems (from growing) up on a farm in the country. My dad and my brother are just out there doing it themselves. Obviously if everyone's doing it themselves, then there's no boss to answer to."

Doing her own thing

Without perhaps realising it, Martin also reflects a changing dynamic among young professionals who are seeking more than a corporate career. In her vision of a small business, Martin sees the flexibility to be able to raise children without putting them in full-time care.

After two years in the workforce, Martin had had enough. Throwing on her backpack, she headed off for 10 months of travel and time to ponder the next stage of her life. The time out gave her a chance to think about business opportunities but, when the idea arrived, Martin's inspiration came from closer to home.

"If you start a business, think about your experiences and what you've done," she says. "So that's what I did. I sat down and thought, well what have I done, and what's a bit different?" Her answer came from her years working as a nanny while studying.

"I wasn't really just nannying ... The lady I worked for was a single mum who worked ... and during the two years that I'd worked with her she started her own business. The first phase of that was (that) I started delivering things. I'd go and do the grocery shopping, cleaning or organising the carpet cleaner to come. Organising all of that."

The idea of a home-life manager was born and, with some refinement through research of the industry in the US, Martin, then aged just 23, launched Lifestyle Elements into the Adelaide market. The concierge and lifestyle management service, in essence, frees up people who are running out of hours in the day and whose to-do list is spiralling out of control.

With up to 20 per cent of Australians estimated to be working in excess of 70 hours a week, it is clear that leisure time is in short supply and that the potential market for Lifestyle Elements is huge.

Martin's team acts as a personal assistant service that links clients to a range of support services. As the blurb on the website puts it: "Our services are only limited by your imagination."

Some of Martin's business acumen emerges when she discusses how her business came by its name. Although in its infancy the business started with a focus on chores such as shopping and cleaning, the name Lifestyle Elements left open the door for Martin to expand the business in the

direction she is now headed. In short, it handles "anything to do with your lifestyle".

"And that means work and your family and lifestyle and leisure. We want to help you with that work-life balance. The stressful times on occasion or every week ... So I can see my business going off clearly into personal assistance for small business, and then as a personal concierge for individuals. I can see that's where it's heading."

Martin also very quickly recognised her own failings; in particular a lack of organisation.

"I've been very conscious of trying to set up systems or concepts as I'm going along. They're not completely refined because a lot of it is learning—because it's such a new business and a new industry you've got to learn as you go what people are looking for. I'm very conscious of time management and being organised because those people are relying on me to keep them organised, so I've got to be organised as well."

An expanding market

Martin's initial target market was executive women as she felt they would best appreciate the service and had the disposable incomes to use it.

"The reason I targeted women to start with is because I feel, at this point in time, they're the ones choosing to outsource in these household-type areas. Being a woman, you can relate to the issues they're dealing with on a day-to-day basis. I can relate to them and talk to them about why. I think that's an advantage."



No more chores

However, as her network has grown Martin has found that many of her businesswomen clients have become great sources of support and feedback on how to grow the business.

Despite her youth, Martin has some innovative ideas on how to develop a business and a common-sense approach towards growth.

“Basically, I’ve been networking. I paid for an ad the first month and kind of felt ‘this isn’t going to work, but let’s see what happens’. And nothing. People rang up to ask if they could work for me, and that was it. From then on I made a commitment to myself, ‘Do not pay for advertising unless it is specifically linked to your target customer and market research. It is not worth the money.’ ”

While this approach may not apply to every business, Martin believes advertising is not the most effective form of marketing in her case “because I’ve got to explain the business”.

“People see Personal Concierge, and think what is that?” she says. Instead, Martin has utilised speaking opportunities, distributed gift vouchers and fed media interest in a new field of enterprise.

With an aim of turning the business into a national franchise brand within 10 years, Martin believes a key to long-term success is developing relationships with suppliers and other small businesses.

“My best example is my cleaning suppliers that I’ve got, and they are a franchise set up in Adelaide. We’ve just developed a great relationship, and it’s amazing we found brilliant cleaners, too. I am able to ring the owner, and he knows what my business is like, and I ring him and say this person needs a cleaner next week on Tuesday at 2 o’clock. He goes and works it out for me. It’s those relationships that are going to help my business grow.”

Martin also takes advantage of government business tools such as www.business.gov.au, an Australian Government website that offers advice on planning, starting and running an enterprise. She found it invaluable when setting up her business as a source of information about issues such as registering a business name and how to get an Australian Business Number.

More than just cleaning

Although organising cleaners is a bread-and-butter role for the business, Martin is aware that it is not a great money spinner as she simply charges an hourly rate for the time it takes her to organise the supplier. For chores such as grocery shopping, clients buy her time in hourly blocks.

She sees more profit potential in taking the personal concierge role into the corporate world.

"I'm working with another lady who is a business and life coach and we're working together to develop a holistic work-life balance program for corporate companies which we're wanting to launch in the future."

Very much in its developmental phase, Martin realises her business in five years could be totally different.

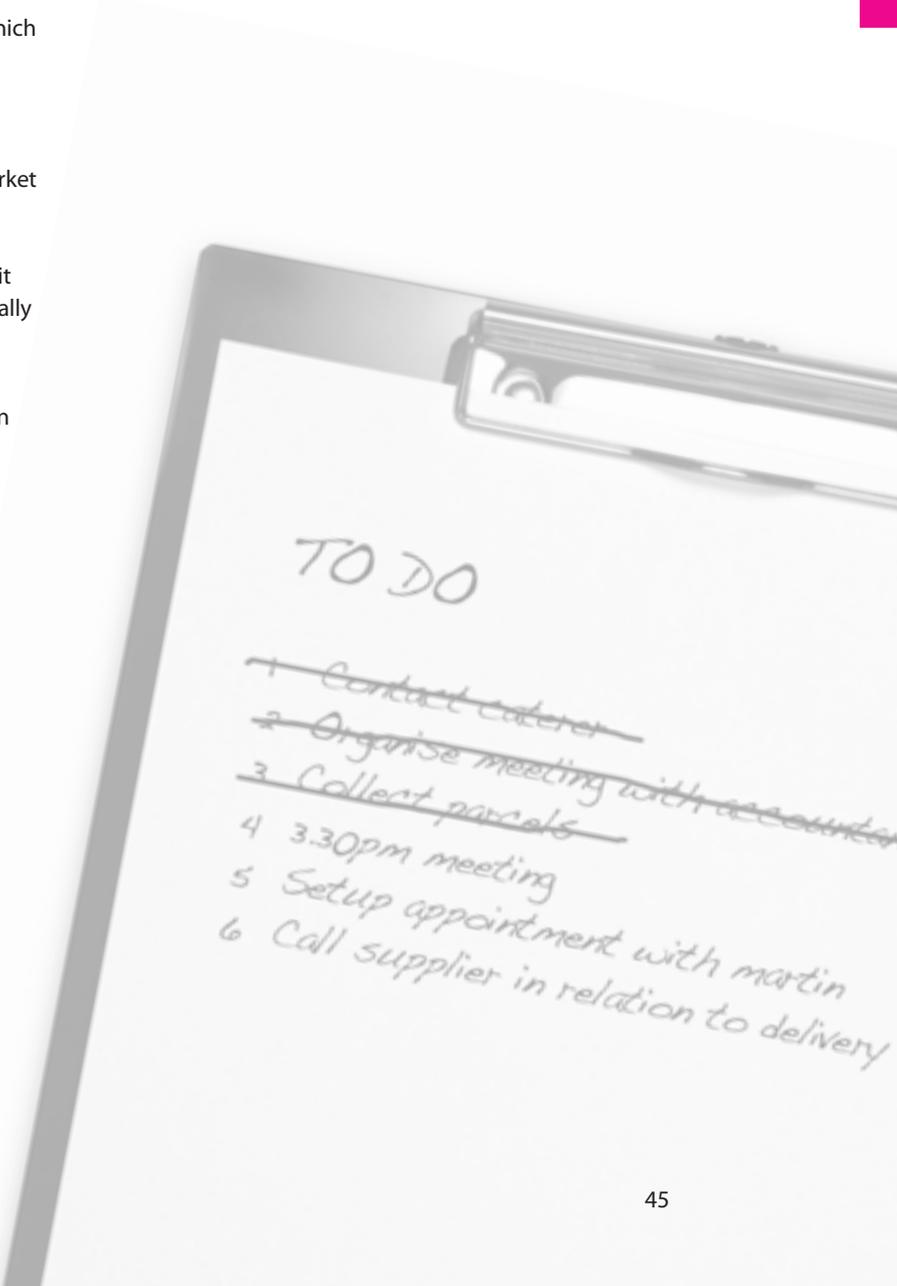
"You've got to be a bit broader to find out what the market wants because you can't go and do research and say, 'x number of people want to use a personal concierge' because they don't even know what it is or how to use it yet. Then it all may narrow, and in five years I may be really focusing on one area."

For Martin, the rewards of her life as a small businesswoman are many. She is especially proud when people are inspired by her efforts to look at their own possibilities.

Her advice to those who yearn to be their own boss is to just do it.

"Anyone can do it as long as they are prepared to work in the business. No matter what age, no matter where you're from. Money is basically going to be the biggest hurdle, but if you can plan enough so that you're ready for it, there's no reason why you can't be doing it."

And a tip from one who has learnt the hard way: "You're never going to be organised all the time, but it helps."

- 
- TO DO
- ~~1 Contact caterer~~
 - ~~2 Organise meeting with accountant~~
 - ~~3 Collect parcels~~
 - 4 3.30pm meeting
 - 5 Setup appointment with martin
 - 6 Call supplier in relation to delivery

Have an attitude of generosity,
rather than scarcity

JULIET BOURKE

Lawyer and Management Consultant



balance



Managing well, thanks

Juliet Bourke's success as a management consultant has enabled her to defy her biggest business critic—herself

For a woman who reckons she was not cut out to run a business seven years ago, Juliet Bourke has come a long way.

"I didn't see myself becoming a businesswoman," says Bourke, a founder and partner in Aequus Partners, a respected management consultancy that advises businesses and governments on organisational change, diversity, flexibility and well-being. "I thought you had to be quite a ruthless person to fill that role. I am very driven and outcomes focused, but I am not ruthless."

The Sydney lawyer's sheer talent and effort have helped her conquer any self-doubts. With business partner Graeme Russell, she has turned Aequus Partners into a prosperous firm with a core team of six people. The business has a blue-chip client list that includes Macquarie Bank, law firm Allens Arthur Robinson and management consultancies such as PricewaterhouseCoopers and AT Kearney.

Bourke and Russell's decision to launch Aequus Partners was not made lightly. Arriving at a "fork in my career" in the late 1990s, Bourke had a couple of choices: she could persist with being a government lawyer with a limited career path, or she could opt for a new challenge that would be professionally satisfying and personally challenging. She chose the latter, riskier option.

"I confess that I stepped into the idea of running a business without quite knowing what it was all about," Bourke says now. "And this has given me freedom to explore my own strengths and to supplement my weaknesses."

Not that she took the leap into the world of small business without some cautious steps. Before inking a deal with Russell, she ensured that her house was in order financially so she could deal with the likelihood of fixed business overheads and no guarantee of income.

"But it was a risk and at the beginning we didn't know if we would be over-run with work or twiddling our thumbs," Bourke recalls. "Seven years on, I know I made the right decision."

Complementary skill-sets

Bourke describes Aequus Partners' start in 1999 as the culmination of a meeting of minds between herself and Russell.

They identified an opportunity to help organisations become more flexible and diverse and to foster more equitable employment policies and practices. Their skill-sets were well matched.

As an employment lawyer, Bourke came to the table with a firm knowledge of compliance and policy issues. Russell, a professor in organisational change, had experience working with private organisations conducting diagnostic assessments, developing and implementing change strategies and evaluating outcomes.

"So it was a nice blend of disciplines and experience—and in the market a unique offering of law and psychology," Bourke notes.

The evolution of the business serves as an important lesson for others. Although Aequus Partners embraced a mission statement to become the premier organisational change and research house on diversity and flexibility, it has since developed a broader offering through three core services: organisational change research and advice, workplace investigations and mediations, and workplace training.

"The second and third services developed in response to market need and our skills. For example, clients asked us if we could conduct investigations, so we started to develop a reputation in that field. We have turned that around from being merely responsive to proactive and in the last

18 months we have marketed our workplace investigation services more aggressively. That share of the business has really grown."

Progress seemed reasonably slow at first. For five years while her children were younger, Bourke worked out of home. It helped keep business overheads down and allowed her to see family more often.

"I overcame the potential disadvantages of isolation by being part of different networking groups," Bourke recalls. "In the end, the real disadvantage was the blurring of work and home time. I was always wanting to log-on to find out what was happening, and that was unfair on my family. The crunch point came when we decided that it was important for permanent staff to have a central office location."

The home-office experiment has not been abandoned altogether at Aequus Partners. Bourke explains: "Having had a good experience working from home we are happy with our staff working from home and, in addition to my business partner, three of our staff regularly work from home."

Good management pays off

Discipline around cashflow has been instrumental to the success of Aequus Partners.

The firm puts aside 25 per cent of each business invoice to pay for overheads. Partners only draw a percentage of their billings and if they do not bill they do not get paid.

Bourke and Russell also encourage innovation. Apart from allowing staff work-life flexibility, Aequus Partners



Managing well, thanks

has developed a monthly e-newsletter that translates academic research into practical information for businesses. The newsletter is disseminated to more than 500 key contacts in Australia and overseas.

“It keeps us top of mind with our clients and contacts in a valued way. We never directly sell services in the newsletter and, accordingly, we are regularly asked to subscribe new readers.”

Working in a partnership has proven a boon for Bourke and Russell. Saying they are “a good foil for each other”, the more loquacious Bourke has come to appreciate that Russell is more laidback and does not need to communicate as much as her. It has been an important realisation.

“At the beginning I was a lot more pushy about when I expected my business partner to communicate—that is, all the time—but after a while I accepted that he had a different level of communication need to me, and things became much more comfortable for me.

“It has also meant that I have taken more leadership for business decisions, such as website design, and while we always seek sign-off from each other on key business decisions, I am now less likely to seek approval before exploring an idea.”

Bourke says the similarities with her partner outweigh any differences, and she advises other business owners to seek out compatible partners.

“We like and respect each other, we value intellectual challenge, we are both client and deadline driven, we understand the value of good relationships with our clients and, most importantly, we really like what we do. I think mutual respect and sharing core values are critical to sustaining a long-term business relationship.”

Some rules of thumb

Bourke has some other iron-clad rules for small business.

First, be prepared to take risks: “With each risk you take you gain confidence in your skills and abilities—you learn where your strengths and weaknesses are.”

Second, say 'yes' more often than 'no': "Take on tasks that are just a little bit beyond your reach because they will stretch you."

Third, in a professional services environment, start to build your profile, expertise and networks "before you jump in".

Fourth, have enough money behind you to handle the initial set-up costs, "and be frugal to weather the ups and downs".

And fifth, "have an attitude of generosity, rather than scarcity".

Bourke is not one to dwell on possible mistakes she has made, preferring to concentrate on the positives. As she explains: "Each stage has taught me something important. Each experience is a building block for the next step."

However, she concedes that becoming a better people manager has been one of her most difficult assignments.

Setting clear job descriptions has become an imperative to ensure the business and the new recruits understand what is expected. Aequus Partners' employees sign legal contracts of employment so that they know their key deliverables and get a level of comfort around basic entitlements such as annual leave. The contracts also help protect intellectual property.

Bourke says: "This has been an important step because I think we made the mistake a couple of times of not quite knowing what we wanted, and therefore not articulating that clearly to the recruit or developing appropriate key performance indicators."

A respected name

With Aequus Partners now in a growth phase, Bourke can reflect on more than seven years' hard work and many achievements.

The respect with which she is held among peers is reflected in her various external responsibilities: chair of the Taskforce on Care Costs, chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Network of Australasia, and immediate past president of the NSW Equal Employment Opportunities Practitioners' Association. She has lectured at Sydney University and the University of NSW, and she is an author and international speaker on subjects including workplace culture and discrimination.

Such high-profile posts, coupled with her experience at Aequus Partners and elsewhere, have inspired some mantras she is happy to share:

- identify your passion and do something you love because a long-term commitment to an endeavour is usually required;
- be flexible because, although planning is required, business markets will tell you what is needed; and
- have the courage to step out and try something new.

They are lessons Bourke plans to continue applying to Aequus Partners as the business grows. A five-year plan to sell the business has long since been abandoned.

She explains: "Initially I did think we would sell the business after five years, but I am having too much fun. I love the autonomy, the diversity and calibre of our clients and the opportunity to do great work, so it's hard to think of a reason why I'd sell it off."

It is another good moral for others—love what you do and success will follow. The formula has worked for Bourke and Russell.

"It's our passion," Bourke says. "We love the subject area and the level at which we can engage with an organisation's leader to improve outcomes for the business and employees. In a nutshell, we still like what we do."





innovative

Don't be afraid to ask for advice, do surround yourself with a good network of people and never, ever go into business with a friend

LESLEY GARNER

Outback Store Owner



A road less travelled

Running a multi-faceted outback store has been a sometimes lonely but always invigorating experience for Lesley Garner

A six-fold increase in turnover within three years is an enviable result for any business owner.

It is an especially impressive achievement for Lesley Garner given that she lives in one of Australia's more isolated areas and, until taking the reins of the Gulf Mini Mart in Borroloola on the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory, had little or no experience running a business.

"I came into this business totally unprepared for what was expected of me," she says. "I had to learn the ropes quickly and it was a case of sink or swim."

Garner chose the latter course. Taking over the store in 2003, she decided to try to put Borroloola (population: about 1000) on the map. That meant being innovative and adding a few city comforts for a passing parade of anglers, caravanners, backpackers, government bureaucrats and the occasional wealthy traveller.

The store serves the only cappuccinos within 400km. It has introduced the region's first ATM and it has extended business hours to seven days a week, 6am to 8pm. Garner has also convinced the Northern Territory Tourist Commission to allow the business to operate as a visitor information centre.

It is a big commitment for a relatively small clientele who frequent a business that serves as a supermarket, service station, restaurant, coffee shop and mechanical pit stop. Apart from the locals and nearby station workers, the mini mart can expect about 500 customers a day in the busy season and a mere two or three in the hotter summer months.

Perhaps the piece-de-resistance of Garner's overhaul is a recent renovation that has produced an up-market coffee shop featuring classy market umbrellas and jarrah tables. It has proven a hit with culture-starved people in the area. Locals are turning up for breakfast, lunch or the two-nights-a-week dinner. Flash tablecloths, romantic candles and friendly staff are a novelty in the bush outpost.

“Even though we know all (the guests), we treat them as if we’ve met them for the first time and that they are a customer,” Garner says. “And we give them the best service that we possibly can. It’s about trying to bring a bit of culture into Borrooloola.”

An outback oasis

Borrooloola is a place where you can expect the unexpected. Located more than 900km southeast of Darwin, it straddles the McArthur River. The town’s colourful history includes a period when illegal rum trading was the main business.

It has also had its share of eccentrics. By the 1920s, so the story goes, the town library had managed to accumulate 3000 books, which helped educate the townsfolk. This included famous local hermit Roger Jose, who used the books to become familiar with the works of Shakespeare and Virgil’s Aeneid (Jose is reputed to have once walked from Cunnamulla in Queensland to Borrooloola, a distance of about 1500km).

It is somehow appropriate, therefore, that Garner’s unusual story is unfolding in Borrooloola. She acquired the mini mart—the locals still call it the chicken shop in recognition of its former role—with a family friend after her husband, a police officer, was transferred to Borrooloola.

Running such a business brings certain challenges: having to travel 700km to do the banking; not being able to attract staff easily; needing to wait a week for fuel, freight and mechanical parts to arrive; tolerating an unreliable mail system.

Yet Garner believes in the town. She put all the family’s real estate investments on the line to buy the store and, after some acrimony, bought out her former business partner in late 2005. Such high stakes act as a source of motivation.

“I think because there’s so much money invested in this business you can’t sit back on your laurels and hope it all works out okay ... I did go through a stage where I was just so worn out and tired and it showed in the shop. It showed in the way I was interacting with the staff. They were unhappy so the customers were unhappy.”

From zero to hero

Starting from scratch as a business owner is fraught with danger. Garner appreciated that reality and was smart enough to recognise the need for a business strategy.

Her starting point was to harangue the previous mini mart owner for information: who were the trusted suppliers, who were the regular customers and, importantly, who the debtors were. She also spent six months checking out similar operations in Katherine and Darwin.

“So I had an idea of who the suppliers were, who the customers were. What I didn’t know was how to run a business. I didn’t know a thing about GST. I didn’t know about stock and how it should be displayed, the kind of things that people liked to buy here. And it’s just been a big learning curve.

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes along the way, but I’ve also made quite a few good decisions that have turned out really well.”



A road less travelled

Lots of face-to-face discussions ensued as Garner sought advice from all quarters. She pored over the NT Government's small business portal for ideas. And she tapped into the brain of regional development officer, Christine Hart, "who has given me an enormous amount of strength and advice."

Garner has also trusted her judgment.

"I'd say at least 90 per cent has been learnt as I go along. I have done a lot of research on the internet looking at how businesses run. Also every time I go into another business I look at it and see what it looks like on the inside; what the staff are like; what it looks like on the outside and compare it to what I've got and think 'Okay, I can do that, but I can do it better.'"

The remote location of Borroloola presents more than the usual hurdles for a business owner. Getting good staff is a perennial problem.

"We tried to employ from within the town," says Garner, who adds that finding appropriate employees is more difficult in small towns.

Her solution has been to bring in outsiders from cities such as Darwin, Townsville or Cairns. She adds: "And that again posed a huge problem because there's no accommodation in Borroloola, so we had to invest over \$100,000 in building accommodation for staff so that when we got them we could keep them here in comfortable air-conditioned accommodation."

In return for a job and a roof over their head, she expects her staff to deliver the goods on customer service.

"My philosophy is to treat people how I want to be treated. Give them the service that I want. If I'm paying for something I expect to get the service and I say that to my staff all the time."

As a woman in a male-dominated outback town, Garner admits gender can be an issue.

"Being a female I've found that men treat you as if you're not capable of doing things. They tend to try to walk over you, try to pull the wool over your eyes all the time and I've certainly been taken for a ride a couple of times."

For the sake of her business, she has had to defend her turf.

"I actually have learnt to stand up for what I believe in, and if it means upsetting somebody then so be it. Otherwise I would just be a little mouse in a corner somewhere that cowers every time someone comes near."

Lessons from the shop floor

Garner has three pieces of advice for other business owners.

First, get motivated: "If you're not motivated it's just not going to happen and you have to be prepared to get your hands dirty; be prepared to be part of the team and not just the leader of the team."

Second, ignore negative people: "Because if you listen to them you end up doubting yourself."

And third, be organised: "I can be a bit of a procrastinator, but on the whole ... I make sure that the important things are always done. If there is something to be done today, do it today."

Speaking from personal experience, she adds that it is imperative to choose business partners carefully.

She explains: "Never go into business with a friend ... Make sure you know who you're going into business with and if you have the opportunity to do it by yourself, do it by yourself. Just make sure that you have a really good network of people that you can rely on and get advice from. Draw from their experiences. And don't be afraid to ask for advice."

Despite a tough run in Borroloola, Garner draws pride from the success of the business and her role in improving the community dynamic.

With a five-year business plan that has a couple of years to run, she is determined to keep innovating. A small car-hire business to cater for government representatives and stranded travellers is in the pipeline. And she wants to run crocodile-spotting tours on the McArthur River.

"I want to keep growing the business, building it up," says Garner, who adds that she expects to look back at the Borroloola business in a decade and think "how the hell did I manage that?"

And the answer: "I had no choice."



Be patient when a problem emerges and try to assess the pluses and minuses of the situation so you can implement an intelligent solution; impulsive reactions are often the worst

ELISE PASCOE
Chef and Caterer



mentor



Silver service

A head for business and a taste for high society have taken Elise Pascoe to the top as a chef, caterer and food consultant

It was 1968. Sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll and the war in Vietnam were in full swing. By year's end, the Prague Spring uprising would mark a wave of student and civil rights revolt across the world and the women's movement would be born.

In Australia, times were less turbulent but the first signs of affirmative action were in the air. Into that breathing space, a bored Melbourne mother and wife stepped out of the house and into the boardrooms of Australia's business elite.

A phone call was all it took to launch Elise Pascoe's evolution from enthusiastic home cook to a global career as a chef and, ultimately, recognition as one of Australia's culinary leaders.

Pascoe, then just 28, remembers the moment her life changed. "As my boys grew and entered their school years, I was really ready to do something. I was playing golf at the time, and I was asking everyone in my group, 'I need a job, do you know of anything?'"

Weeks later the telephone rang. Pascoe recalls the conversation with the gentleman at the other end of the line: "(He said) 'I would like you to come and see me, to talk to me about cooking for the executive dining room and Rio Tinto (then known as CRA)'"

"It was just a chance. Somebody had said, 'Ah, I've heard of someone. She's a terrific cook and she's looking for a job. Ring her up and this is where you'll find her.' And that's how it happened. So I think it was meant to be."

The job was only a temporary position while the incumbent chef was recovering from cancer, but within a month of taking up the position Pascoe was, in her own words, "in love with it". With a view to getting a permanent job, she was determined to impress every guest who dined in the CRA boardroom.

True to her vision, Pascoe was soon dishing up lunches to the boards of Broken Hill Smelters and Comalco, among others, and friendships were forged with business and mining luminaries such as Gordon Darling and Sir Roderick Carnegie.

Those boardroom dinners led to requests for private catering, and soon Elise Pascoe Catering was feeding the cream of Melbourne society at weddings, christenings and private parties.

A nose for business

It was a steep learning curve for an only child whose love of food and wine was fostered around the dining table of a modest Adelaide home.

Her father, an avid wine collector, helped train her palate.

“I can remember a particular occasion nosing a wine,” Pascoe says. “I put it down and my father said, ‘But you haven’t tasted it.’ ‘Oh no, I don’t like it’ ... And it’s still the same today. I smell everything, even when I’m buying food.”

Her appetite for food and cooking grew through global travels as the young wife of an oil executive. Based in The Hague in The Netherlands, Pascoe socialised with the wives of diplomats and filled her time with cooking demonstrations and market visits.

“Eventually, because I drove, I used to hop in the car and drive through two countries to get to Paris to the markets ... I would take all these extraordinary things back to my apartment in The Hague. There were vegetables we’d never seen in Australia.”

Those years trawling the markets of Paris would later place Pascoe ahead of the field as Australian cuisine moved from “reef and beef” to a more international menu.

Back in Australia’s boardrooms in the late 1960s, Pascoe learnt her first lessons about business: people wanted quality and a high standard of service. And two pieces of advice from her then husband have stood the test of time: you need back-up help so you do not let people down as a business grows, and resist the temptation to mix household and business money.

Pascoe hired a woman to help at home and step in for emergencies such as a sick child and, with \$2, opened a business account at her local bank.

She was ready to take on the world.

“I did an awful lot myself in the beginning,” she explains. “I can remember I worked for the first six months, seven days a week without a day off ... I thought there’s got to be more to life than this. I had to get help and work out how that was affordable. Basically I learnt as I went.”

On a path to profitability

Pascoe looks back on those early days and acknowledges many faults with her approach, including the absence of a business plan.

While it is easy to criticise her unstructured growth, Pascoe had an intuitive business acumen that kept her on a profitable path. More importantly, perhaps, she was a supreme networker, a skill that ensured her place as a player in Melbourne social circles in the 1970s.

By the 1980s, Pascoe’s star was such that on Sydney visits she would be mixing with society and media figures such as Ita Buttrose and Leo Schofield. With her children grown up and her marriage failing, Pascoe contemplated



Silver service

a move north from Melbourne. The rumour mill went wild, and soon she found herself negotiating with the *Sydney Morning Herald* to take on a role as founding food editor for the *Good Living* liftout.

“As soon as I knew I was going to live in Sydney, I started my network, which I’m very good at. I said, I work here in Sydney and I need a real job. Not just a writing job, I need a real job. And do you know, the most amazing things started coming out of the woodwork left, right and centre.”

She became a respected catering consultant and was immediately voted on to the board of the Australian Wine Society (in its 60-year history Pascoe is the only woman who has served on the board).

“So I had a board appointment. I had the major food column in the country with my *Good Living* column. I started with a number of consultancies. I was invited to the best tables in Sydney, and I still had a cooking role in Melbourne. I was really on my way.”

Pascoe’s career took off on a stellar trajectory she could not possibly have envisioned while serving prawn cocktails and steaks in Melbourne’s Collins Street. Her journalistic career included roles as food editor of *Mode*, *Belle* and *Belle Entertaining* magazines and as a contributing writer to *Gourmet Traveller*. She is presently the Australian editor of *Food Arts*, a New York-based magazine. On top of these commitments, Pascoe has written five cookbooks and for six years had her own cooking segment on Australian television.

Top of her class

Today, all these roles have coalesced into the vision that is the Elise Pascoe International Cooking School in the hinterland of Kiama, about 120km south of Sydney.

She runs the school in partnership with her second husband, John Kelly. Now in her 60s, Pascoe admits to some regrets at having left the creation of the school to so late in her life. All the same, it is thriving and Pascoe won the Westpac Business Owner’s Award in the Telstra Business Women’s Awards in 2005 for her management role at the school.

“It’s been the most successful of all the things I’ve ever done,” she says, adding that it helps her combine a rural and community-minded life with her passion for food.

Pascoe believes the school may reach its saturation point domestically within the next two years and she is already moving to attract international trade with a focus on Singapore’s expatriate community. The Australian Government’s trade facilitator, Austrade, has been instrumental in the Asia push.

“Austrade approached me with their new exporter development program ... and I said ‘No I’m sorry, I haven’t got time’. But then they spoke to me again. (They said) we urge you to do it now because you’re absolutely perfect for what we’re doing.

“So we’ve gone full bore. The research is done. It’s all looking very rosy and positive.”

She also plans to expand her writing and consultancy work and has the seeds of a produce business selling and manufacturing jams and jellies in the pipeline.

The move to the country has also changed the way Pascoe looks at business. “In a big capital city, everybody’s out for themselves,” she says. “Now that I’m in a small rural community, you realise that you can contribute to the community, and I enjoy the satisfaction of having done something for somebody else. I always get networking and word of mouth out of it. So I’m never the poorer for it, having enjoyed it anyway.”

That belief has seen her take part in local tourism groups and loan the property for a myriad of functions. While Pascoe is committed to helping charities, she now insists—having learnt the “hard way”—on a contract being drawn up to ensure both sides know what each expects of the other. It is another of her golden rules: never let sentiment get in the way of sound business practices.

A lifetime of lessons

With no signs of her business life slowing down, Pascoe has a lifetime of experience on which fellow businesswomen can draw.

Perhaps her most valuable insight is to always be patient.

“One of the things I like to do in my business, if I’ve got a problem, then I get a page and I draw a line down the middle, and I put the pluses on one side and the minuses on the other. And then I might even walk away from it. If it’s a really bad problem and it’s one that you really want to go and tear strips off someone, I don’t. I don’t do anything within 48 hours. After I’ve calmed down, I’ll start putting the arrows across and working out whether there’s a balance at the end. It’s a wonderful way to sort out something. You need to be calm, to give it time, and above all be fair.”

Beyond patience there is, of course, a sense of the philosophical, perhaps harking back to the day when a phone call launched her new life.

“I know what I want, and I know how to get it,” she says. “Sometimes it doesn’t work out, and you just have to think, it probably wasn’t meant to be.”





motivator

Hiring more staff just to satisfy your ego will only create additional cost pressures, so recruit in line with the growth of your business

MELINDA YOUNG
Mortgage and Finance Broker



On the money

Matching lifestyle and business needs is paying off for boutique mortgage broker Melinda Young

Melinda Young believes in business fate. Five years ago, soon after taking a redundancy from the giant Citibank group, she turned up to her first function in a new guise as a mortgage broker.

“They had a door prize that I won and it was a laptop. I am just a lucky person,” she says. “It was just amazing because three months later I started up and I had the laptop ready to go ... Yeah, it was meant to be. All the signs were there.”

Good luck and more than a little good management have enabled Young and her husband Rob Seton to create a thriving boutique mortgage and finance broking firm, Mortgage Simplicity, in Melbourne. With Young concentrating on sales and her partner handling administration duties and business strategies, they now represent more than 30 lenders and have an ever-increasing client list.

Drawing on more than a decade of experience in the finance sector, Young is piecing together the best aspects of each mortgage-broking model she has seen to create her own template for Mortgage Simplicity. The result is a streamlined business that shuns high overheads and champions client service.

“I feel it is very important to take the time to really listen to clients’ needs before suggesting a course of action,” she says. “It’s also important to empower the client to make the final decision.”

Cutting the confusion

Mortgage broking is a boom business in property-obsessed Australia. With more than 100 lenders across the market selling in excess of 1000 products, many real estate buyers understandably get confused.

Mortgage Simplicity helps clients select loans and financing options from a pool of lenders such as the Big Four banks and other mortgage providers. First-home buyers make up a lot of Young’s business.

"I probably get the most kick out of working with them ... It's giving them a start. They really don't understand anything. When you walk into a bank branch, unfortunately you don't get any information, so I just explain to them how it all works."

Off-the-street business is not the goal for Young and Seton. They rely on referrals. As a consequence, networking has become a crucial tool.

"I used to think that networking was a lot of hogwash," Young says. "But I have found that the most valuable thing I can do is to network."

She attends many business functions and is a longtime member of Women in Finance, a Victorian support and education group for women, and Zonta, an international group whose charter is to advance the status of women. Business inevitably flows from such links. A tool that has worked well for Young is a rewards system for clients who refer others to Mortgage Simplicity. It may entail a simple thank-you card, a subscription to a magazine or some other small gesture of gratitude.

At the same time, an important lesson Young has learned is that businesses do not need every potential client. "You've got to weed out the clients, which is the same in any sort of sales environment," she says.

The firm has implemented a simple email-based application form which is sent to prospective clients requiring them to fill out details about a possible mortgage application. The message to clients is that the form helps fast-track the application process and acts as a starting point for a serious face-to-face meeting.

"If they don't do that, they are not serious," Young says. "I think that has cut our workload by about 40 per cent without having any impact on our bottom line."

Less is more

Early in its evolution, Mortgage Simplicity employed administration staff and four loan writers. Young and Seton, however, have made a conscious decision to streamline the business and operate a two-person firm. They did not have to force anyone out of the business; natural attrition was their ally.

Flash offices and hordes of staff are not on the agenda.

Young explains: "(We wanted) to make the business work for us, not the other way around ... We did have a struggle when we had all the staff. And we (employed them) because we thought we should because everybody else in the industry seemed to be doing it. Well, they didn't add anything to the bottom line, they were barely covering their own expenses and required a lot of support from our part ... We sort of woke up and went, what are we doing?"

That moment of clarity has transformed the business. Mortgage Simplicity now operates through a virtual IT-based network along with a serviced office, which provides an efficient reception and administration base without the debilitating overheads of a traditional office set-up.

The minimalist approach to staff and offices has become part of Mortgage Simplicity's core strategy. Young is adamant that ego often rules business decisions. She tells the story of an industry colleague who has been in the



On the money

game for a long time. After telling him that Mortgage Simplicity has no loan writers other than the husband-and-wife team, the peer boasted that he had eight on staff.

“And we went: ‘Yeah, but how profitable are you?’” Young says. “And he (said): ‘Actually, you know, I thought about that the other day and we’ve never been as profitable as when it was just me and my wife working from home.’ A lot of it’s about ego and how big is your business. I think the bottom line has got to be how profitable you get.”

Young advises businesses to avoid the trap of forcing growth.

“If it’s meant to grow, it will ... You don’t go hiring staff in the hope that that will bring growth. If your business starts to grow and you need more staff that’s one thing, but hiring people to grow the business can be really dangerous.”

To maximise their resources, Young and Seton use technology. They run a network server so they can function as a business while on the road. And using the serviced office to full effect, they find they can do the same amount of work with fewer people.

Aside from boosting profits, the lean operation gives Young and Seton a lot more flexibility—they even get to go on holidays. She explains how they achieve this: “Even though there’s only two of us we run a server because when we do go away on holidays we can actually take a laptop and we can check emails, do any work we need to do, from wherever we happen to be. So we can tend the actual office when we are not there.”

She says the breaks make the business more productive.

“We are far more profitable, less stressed and healthier as we have more time to look after ourselves and fewer expenses to concern us.”

The female touch

Young estimates that men make up about 85 per cent of the mortgage-broking sector. She is far from intimidated by the statistic.

“I actually think that is an advantage for women,” she says. “Women probably relate to people a little bit differently. (They’re) more likely to really listen and try and empathise with the client and understand what their situation is ... I also have a lot of

single women as clients, and I think they are definitely more comfortable dealing with another woman.”

A number of strategies have paid dividends for Mortgage Simplicity, and Young is happy to share them.

First, find a great accountant—“Somebody who understands your business and your industry, and who takes the time to learn your strengths and weaknesses.”

Second, keep revisiting your business plan and remember initial aims—“Don’t lose sight of what you started out to do.”

Third, outsource to specialists when required: “For example, tax is just such a nightmare. If you really don’t know, don’t try and muddle through it or dump a shoebox with your accountant; it will cost you a fortune.”

Fourth, keep abreast of your financial position—“Know how much is in the bank, what tax is due.”

A final piece of advice is that Young makes a commitment to exercising. In fact, she puts personal commitments and exercise sessions in her diary before any work commitments are factored in “because otherwise you do get overwhelmed with work”.

Although Mortgage Simplicity is barely five years old, Young is already thinking about the future of the business. In fact, she has been planning her departure from day one.

“I guess it is about having some sort of exit strategy when you go to business, knowing how big you want it to be and where you want to head.”

For now, though, she and Seton are content to be running a sustainable business which, at some point, will have a saleable value. Down the track they can assess their options. Perhaps they will sell the business. Or they may pay someone wages “to keep it rolling while we are not there”.

“So we don’t have to worry so much about making it massive and employing lots of people—just over time naturally the value of the business is growing.”

As Young says, fortune is smiling on her.



Business systems are crucial, but even the best strategies need to be tweaked and updated for continuous improvement

SAM DENMEAD

Cycling Tourism Operator



leader



Tour de force

Negotiating the highs and lows of business cycles is just part of the everyday job for tourism entrepreneur Sam Denmead

Sam Denmead's kindergarten teacher could see early signs of an entrepreneur as she dominated the playground.

"When I was at kindergarten I think mum got the report card which said, 'Sam tends to be a bit bossy'", Denmead recalls. "I read that as leadership skills. Ever the optimist."

Now 31 and the founder of Island Cycle Tours in Tasmania, Denmead is still telling people where to go—and they love it. The company's range of cycling tours take in the often rugged and always beautiful delights of places such as Port Arthur, Wineglass Bay, Freycinet Peninsula, Maria Island National Park, Cradle Mountain and the Gordon River.

Island Cycle Tours is Tasmania's only cycling-focused tour operator and combines bike holidays with boutique accommodation in historic guest houses while wining and dining on the state's best produce. The business, which started in 2002, has been the perfect entrepreneurial vehicle for Denmead, a keen rider herself who for seven years worked in the hospitality sector in Tasmania, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Scotland. Just as importantly, the healthy, environment-friendly concept is a business that has emerged at the right time and the right place.

A legendary start

If you are going to get a little push-start into the cycling business, there are few better motivators than Greg LeMond, the American cycling hero and three-time winner of the gruelling Tour de France road race in France.

Visiting Tasmania for a fly-fishing promotion, LeMond met Denmead in her role as a Tourism Tasmania marketer and they pondered life and business over dinner a few times in the company of friends.

Denmead remembers the moment: "He said, 'It would be great to come down and do some training.' He gave me the impression that Tasmania is perfect for cycling training—

the scenery, the roads, the climate. The light bulb's over my head, and a few days later it was like, Greg's right, I should start a business ... I'd been drifting along waiting for my big opportunity, and I found it."

Fours years later, tour reservations are booming and Island Cycle Tours is a sustainable business with huge growth potential. In retrospect, Denmead believes she was always destined to run her own business. Even in Year 8, selling t-shirts for a school project, she had a gift for management and sales.

"I knew straight away that that was what I wanted to do. To have control. I just basically slotted into this leadership role."

Enjoying the ride

With about 14 permanent staff and other casuals involved in the business, Denmead has been spending less time on the bike and more in the head office in recent years, ensuring reservations are flowing and business systems are in place.

"The only reason I was out there guiding was financial, and of course I had to see the tours develop and evolve so I had to be part of that," she says. "And now I'm in a position where I'm happy for the guides to do it without me, and I just work on the business."

Although she studied business marketing at university, Denmead says the courses were geared for big business and international marketing concepts, "which has been absolutely no use to my small business".

"I didn't realise how much I didn't know ... I've had to

learn from the school of hard knocks because I didn't know what to expect. And now I've seen how long it takes for things to happen, how important your branding is and all the other things that are associated with it. It's been an absolute eye-opener."

A business plan has been crucial to mapping out the journey. She spends much of the off season—Tasmania's icy winter months are not ideal for road riding—contemplating business changes and analysing the previous 12 months.

"In the back of my mind I'm always thinking ahead and making sure it does fit in with the plan ... Even if it hurts your head and it seems pointless, write it all down and revisit the plan at least once a year. Even the smallest business needs a plan."

Denmead has not been afraid to tap into government help, either. She is a regular visitor at www.business.gov.au, the Australian Government's business advisory website, and has gleaned information on issues such as registering business names, corporate structures and taxation. She has also sought funding from the Australian Tourism Development Program for 2007 under an Australian Government grants program that promotes travel-related business initiatives.

Denmead has a sign on her wall that reads: "Some days you're the pigeon, some days you're the statue." Fewer statue days result when you have planned properly, she says.

While her start-up funds were minimal, Denmead now sees that as a potential blessing, saying "if I'd had



Tour de force

lots of money, I may have spent it badly". "So I haven't spent money unwisely. Of course, I've made mistakes, but I think what I've done has worked."

Taking a new path

Denmead sees herself as a serial entrepreneur, so she has already been planning for a life after Island Cycle Tours. The business is merging with another tour company, Under Down Under Tours. And while the original brand will continue to exist in its own right, Denmead will become a director and shareholder of the parent company and specialise in a marketing and group management role.

"It means I get to focus my energies on what I do best, rather than doing stuff that simply has to be done," she says. "This is a great move for me because for the past four years I've had to do absolutely everything in the business, from guiding tours, answering the phone, paying the bills, human resources activities, tax, permits, marketing, responding to emails, the website, attending functions and exhibitions, and that's just the start of it. Exhausting isn't it!"

The concept of a merger has been on Denmead's mind from the start: "I've never seen myself doing the same thing over and over and over. So I'd like to think that this is another step. Get it up and running and then move on."

In her new role, Denmead will have a chance to promote the business strategies of her favourite mentor Michael E. Gerber, the author of *The E-Myth* series and who is an advocate of getting the right systems in place.

Denmead admits that trying to implement systems while working in the business as opposed to working on the business is tough. Training, insurance measures, wages management, monitoring telephone bills and reservations—they all require a lot of day-to-day management.

"I've learnt that putting systems in place earlier would have been better because now I'm playing catch-up. And what I'm learning is that even the best systems always need to be tweaked, and there's always continuous improvement. But I wish I'd started them earlier."

She is confident, however, that those systems are maturing. She has always used two manuals, one for tour operations and the other for sales. They were written so that anyone can walk into the business and understand where it is and what needs to be done.

"I try to think of it in terms of 'this needs to be written as if I'm never coming back!'"

Two other routines that have paid dividends are detailed feedback forms from clients evaluating the cycling tours, and comprehensive booking forms that allow cycle guides to provide a targeted service that meets the requirements of a myriad of customers, whose ages and nationalities can vary dramatically from group to group.

One piece of feedback led to the age-group category for children being extended from 8–12 to 8–15 because many parents were not booking in their teenagers because they thought the overall tour cost was too expensive.

"So we increased the age of children to open that up more to families," says Denmead, who says the move has improved the business' economies of scale. "I think if you didn't do that sort of data analysis, you wouldn't understand your customer base."

To each their own

One lesson Denmead has learnt is to let staff slot into their specialty areas. Leave good guides on the bikes. And get good administration people in the office.

"I've tried in the past to have some of my guides come and do reservations because I thought it was important for them to see how it works, and it didn't work very well," she says. "They were like, 'get me out of this office!'"

The other key is putting customer service at the core of the business. When training guides, she emphasises that the paying riders always come first. To that end she employs guides who she thinks will fit into the Island Cycle Tours team and enjoy the work—not just someone who has the attitude of "okay, I'll do it" for the money.

In the past, she has hired based on mindset, not age, and wants people who are dynamic, enthusiastic and passionate.

"And I'll say to the guys ... I'm not employing you because you can ride; it's got nothing to do with it. I need you to be out there looking after the guests. If they aren't happy, fix it. If you can't think how to fix it, only then will you ring me."

Staff issues aside, managing cash-flow in a largely seasonal business has been one of Denmead's biggest challenges. She and the new management team are trying to diversify—walking tours in winter, for example, and running programs for schools—and maximise the September–June business period in the warmer months. Things have been going well; reservation numbers have grown 100 per cent every year for the past four years.

For now, though, Denmead is just enjoying the journey.

"I guess I'm in a lucky situation because I'm happy. When my guests are happy, I'm happy and that's the main thing. I'm in the lucky situation where I don't even have a complaints area because we don't get any ... Happy people are great."





discipline

The presence of a third-party consultant can act as a crucial sounding board for a husband-and-wife business team—helping the business and the marriage

MONICA MORSE
Business Centre Director



Not the retiring type

Sixty-something Monica Morse sees her experience as a weapon—not a handicap—as she continues to thrive in the business world

When roadies started addressing her as ‘dear’ five years ago, Monica Morse took the hint that it was time to get out of the promotions and events management industry.

Turning 60 and with a distinguished career behind her in events management for Bathurst City Council and Charles Sturt University in central NSW, Morse could have been excused for contemplating retirement. Instead, she bought a new business, Belinda’s Business Centre, with her husband Michael, a well-known chartered accountant in the region.

Morse recalls the trigger for her career change: “Most event organisers are young people. When roadies for bands started calling me ‘dear’ and helping me on to the stage, I knew that I was approaching my use-by date in events.”

“Also, I had become very tired of not being able to make my own decisions,” she says. “Mind you, leaving it till you are 60 to decide this is really leaving your run a bit late!”

Morse is perhaps symbolic of a new generation of ‘grey-power’ workers who refuse to be pushed into retirement. They enjoy work, they want the challenges that business or a career bring, and they will not be denied.

The age and gender factor is a complex one for Morse and others. She acknowledges that it is desirable to portray older women as being able to take on new tasks and learn new skills, but warns that they should not be defined by age or highlighted only in terms of “being handicapped or a victim”.

“Women tend to trade on their disadvantages and be acknowledged for their success on that basis rather than on their advantages or successes ... I subscribe to the principle of life-long learning and am against stereotyping women by age.”

A new chapter begins

After leaving the council, Morse agreed to hold the fort for an ill friend's secretarial bureau, and during that three-month period heard of the impending sale of a business then known as Belinda's Secretarial Service.

Her husband, somewhat bored in retirement, had taken up some accounting consulting work in Sydney but was ready for another challenge. They purchased the business in 2002.

Monica Morse says: "I guess we had assumed that retirement would be a good time of life. But we had so much energy between the two of us and the desire to try a new challenge that we decided to buy a business."

She felt their combination of talents—a left-brain, right-brain mix—would be ideal to overhaul and modernise the business, which had struggled to keep up in the era of the internet and email. Morse used her superannuation to help fund the purchase, and her husband added some savings.

A name change to Belinda's Business Centre reflected the business's evolution from a typing and secretarial service. The Morses then embraced the web and set about retaining existing clients.

Now employing three full-time staff and using other specialist consultants, Belinda's Business Centre has grown from humble beginnings as a typing service 25 years ago to providing administrative support to national, state and regional clients. Serviced offices, secretariat functions, professional business management services and teleconference and web-conferencing facilities are all part of the new business mix under the Morses.

One of the first major new clients was the media monitoring company Rehome, a coup for the new business. They helped it grow rapidly into one of the country's biggest reporting agencies. The deal proved gruelling for the Morses. For more than two years they started work at 5am and worked through until 5pm or 6pm just to get the work done.

"The hours were very gruelling for an 'older' person and we had very little social life," she recalls. "But we were able to work hard and fast and were known for our efficiency."

Another growth area has been the preparation of resumes, a skill Morse had learnt in previous business incarnations.

"I get to meet some very interesting people and hear some amazing life stories," she says. "Sometimes I need a box of tissues in my office—for the clients, not for me!"

A search for talent

Like many growing businesses, the Morses have found it tough to find the right staff. Asked how they have handled the talent crisis, Monica Morse concedes: "With difficulty! Right now we have some good staff who show initiative and work hard as well as getting on together. But they can have good and bad days and in a small office that can have a significant impact."

They have been happy to engage outside consultants to fill gaps in the company, and recently used an external consultant to develop a strategy to allow Belinda's Business Centre to keep growing while preparing the Morses for an exit plan that is likely to take effect in the mid-term future.



Not the retiring type

The presence of a third party has also made it easier for the husband-and-wife team to manage inevitable differences of opinion.

Morse comments: "One of the reasons we employed a business adviser was that he was a third person, an unbiased opinion ... It is not easy for husbands and wives to work together. It is not easy learning new skills like running a business. I had never run a business—my husband had been doing it all his life. So when I make a mistake, it is hard to be told what to do and what I did wrong. It was not easy working with a man who had been used to being the boss and it was not easy for him to work in an all-female office."

Such issues aside, Belinda's is on a roll on the back of an improved technology offering. It regularly hosts teleconferencing meetings and has a 24-line telephone system that can handle calls to 1800 numbers during business hours. Web-conferencing is also a growing part of the business.

The Morses, dispelling the myth that 60-something workers cannot handle technology changes, have prided themselves on being able to implement new IT-driven tools into the business.

"Michael and I find that we are unusual in our ability to take on new technologies," Morse says. They have set up networked computers boasting the latest firewalls, mirroring, high-speed internet and a virtual private network for accessing their office computer system from their laptops anywhere in the country. They also introduced the latest scanning technologies to provide media monitoring services. In short, they have brought Belinda's into the modern era.

Morse admits it is sometimes tough convincing clients that a woman of 60-something knows anything about technology.

"Older women are pigeonholed into not being up with the latest," she says. "Most people of my age pride themselves on being computer illiterate, which I find very irritating. At a party recently a woman who was a musician scoffed at my suggestion that she should take up using the internet as her next project. She said she would on the condition that I undertook to learn to play an instrument. It gave me great pleasure

to say that I play two instruments, the violin and the viola and play the viola in our local orchestra.”

Morse is also involved with the Bathurst community in her roles as president of the Bathurst Business and Professional Women’s group and as chair of the Bathurst Relay For Life event, which is an inspirational weekend of community caring and support for cancer survivors and carers as well as fundraising for cancer research.

Tips for young players

As a veteran in business, Morse has learnt many lessons along the way. Her observations include:

- men and women work differently and it is important to understand those differences and use them to advantage;
- being an older woman in business is hard;
- running a business is a skill that needs to be learnt;
- taking a long-term view is critical;
- getting good accountants on board is crucial for success;
- it is an advantage to be part of a community network and to have a high profile; and
- looking smart and dressing well sets the tone for a business.

Morse has few regrets, but concedes she should have been tougher on one very important detail—the name of their business. She feels the switch from Belinda’s Secretarial Service to Belinda’s Business Centre did not go far enough.

“I regret not being strong enough to win the argument to change the name of the business right at the beginning. I was aware that we had paid for the goodwill of Belinda’s ... but it sounds like a frock shop or an ice cream parlour. I should have been more assertive and changed the name at the start. Now it is too late.”

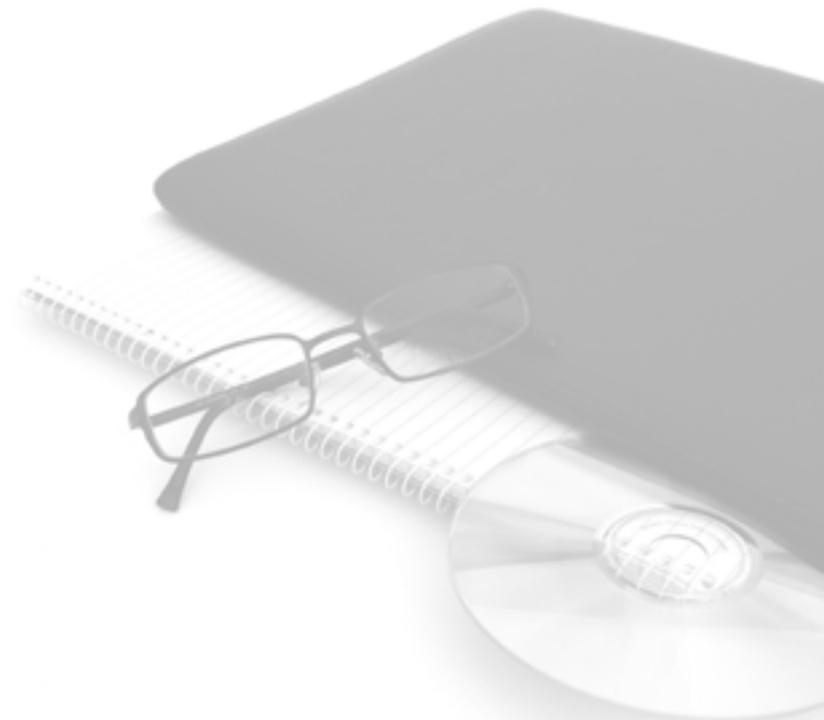
Morse remains positive, however, that the business will continue to grow. She adopts a philosophy of ‘look back with a smile, go forward with courage’.

And she also uses an ‘is it likely’ test in the business—is it likely that we will win this client, is it likely that we will need a new computer system, is it likely that we will lose staff? Addressing such questions means the business is rarely caught unprepared.

While their succession plan is written, the Morses are not resting on their laurels. They have embarked on a marketing plan to attract new clients, and keep modifying business solutions.

Morse says she likes “the challenge, the people, the clients”. And she enjoys being part of the social structure of the business world and the local community.

“Even though we have some difficult clients at times, the challenge of being abreast of the situation keeps us interested. I don’t think either of us is quite ready to spend our days whittling.”



If disputes arise with staff or clients, try to take the emotion out of the issue and make a decision that is best for the business—not your ego

KATE JAMES
Business Coach



spiritual



Stressing the positives

Running her own business coaching service has taught Kate James a few of life's lessons along the way

Kate James is the first to admit she had “no idea what I was getting myself into” when launching her small business career four years ago.

It is a surprising confession from someone promoting herself as a business coach, yet it reflects how her business today is very different from the one she envisaged.

An initiative that began as Total Balance with a focus purely on personal development and small business coaching now also incorporates Corporate Chillout, a company based in Gardenvale, Victoria, which provides well-being programs for big and small businesses and employs about a dozen contractors.

“In the first two years, my business was predominantly coaching,” she says. “Then I began to see a theme. Most of my clients were stressed. So I began teaching them how to meditate. I also advertised the classes via my free monthly newsletter ... Subscribers eventually asked me to come and do classes for them at their organisations and eventually those corporate clients asked ‘what other programs do you have on offer’.

“I saw a niche—providing well-being programs to corporations.”

A family legacy

Total Balance Group Pty Ltd has carved out a niche and offers a range of activities such as meditation, yoga, tai chi, massage, pilates, drumming, cooking and wine tasting, as well as the original coaching programs.

The corporate world, according to James, is ready to embrace such alternatives as a means of supporting their staff, many of whom are a ball of tension or suffering from low self-esteem. Large corporations, eager to be seen as an ‘employer of choice’, are among the target clients.

James’ move into business had its genesis in the stress of a family death and is in many ways a tribute to her grandmothers.

“Both my mother’s mother and my father’s mother were really funny, spirited women who were born in an era where they didn’t have the opportunity to have careers. But their attitude was just give it a go, do whatever you want to do. My second grandmother passed away in March 2002 and she actually left me a little bit of money, which gave me the opportunity to go and do the (business coach) training.”

The decision to take the leap into small business was driven, in part, by the fact her children had started to grow up. James believed she would have more time to take on new challenges.

In retrospect, she admits, this conviction was wrong and her experience serves as a warning to other businesswomen about the difficulties of maintaining a family–work balance.

“I think a lot of women get to this stage that I’m at in life and they think, oh, you know, the kids are off my hands now ... My children were 11 and 14 when I started the business and they were quite independent. I thought, they’ll learn their legs. And in fact they needed me more. Going into those teenage years I found has been more demanding than I’ve anticipated. So the difficulty has been keeping the balance at home.”

Four years on, James concedes that her work–life balance is not as good as it was before she had a business. However, promoting a “family contribution” has helped.

“I didn’t get outside help, but I did learn to change my standards with housework. And I get the kids to help and they are good. It has worked well for them too as it makes them feel that they are contributing. And my husband is

great. He cooks, vacuums and occasionally even goes and buys stationery for me.”

Exercise has been crucial to maintaining an even keel, and it is at the heart of the philosophy she promotes as a business coach, too. “There are certain core things that I think are really important. Things like planning, planning time for yourself, reflective time. And I encourage everybody to make time to exercise. They’re the fundamental things.”

With a management background complementing her stress–busting techniques, James prides herself on creating calm in a chaotic environment. For her, running a disciplined, organised business is a must. It is a tip she recommends to other business owners.

“A lot of small businesses ... are not particularly organised and they don’t think about how they can save time and energy. So one of the things that I’m very particular about in my business is creating structures and templates and process. I have processes right from the word go, so that things are highly systemised. You don’t want to be responding to every individual website enquiry with a freshly written email.

A harmonious approach

As her commitment to exercise reflects, James practises what she preaches. For the past 15 years she has regularly meditated and, not surprisingly for someone promoting well–being programs, considers “harmony and family” her top two values.



Stressing the positives

When making decisions, she first assesses how any changes will affect those two factors. She has found it helps to have her own coach.

“I have an associate colleague who I trained with and we keep each other accountable. And we’ve actually just come up with a really good idea whereby we follow up each other. I really like the accountability. That’s really important because I can come up with great ideas but then I might not follow through. And it’s just that sense that I’ve got someone batting for me.”

Marketing has been one of the greatest challenges for James.

“A great idea, a great product or service rarely will sell itself,” she says. “You need enormous amounts of energy, and a thick skin, to be able to continually put yourself out there so that people learn more about your business. I’ve learnt to be my own publicist and to be bold about it.”

James decided early in the piece that passive marketing—the likes of *Yellow Pages* and advertisements in local papers—would not be sufficient. She opted to be more creative.

Her most public success was to call Channel Seven’s *Today Tonight* promoting a story on the trend toward “coaching”. This led to a segment on her business in January 2004, which then snowballed into profiles in a range of media from *The Sydney Morning Herald* to *Cleo* and *Good Medicine* magazines.

As she has discovered, you can’t buy publicity this good.

Like any business owner, James has experienced a range of highs and lows, with one of her most difficult times centring on a dispute over the company’s name.

Early in 2005, she was approached by a woman who had registered a name very similar to Total Balance, about the same time that James registered her business name, for a business that was also providing a coaching service. She has also had trademark issues with Corporate Chillout.

What initially seemed to James like an issue that would be resolved quickly and amicably almost ballooned into a legal row. She admits now that she failed to protect her business name and branding, and regrets it. James sought legal advice over the

naming dilemma. One lawyer advised her to fight the battle legally at a cost of potentially tens of thousands, and another told her to back away from the dispute and change the business name, but she took a different route.

"I approached both people directly and talked to them as human beings and we worked it out without the lawyers. I now have the trademark accepted on the logo for Total Balance and the trademark for Corporate Chillout pending. My business now trades under the name Total Balance Group Pty Ltd (incorporating Corporate Chillout). I learned that when you're looking at a business name you should use words that aren't too generic." She has learned a lot about such issues at www.business.gov.au, and recommends that others take advantage of such a resource.

It might be her commitment to harmony, but James has an uncanny ability to turn a negative into a positive and says the trademark experiences have helped clarify her business outlook. Whereas before she provided coaching services but nothing else tangible, the business has evolved into something "that didn't need me ... that I could actually sell". She is putting systems in place. She is confirming contracts and factoring in goodwill. She is building a corporate reputation.

"And then I can say the business is generating this amount of money and in five years' time I can sell it."

At the same time, James is adamant that money should not be the business driver—not for her anyway: "No it's certainly not a driver, in a sense it's the lowest driver that I have."

In fact, she would happily work with people for nothing. It is a passion for healing and helping that motivates her. "But having said that I am learning to be more of a businesswoman."

Quality comes first

Today, James believes her work in "creating" the business is almost done. "I have been in the transition part. I'm just in the process of growing and there's still some work to do with that. But I have a sense that I almost have everything set up."

The recent development of a company CD and new promotional material also reflects James' initial decision to make quality her point of difference in the market.

She has invested "a reasonable amount" in having a corporate identity created by a graphic designer and getting business cards, stationery and marketing cards printed.

The money ran out when it came time to launch a website, so James taught herself web development and considers her mastery of this technology as a source of pride.

"Building your own website is just an absolute godsend," she says. "It's a difficult thing to do, but it is great because it gives you the freedom to be able to make changes whenever you want to," she says. "And I think a really important part about doing the website myself is it really feels like me. I think it's just so important because people get a sense of who you are."

James likens her four years in the small business arena to a rollercoaster ride and stresses the importance of having the right support people around.

"Know that it's going to be a bit of a rollercoaster and there'll be weeks when you think you don't want to do it any more. And know that that's okay and that you will get through that.

"People talk about building self-esteem and building confidence. In my opinion the only thing is just doing it."





creative

Rather than fighting government departments,
try to work with them and tap into their vast
stores of business knowledge

MELISSA BOOT

Handcrafts Designer and Chocolate Maker



Sweet fruits of labour

A traumatic family experience has been the catalyst of business success for the creative Melissa Boot

Not many people can point to an attack by an armed gunman as the catalyst for a move into small business.

For Melissa Boot, everything in her life changed the day a crazed gunman ran through her first-grade daughter's Ballam Park Primary School in Melbourne in 1996. The comfort of the Boot family's lifestyle suddenly seemed claustrophobic, and their thoughts returned to the plans formed during their childless years travelling around Australia.

"My husband (Warwick) and I sat down and we said 'well, we've lost our goal, you know. We were going to settle up in the Kimberley. What happened?'"

Within a year the couple had made a clean break from Melbourne and financial security, and were living in the northeast of Western Australia. It was a brave move and, Boot admits, a monetary struggle as they tried their hands at establishing various businesses before Warwick, a former boat builder, turned his fibreglass skills into a successful pool and spa company.

From that initial adversity, however, Boot has reaped her own business triumph.

In search of something to keep her busy and spin a "little money on the side", Boot turned her hand to creating household items such as bowls and candleholders out of the nut of the boab, or boab tree.

"It was just an idea," she says. "Just something to keep me busy while the kids were small, a little bit of extra cash on the side to keep our heads above water until our main business took off, and I never expected it to come to this level."

A winning idea

That "idea"—Kimberley Boab Kreations and her retail outlet, The Boab Shop in Kununurra—is now a tourist destination in its own right and winner of local, regional and state small business awards.

Original products such as boab bowls, candles and goblets, which are crafted from the wooden exterior of the fruit seedpod, continue to sell strongly, while other product lines have gradually been brought on board.

Boot is the first to admit the early years were tough going, but believes the hardship of those fledgling years has shaped her business acumen.

“To come here and to have to start from scratch, it was quite hard. We were also living in a caravan and a shed, no air con. Life was really tough at the beginning.”

“(But) tough beginnings, I think, make you a rounder person and you really do put your feet on the ground and say ‘no, nobody’s going to say no I can’t do this’. And I guess that’s where you grow as you go along. You become very passionate about what you do.”

Boot’s metamorphosis from mother-with-a-hobby into astute businesswoman has been slow, the consequence of her commitment to being a mother first and the unique character of her business.

As someone who is always open to advice, Boot has drawn on the services of the government-run Business Enterprise Centre.

“I was already designing and making these products for sale at retail outlets and I just approached the BEC, and they came around and had a chat and I was able to talk to somebody about starting up business.

“I then realised how important it was to have some goals and ideals, to find out where my competitors were and look at everything from every side of the coin, which I hadn’t actually thought about.”

A business plan followed stressing the need for slow, manageable growth that would be funded from business profits, not the family bank account.

Boot explains: “I didn’t want it to be something that I couldn’t handle, and I needed to learn as I went along, and that’s basically what I’ve done. I’ve just learnt as I’ve gone along.”

It is an approach she endorses to this day.

“You get an idea and you kind of look up into the sky too far sometimes. Okay, I want to be able to do that, but you’ve got to get those stepping stones happening.”

During each step of her business’s development, Boot has had to meet the understandably strict requirements of government departments—first in securing a licence to harvest the boab tree nut and then in gaining health department approval to use the fruit of the boab nut in edible products.

While many people decry the layers of bureaucracy that come with running a business, Boot has turned it all to her advantage, becoming an authority on the boab tree and using that knowledge in her retail outlet to inform tourists about this iconic Australian flora.

And as part of her efforts to get food-authority recognition for the boab fruit, Boot has fanned media interest, resulting in magazine and TV appearances. It is a positive approach that is reflected throughout her business experience.



Sweet fruits of labour

A hard sell job

Early in her business foray, Boot took the traditional route of selling her products in shops. She soon realised, however, that this put her on a fast track to failure.

“I’d established markets and I found that there wasn’t enough money in it. With the time involved in collecting the boab nuts, producing the finished design, right up to marketing and selling, I found that to compete with the Asian markets is very difficult.

“A lot of people would walk into a giftware shop and they would see a wooden product that has been made in Asia for, say, \$15, and mine is \$20–odd. That’s the first thing that I found very, very difficult. I was having to keep my prices low to be able to stock them in their shops to compete with that other market.”

A change of strategy led to an important change: instead of selling and marketing her products through other stores, she decided to open her own shop.

“So I’m now a retail outlet rather than a wholesaler,” she says.

The transformation immediately resulted in time savings for Boot and reinvigorated her love of the business. “Once I started doing that, it wasn’t a mass-produced item ... Each piece is a one-off design that’s been finished beautifully.”

In between developing the craft business, Boot was also experimenting with ways of using the boab fruit. Her family became the guinea pigs.

“The Aboriginal people have been eating it for centuries and I knew that it was very nutritious bush tucker. I did lots of things with the boab fruit. The favourite in my family was the boab chocolate.”

At her exhibition in 2000, Boot served up her boab chocolate to an unsuspecting public. It was an instant hit and suddenly a new product opportunity loomed. However, it took two years navigating the requirements of the health department before the boab chocolate became a commercial reality in 2002.

In high demand

Today, boab chocolate is one of her biggest sellers and, in some respects, one of her biggest headaches because during peak season she is up each night making new batches of chocolate. Such success has forced Boot to recognise that a business approach that has succeeded to this point may need some serious refining.

“I’ve got to the stage where I’ve got so many tourists that come into my shop on a daily basis ... that I’m seeing this business going a lot further than what I ever anticipated.

“In the last year I’ve almost been drowning. Basically the squeakiest wheel gets the most attention, and if the (Business Activity Statement) is coming up then that’s where I spend my attention. If my showroom is getting a bit low, then that’s where I spend my attention. The chocolate orders are coming in so I have to get back into the kitchen again ... I’d like to do a little bit more time management, as you call it.”

Boot is an advocate of forging relationships with other businesses and believes, particularly in remote or regional areas, strong networks benefit everyone.

“I think it’s also very good to network with other businesses, especially businesses that have been there for a long period of time and have been through the ups and downs ... I think all successful businesses within a small community will grow a stronger community.”

As part of her reassessment of the business, Boot is also rethinking her chocolate production, with the option of sending the fruit away to be put into boab chocolates at a factory or establishing a chocolate factory in the Kimberley which can then add to the tourism experience.

Part of her excitement for the business’s future lies in the new retail facility she built a couple of years ago to replace what was essentially a dressed-up demountable masquerading as a showroom.

“This new modern facility is definitely what has turned Kimberley Boab Kreations around. Now I can imagine having my shop, the Boab Shop, in conjunction with a coffee shop. This is probably the pinnacle of the idea for the far future—selling boab cakes, muffins, slices, boab chocolate, anything and everything all made from boabs.

“It then becomes the ultimate boab experience and that’s what I’m looking toward eventually.”



Do not underprice your services: doing so reflects a lack of self worth and makes running a sustainable business almost impossible

PATRICIA WILLIAMS

Advertising Management Consultant



integrity



It pays to advertise

Saving money for advertisers is a speciality for Patricia Williams, who has also come to realise her own self worth as an entrepreneur

There is much to be said for lateral thinking and in Patricia Williams' case it has helped her flourish during a recession and become a significant player in the cutthroat world of media spending.

In 1980, Williams began a sole-person consultancy, Williams Advertising Management Services, providing media planning and buying services to marketers and advertising agencies.

"I had a series of roles in advertising and media agencies from the age of 18, but I would move every 18 months to two years because I was quite ambitious about wanting more responsibility, growing my skills and career," she says.

"There weren't career paths for women in a lot of organisations like there are today. The only way you could advance was to take a sideways step, so I would do that. At the age of 24 or 25, I thought I was ready to be lead director of a media agency. In hindsight I wasn't but ... I decided to do it for myself, and I don't regret that."

From humble beginnings

After launching her business out of a spare bedroom, Williams grew the operation quickly and, by 1987, had five full-time staff.

It came with a hitch, though. There were plenty of similar operations and her debt level was on the rise. Compounding her problems, the "recession we had to have" was about to hit the Australian economy. Instead of firing staff who would not have been able to find new jobs, Williams went further into debt.

"In a moment of desperation and inspiration", Williams changed tack in late 1989, opting to use her knowledge of the industry to provide services demonstrating how businesses could slash their advertising budget, rather than spend it.

"I had been party to the fibs that had been told by agencies, the cover-ups," she says. "There was a big market who needed to save money, and needed to understand how their money was being spent better, and I just came along at the right time. In a recession companies need to save money, and in good times they need to save money."

Not surprisingly, budget-conscious clients soon came on board. Retail giant Myer was her first client and she has gone from strength to strength, developing a domestic and international client list for Williams Advertising Management Services that includes General Motors Holden, Revlon, Orica and McDonald's.

Williams has worked with General Motors Holden since 1987, and has helped it make significant budget savings across the world.

"I was astonished to find that my self-taught advertising value-management skills could also apply to the United Kingdom, Asia Pacific and most recently the United States," she says.

Based in Port Melbourne, Victoria, but constantly criss-crossing the world for her clients, Williams spends part of her time driving down advertising costs and another part improving the service of the communications agencies hired by her clients.

"Which means that sometimes I have to fix problems before they arise. I have to help the client get the agency they deserve."

In response to client demands, she has also expanded her services to include training programs and market development planning. Travelling to unknown markets

to test her skills is a process Williams describes as "like jumping off a cliff and seeing if I can flap fast enough to fly".

Keeping things lean

Given her success in a cash-rich business niche, one might expect Williams to have scores of employees. Not so. She runs a micro-business—herself, "a very clever assistant" and several specialist sub-contractors.

"Employing people that I couldn't lay off when necessary was not my strength, so I learned to stay small," she says. "I probably also recognise, too, that I am not a team player, which is so important in business these days. I am a team leader but I am not a team player."

That self-awareness and honest approach permeates all Williams does. For instance, she is often approached to 'mentor' young businesswomen, but the tag does not sit well with her.

"I just will give a big grin and say, 'Couldn't I just be your mate? Because I have a theory—I learn things through you, too, so couldn't we just go and have a coffee and have a yak every now and again, and you can talk about what you are doing and your clever ideas, but let's not call it mentoring'.

"In terms of finding those people who you like, whether it be professional or personal, the reality is there will never be one [mentor]. You will find different things you want to learn from different people."



It pays to advertise

Technology, not geography

Williams has also learned what is important and what is not. For example, she used to think office location was vital but now believes technology is the key.

“It is more about how you can present your documents, the efficiency of your communications, your software, your ability to handle things like that, than where your office is,” she says.

As for other advice, well, she has plenty. Number one, do not underprice your services.

“The problem with costing for most people who work for themselves is more about their opinion of their self-worth than it is about their value in the marketplace.”

Williams says the industry she works in spends billions, so someone such as herself, who helps them save millions, should be paid well.

“But I do not believe that what I do is as valuable as teachers and nurses, and they work for less,” she says.

“I have to joke about being in a stupid industry that charges a lot of money. When I first started working for myself many, many, many years ago I found it difficult to look a client in the eye and say my hourly rate. Back then it was \$100 an hour, I would get this look on my face like ‘can you believe it?’ So I had to practice in front of the mirror saying my hourly rate is \$100 an hour and not break up laughing.

“When I could say it without breaking out laughing or with the ‘can you believe it?’ look on my face I put my rates up. So that was how I managed my sense of self-worth and just how ridiculous my industry was against my ability to cost and sell myself.”

Her second piece of advice is to be transparent in what you offer.

“A lot of people who get into problems with the costing of businesses are not being really clear up front about what the cost of their services are, so I always set it out in great detail,” she says.

“I provide a very, very detailed spreadsheet for clients and it can go to the nearest quarter hour and full reconciliations against the project budget and I always come in

under the project budget. Don't lump your clients with a high invoice because you haven't got it right. Be very open with them, very transparent, be very professional in letting them know exactly up front."

She has a few other suggestions for business owners:

- do not mistake cash-flow for profit and forget about all the bills to be paid;
- use female service providers if you are a woman because they tend to communicate better; and
- remember that people are not always driven by salary—they also want recognition, respect and kindness.

No parachutes

As a single person, Williams says she has always been without a backstop or safety net, particularly financially. Admitting she is not a good saver but "a fabulous payer-offer", she has invested in property because the mortgages make her work harder.

"I think fear is grossly underrated as a motivator."

In a moment of self-introspection, Williams describes herself as "never being an extremely attractive woman", but says she has used that as a tool.

"I think what tended to happen as a result of that is when I've walked into a room they've gone 'well, she's not here for her looks, maybe there might be something else to offer'. You don't let it be a barrier. I think the key is your own self-esteem.

"I am probably more focused on who I am meeting, and trying to understand what is going on. I am not walking in the room and thinking about me."

As for her plans, Williams says she always thought her use-by date would be at the age of 45, which then blew out to 50.

"And here I am at 52 and I just picked up one of my first US projects this year, and my Asia Pacific work has gone nuts, and next year is going to be the busiest year of my career."

Her over-riding message for small business is one of adaptability. She says Australian businesses tend to underestimate, as she once did, the skills they have to develop to survive in what is essentially a niche market of the world.

"With only 20 million people, Australians expect all the choices of the major economies of the world: in telecommunications, retailers, cars, financial services, packaged goods. In order for all these companies to survive in this small, very competitive market, we have had to develop skills that are often more flexible and creative than those found in larger economies.

"My message to small Australian businesses and especially women is to be brave, be flexible and accept the challenges that arise. I have been astounded by how far that approach has taken me."





teamwork

Don't be afraid to charge a fair price for
your products or services—you are running
a business, not a charity

SARAH BENJAMIN
Rose Petal Grower



In the pink

Sarah Benjamin has a simple vow—to supply the best dried rose petals for weddings all around the country

As dried rose petals—not traditional confetti—shower down on you the next time you attend a wedding, check out the colours.

It may be a Princess Pink, a dusty pink hue, for example. Or perhaps a creamy white Antique Ivory. If so, you are likely to be under the charm of Victorian rose petal grower Sarah Benjamin.

Benjamin and her mother, Jan Slater, started Simply Rose Petals in 2004 and their farm in Murraydale, north-west Victoria, is the first rose farm to specialise in premium dried rose petals—just perfect for confetti.

Despite being in the business for only two years, Simply Rose Petals supplies brides across Australia and plans to begin exporting soon. The business's export plan is under way after Benjamin recently sought advice under the Australian Government's Export Market Development program.

Extensive research into drying methods has produced 11 vibrant colours that add a special touch of romance to the wedding day. And with churches, reception venues and botanical gardens outlawing conventional paper-based confetti, Simply Rose Petals has staked its claim in a niche market for a biodegradable product that does not stain bridal gowns.

Team players

Things have moved quickly for the mother-and-daughter team since they decided on the business venture while they were, curiously, taking part in a local tennis competition. The stakes in their current game are much higher.

Benjamin admits her mother, who grew roses for a major florist for more than 20 years, had doubts about the merit of a rural business in times of spreading drought and also wondered if she should let her daughter go it alone.

The combination, though, of Benjamin's management skills and Slater's horticultural talent has made for a formidable team. Not that they have always agreed on strategy.

Benjamin's first big business decision had to do with pricing. Her mother had originally sold dried rose petals in 1 kilogram bags to Melbourne wholesalers at a low cost, but it became clear that the business model was not profitable.

"Mum was refusing to let me put up the prices and saying people will not buy them, and I refused to go to market," Benjamin says. "I think it takes away the quality idea of our product."

They struck a deal. Benjamin would create a website enabling brides to purchase rose petals directly from the business at a higher price. If they did not sell, so be it. However, if they were snapped up it was agreed that Benjamin would assume more control of pricing matters.

"The petals began selling immediately," Benjamin says. "The price didn't even register and brides were happy to buy directly from us."

It was an important lesson: business is not a charity. Instead of selling 1 kilogram of dried rose petals for about \$25 wholesale, Simply Rose Petals began charging \$15 for 100 grams of pink petals in the retail market. It was a bold step, and one that has transformed the bottom line of the farming operation.

Prices aside, innovation and attention to detail have been responsible for the business' rapid rise. The dried petal technique it has developed has been a boon on two fronts.

First, it has created a viable sales line for a business that once struggled to compete against cheaper imported roses. Second, the dried product is suitable for long-distance freight—a factor that should help planned export sales.

Benjamin and her mother have also swapped the old packaging—they describe their first attempt as "dreadful"—for a slick, new look that has made for more attractive products and less labour-intensive packaging. The change is symbolic of a more disciplined approach to business. Benjamin says: "I don't want people buying anything with our name on it that just looks appalling."

Success and setbacks

All the indications are that Simply Rose Petals will continue to flourish. It has become an accredited Australian Bridal Service business, raising its profile and building a further layer of trust with customers.

It has won the Best Site Award at the I-Do I-Do Creations Bridal Expo, and recognition as a finalist in the 2005 Swan Hill Region Business Excellence Awards soon followed.

Yet Benjamin and Slater have had their detractors. Some have questioned the viability of the market, while negative comments from a wedding photographer-cum-friend hit Benjamin hard. After being shown a sample of Simply Rose Petals' products, the photographer snapped: "What, I wouldn't buy them! Why would I spend money on this when I can grow it in my own garden?" Benjamin admits: "I walked away and I was really quite devastated."



In the pink

On another occasion, while applying for a business scholarship, the selectors were blatantly derogatory about her business' potential, regarding rose-growing as a hobby rather than a valid sales vehicle.

"I walked out of the interview ... I probably looked very cool and calm in the interview but afterwards I was bawling my eyes out," Benjamin says. "I've never felt so humiliated in my life."

Gender has also been an issue. Despite prospering for the last year, the women feel they are often not taken seriously.

"It has been difficult being two women starting an innovative business in the male-dominated world of agriculture and particularly in rural Victoria where non-traditional farming is encouraged but looked upon apprehensively."

Benjamin has used such setbacks as a motivator: "And I guess that I was just convinced that it was something that people needed, so I just kept going."

Living and working in a rural area has pros and cons. Qualified advisors and computer technicians are in short supply, but this is offset by a steady stream of supportive country friends and associates.

"I've got a great network of friends who are business owners who I can call up at any time of the day for absolutely nothing, and they'll give me advice," Benjamin says. "I mean, I've developed strong relationships just getting to know them in business as well, and they've actually become friendships."

Benjamin suggests that all business owners choose their advisors carefully. At one stage she approached a business coach but abandoned the idea when "it turned out that they'd never run a business themselves".

She also advises choosing target markets carefully. Simply Rose Petals initially homed in on a rural demographic that simply was not prepared to pay for such a premium product. The market is now clearly defined: mature brides aged 25 to 35 "who have a little bit of extra money for the luxury of it".

Go with the cashflow

As Simply Rose Petals expands into new markets, Benjamin admits it could struggle to meet demand for rose petals if it receives a sudden flood of orders.

“We couldn’t manage it, no,” she admits, noting that rose bushes can take up to three years to produce at full capacity.

Such demand and supply issues collide with cashflow management, a perennial concern for most business owners. Benjamin says there is an expectation among many businesses that growth will inevitably lead to greater financial resources.

“You have to put more money into new resources to enable growth and so money actually seems to be getting tighter, even though it should be getting more readily available.”

Staffing—or a lack of it—is also an issue as the business grows. With up to 20 orders a day being processed, Benjamin says a new horticultural apprentice is required but that, ironically, she has been too busy working to properly look for help. At the moment the family work team includes grandmother Fay Arthur and stepfather Brian Slater.

“My grandmother, who is 80, comes over about three days a week in the summer and picks for us as well, and she’s incredible. She’s a very hard worker and she does twice as much probably as the others would, but it’s not the right thing to be doing.”

It is a common lament in small businesses—there is no time to examine big-picture issues when the day-to-day minutiae have to be completed first.

“There is no opportunity to work on the business at all,” she says. “You’re still working on just getting the orders out. And I really want to get away from that.”

The power of networking

Perhaps the key to Simply Rose Petals’ success, great products aside, is Benjamin’s willingness to get out and sell the business.

She advises other business owners to attend every business seminar possible. The payoff is worth it, she says.

“Sometimes you’re tired and can’t be bothered ... and I’ve arrived and my attitude is ‘I don’t want to talk to anyone tonight and this is a nightmare.’ But the business that I’ve got from just talking to people is well and truly worth it. And I actually love networking.”

Recognition is growing for her personally, too, with Benjamin being one of 32 people chosen from across Australia to attend the Australian Government’s Young Rural Leaders Course in Canberra. The event promotes leadership skills and the opportunity to develop the skills needed to be an industry leader.

Benjamin will attend the Australian Institute of Company Directors’ course after being chosen as one of 14 Australian recipients for the Australian Government’s Corporate Governance Scholarship. The course will help boost her corporate governance, financial and legal skills so that Simply Rose Petals can make a smooth transition through its next growth phase. And Benjamin has been awarded the prestigious Peter Mitchell Churchill Fellowship for agriculture. The itinerary includes field trips to the US, Britain, Israel, China, the Netherlands and New Zealand.

With such activities eating into her already limited free time, Benjamin is determined to maintain a good work-life balance, including time for hobbies such as kayaking and tennis. For her, sport keeps her mentally and physically fresh.

“In a small business it’s easy to not have the time for other pursuits but I find I am twice as productive and motivated when I exercise during the day. I mean, if I didn’t go and do that sport then I wouldn’t be very proactive in the business.”

Great flowers and a great business mindset: it’s a perfect match.

Find the right business partner, do your
market research and never, ever be afraid
to learn new tricks

ANGELIKA PYKA

Fish and Ginseng Farmer



Photograph courtesy of Garry Conroy-Cooper

relentless



Going with the flow

An unusual combination of business interests spanning fish farming, ecotourism and ginseng growing has reeled in Angelika Pyka

When Angelika Pyka and her family packed their bags and left Germany for Australia in 1987, they just wanted to find a safe place with fresh air for their children.

The Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident in Ukraine the year before had sent shivers down the spine of many Europeans, and the Pykas wanted out.

Now, as Pyka sits among woodland areas and wetland grasses with husband Ziggy on their property in the north Tasmanian wilderness at Deloraine, in the idyllic Meander Valley, she knows they made the right choice. The Pykas' sometimes rambling journey, however, underscores the value of persistence.

Just over a decade ago, Pyka and her husband decided they wanted to be ginseng growers. The dream is now starting to play out, but they had to become fish farmers first.

The family had been running a welding business, but closed the doors in 1995.

"My husband had enough of welding work and wanted to grow ginseng, but to make money with that takes a very long time," Pyka says. "So we bought the land for growing ginseng and it had a river, and we thought we could do aquaculture in the meantime to grow fingerlings for the big ocean farms."

By 1998, they had started building the fish farm, carrying hundreds of tonnes of concrete bucket by bucket to build 10 fish-holding tanks. The result, 41 Degrees South Aquaculture, is now renowned for its wonderful salmon and cutting-edge smoking plant. The property also offers an outlet for self-guided eco-walks on a farm that promotes ecologically sustainable aquaculture. The Pykas have plenty of clean air—and they want to keep it that way.

Never a spare moment

The Pykas' operation is a tribute to flexibility. It is a thriving fish farm. It is a processing plant that smokes fish for commercial markets. It is a tourism concern. And, for good measure, it is now a ginseng plantation.

With so many arms to the business, the workload is immense. Four people, including the owners, run what has become a demanding operation.

With their children now grown up, family demands are easing, but the business is still time consuming. Pyka says: "At times is difficult to juggle everything and there are times there is no food in the fridge except fish, butter and yogurt ... How have I managed? I guess I just manage. Good days, bad days—I take them as I can."

Pyka says the success of 41 Degrees South Aquaculture is built on good business sense, a strong working partnership, hard work and a willingness to seek and consider advice from all possible sources.

Angelika and Ziggy's skill-sets are complementary: she concentrates on the marketing, design and product development side of the business, and he uses his skills as a former electrician to get his hands dirty and handle construction and maintenance work.

"I would love to do only the product development and packaging design, and I don't mind a bit of office work or marketing for tourism," Pyka says. "I would do that again anytime. The rest can be a drag."

The challenges for 41 Degrees South Aquaculture have been significant. Pyka reels off some of them:

- red tape of dealing with councils and fishery departments over land and water issues;
- getting property development plans approved;
- managing the vast infrastructure of the property;
- natural disasters such as floods that have wiped out fish stocks;
- language difficulties with their Korean partner in setting up a new ginseng venture; and
- dealing with people from all walks of life who require a different tourism experience.

Floods have been a particular scourge. In September 2005, severe flooding hit northern Tasmania and the Pykas watched the river rising through the day as it threatened to engulf the farm.

"We thought if it doesn't go higher overnight we should be okay. But all hell broke loose overnight. You have to imagine we live in the bush, no lights whatsoever"

When the sun rose the next morning, the picture was devastating. The wetlands were one huge lake, and the fish tanks had been destroyed. About 10,000 fish were lost; the stocks for the whole summer.

After taking a few hours out to count their losses, the Pykas started organising excavators to begin the repair job the next day.

"We asked for help because other people got help, but if you wait for help you wait forever, so we repaired it all ourselves, which cost us a lot of money," Pyka says.



Going with the flow

Like many small and medium entrepreneurs, they have poured their cash reserves into the business. Gradually, though, they have overcome the barriers.

On-the-job training

Angelika Pyka's success is all the more remarkable given what she could not do when she arrived in Australia. No English. No computer skills. No bookkeeping, banking and payroll knowledge. She has learnt it all on the job.

That acts as a big tip for others: "I learned that I have to learn ... as much as I can."

Pyka advises prospective entrepreneurs to do their research before jumping headlong into business. And they should trust their instincts—if you want a service or product, there is a fair chance that someone else will also need it.

At the end of the day, though, she says the buck stops with you. There is nobody else to blame for failure.

To survive, 41 Degrees South Aquaculture has been innovative. In 2001, the Pykas specialised in the production of plate-size Atlantic salmon for the restaurant and delicatessen markets. The hot-smoked baby salmon differentiates itself from the usual fare of large salmon on the market. And the smoking process, drawing on an old European recipe with sugar, salt, herbs and spices giving it a unique flavour, has been a hit.

A commitment to sustainability also sets the Pykas apart from many other fish farms around the country.

Pyka says: "We are the first fish farm in Australia that uses a wetland as a filtration system for their fish waste. It's been done in Europe but not on this scale in Australia."

While the fish farm dominates the business, the Pykas' ginseng dream lives on. They started a modest ginseng farm in nearby Westbury in 1995 but upped the ante a couple of years ago and moved all the plants to 41 Degrees South Aquaculture. A deal with a South Korean company promises to turn the production of the root—which is touted as a cure for ailments such as low virility, insomnia and fatigue—into an export business.

A realistic approach

Angelika Pyka has three key suggestions for others considering a life as a small business owner.

First, find the right partner: “It’s important to share good and bad things and to keep (yourselves) grounded. When people start a business they are usually over-excited, which doesn’t sometimes give you the right view or start, and things can go wrong.”

Second, do your homework on the market: “Ask a lot of questions to anyone, not just people in the industry.”

Third, keep learning and always try to do things yourself rather than just immediately outsourcing it: “I learned from my husband that you can do everything ... There is no, ‘I can’t do this’ in his vocabulary.”

Adversity has steeled the Pykas for their business journey. They have learned from their setbacks and made changes when required.

“It’s a hard way to learn but sometimes necessary,” Pyka says. “Someone once told me, ‘Out of every adversity is a better or greater opportunity’. When I face a big problem I always remember that and know all is good.”

“Not that it has all been a chore. The rewards have been high, too” Pyka says. “Nine out of 10 visitors to 41 Degrees South Aquaculture are “very impressed” with the work they have done on the farm in such a short time—and it’s rewarding that people like what we do and tell us.”

The design work she has done on the shop also earns praise. And there is the small matter that after they lock the gates at 5pm the farm is all theirs—36 acres of river, wetlands, waterfalls and nature.

More to do

Although the business has come a long way in less than a decade, Pyka realises there is much to be done. The prospect is intimidating.

“We are still in development and have big new plans and it all feels very daunting. I think I do so much already and don’t know with the new challenges ahead how to work it all out and juggle everything.”

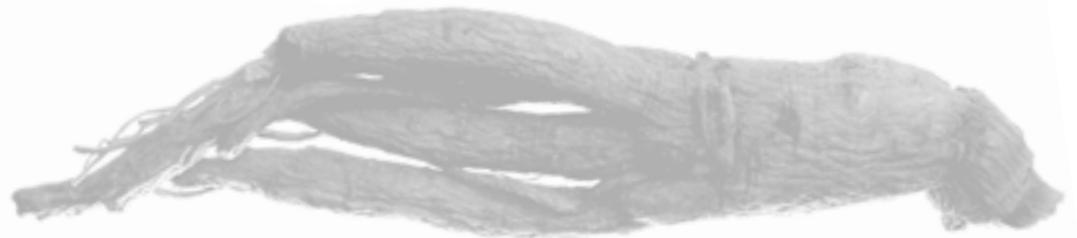
She adds that limiting the business’ growth may be the hardest—and most important—thing to do.

“I never wanted to become ‘big’. That is the challenge—to stay small and make a good quality product and a reasonable living. We are still very fresh in the business and if the opportunity (arose and we were) young enough we would do it again—maybe a bit slower than we did.”

There are few regrets, though, and Pyka says it is pointless to look back with hindsight.

“To do things differently always depends on the financial situation (at the time), on what you can afford to make it easier for yourself,” she says. “You have to make the best out of the situation you are in. I don’t think I wouldn’t have done anything differently, (although I) probably wouldn’t have started in the first place if I had known how much work it all would be.”

Pressed for other changes she might have made, Pyka jokes: “The easy answer is—get another husband with fewer ideas.”



Appendix

FURTHER INFORMATION

www.business.gov.au

Offers you simple and convenient access to all the government information, transactions and services you need. It's a whole-of-government service providing essential information on planning, starting and running your business.

www.business.gov.au/checklist

Will help you find the right information quickly and easily when starting a business. This checklist includes many of the basic issues you need to know about when you're new to business and helps you find the information you need in the one place.

www.ofw.facsia.gov.au

The Australian Government Office for Women offers general information to connect you with other initiatives for women.

Specific Australian Government information is also available on:

Programs and services for small business AusIndustry 13 28 46	www.ausindustry.gov.au
Taxation Australian Taxation Office Small Business enquiries 13 28 66	www.ato.gov.au
Employment Australian Workplace	www.workplace.gov.au
Wages and Conditions	www.wagenet.gov.au
WorkChoices	www.workchoices.gov.au
Office of the Employment Advocate	www.oea.gov.au
Women's Employment Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace 02 9448 8500	www.eowa.gov.au
Fair Trading Small business help line 1300 302 021 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC)	www.accc.gov.au
Grants Assistance GrantsLINK	www.grantslink.gov.au

Women's Business Groups:

Koorie Women Mean Business	www.kwmb.org.au
-----------------------------------	--

Business and Professional Women	www.bpw.com.au
--	--

International Women's Federation of Commerce and Industry Limited	www.iwfc.org
--	--

Women's Business Centre Australia	www.wbca.com.au
--	--

Australian Businesswomen's Network	www.abn.org.au
---	--

Women's Network Australia	www.womensnetwork.com.au
----------------------------------	--

Specific Australian Government information is also available on:

Export Assistance

Austrade | 13 28 78

www.austrade.gov.au

Trade Marks and Patents

IP Australia | 1300 651 010

www.ipaustralia.gov.au

Regional programs and services

Commonwealth Regional Information Service (CRIS)
for regional and rural | 1800 026 222

www.regionalaustralia.gov.au

Australian Business Number Registration

Australian Business Register (ABR)

www.abr.gov.au

Corporations law compliance

Australian Securities and Investments Commission

www.asic.gov.au

Business Licensing Information Service (BLIS)

Business Licence Information

www.bli.net.au

Superannuation

Super Choice

www.superchoice.gov.au

Participant Contact Details:

Sarah Benjamin	Simply Rose Petals	1300 785 101	www.SimplyRosePetals.com
Sonja Bernhardt	ThoughtWare	1300 659 506	www.thoughtware.com.au
Melissa Boot	Kimberley Boab Kreations	08 9168 1816	www.boabkreation.com
Juliet Bourke	Aequus Partners	02 9810 7176	www.aequus.com.au
Sam Denmead	Island Cycle Tours	1300 880 334	www.islandcycletours.com
Lesley Garner	Gulf Mini Mart	08 8975 8790	crackersnco@bigpond.com
Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow	Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow	08 8932 8306	www.denisegoodfellow.com
Kate James	Total Balance Group	03 9505 0424	www.totalbalance.com.au
Lorraine Mance	Westhaven Dairy	03 6343 1559	www.westhavendairy.com.au
Abbie Martin	Lifestyle Elements	08 8234 8657	www.lifestyleelements.com.au
Lisa Messenger	Messenger Marketing	02 9699 7216	www.messengermarketing.com.au

Jodie Morrison	Steppin' Out	02 9568 6787	www.steppinoutshoes.com.au
Monica Morse	Belinda's Business Centre	02 6331 8766	monica@belindas.com.au
Elise Pascoe	Elise Pascoe International Cooking School	02 4236 1666	www.cookingschool.com.au
Angelika Pyka	41 Degrees South Aquaculture	03 6362 4130	www.41south-aquaculture.com
Samantha Simpson-Morgan	Rarified	02 6257 4270	www.rarified.com.au
Patricia Williams	Williams Advertising Management Services	Withheld	Withheld
Melinda Young	Mortgage Simplicity	03 9832 0802	www.mortgagesimplicity.com.au



18 INSPIRING TALES OF SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS

For other women's publications go to www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/publications/
For other business information go to www.business.gov.au