SUCCESS IN THE CITY

DUBAI'S ENTREPRENEURS TELL THEIR STORY.

Kelly Lundberg



Supported by

Lloyds TSB


LOVE


Magrudys
STAND UP FOR A GREEN EARTH
propertyfinder.ae

Why would a Personal Stylist be writing a book on entrepreneurism?

"During the course of developing my business in Dubai, I was constantly amazed at the wealth of fascinating entrepreneurs I came across. This book reflects their zeal that has been my constant inspiration"

Ebullient, determined and resoundingly Scottish, Kelly Lundberg launched Divine, Dubai's premier personal shopping and style service offering a luxurious and tailored 7* shopping experience, in 2005.

This award-winning stylist has worked with numerous independent clients and projects. Her recent red carpet styling events include the Grammies, the Brit Awards, Dubai World Cup, as well as offering bespoke styling services to the regions elite.

Kelly's company Divine has been featured in major media, including exposure on the Discovery Channel, The Sunday Times, Virgin and BA's onboard magazines, GQ and Tatler.

In 2007, Divine won the Lloyds TSB Small Business Awards – Creative Promotion, and in 2008 she was nominated for Female Entrepreneur of the Year by Visa and 'Your Business' magazine.

This is the first book in a global series that Kelly plans to publish across emerging cities worldwide.

Have you ever dreamed of owning your own business?

SUCCESS IN THE CITY is a collection of 20 testimonials recounting the highs and lows of setting up and running a business in the most talked about city in the Middle East – Dubai.

- Have you ever wondered what it takes to turn a seed of an 'idea' into a sustainable business?
- When do you know you have actually made it?
- What is the thought process behind choosing a brand name and marketing your idea?
- Where does the entrepreneurial passion stem from?
- How has the economic down turn affected other entrepreneurs?

Turn dreams into reality, with inspirational quotes, hints and tips from some of the cities' thriving business owners – go on be inspired it is time to be Divine!

SUCCESS IN THE CITY

DUBAI'S ENTREPRENEURS TELL THEIR STORY.

Kelly Lundberg

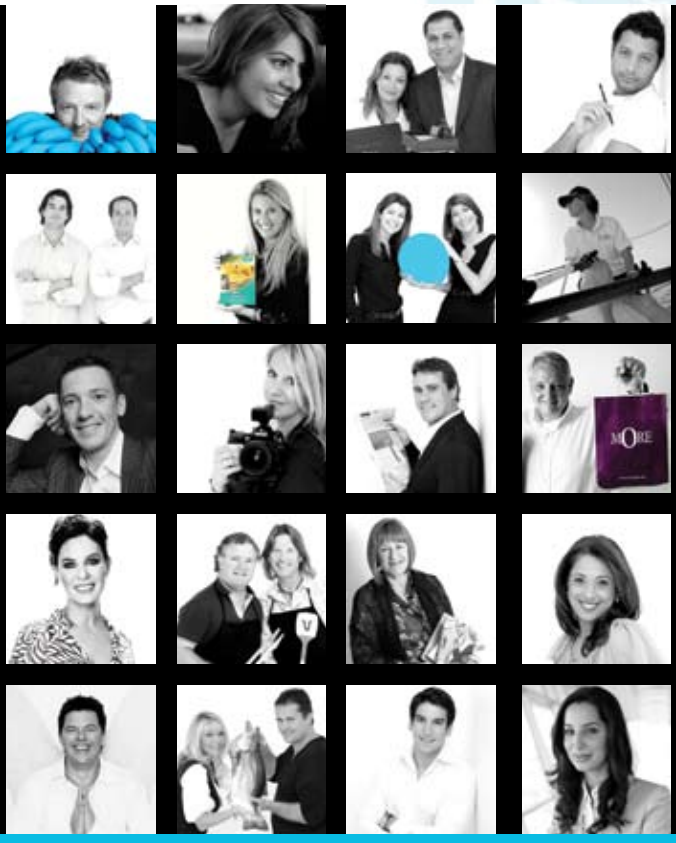
SUCCESS IN THE CITY

DUBAI'S ENTREPRENEURS TELL THEIR STORY.

SUCCESS IN THE CITY

DUBAI'S ENTREPRENEURS TELL THEIR STORY.





www.successinthecitydubai.com

Foreword 1
Acknowledgements & Introduction 3
Blue Banana 7
Choco'a 17
Complete 27
d'events - d'pr 37
Dubizzle 49
Expression 61
Foresight Charity 73
Frankies 83
Hotshots 95
Magrudy's 107
More Café 117
Outdoor Concepts 129
Property Finder 141
SensAsia Urban Spa 153
The Entertainer 165
THE One 175
Wet Fish 187
Zain Mustafa 199
Zaya 209
Zufi Alexander 219



Kelly Lundberg, winner of the 7 Days Creative Promotion Award, with the other category winners at the Lloyds TSB Small Business Awards in 2007.

At Lloyds TSB, we have a long and proud history of supporting small and medium sized businesses, helping turn their dreams into profitable reality. It's a role we play here in the Middle East each and every working day.

Foreword

SMEs – or Small and Medium Sized Enterprises - are vital cogs in the evolving economy of the UAE. They're nimble, creative and highly entrepreneurial, and, together, they encapsulate the spirit of Dubai: dynamic, open, and ready to do business.

In the pages that follow, you'll find inspirational profiles of the kinds of businesses, often begun from scratch, that represent the future of commercial opportunity in the Gulf.

At Lloyds TSB, we have a long and proud history of supporting small and medium sized businesses, helping turn their dreams into profitable reality. It's a role we play here in the Middle East each and every working day.

Since 2006 we have championed SMEs from across the UAE in the Lloyds TSB Small Business Awards. It's an initiative created to recognise and reward the imagination, passion and success of the Emirates' best small companies. In the years since then, it's been rewarding to see so many past winners continue to thrive.

Kelly Lundberg, creator and founder of Divine, is a truly distinctive past winner. Back in 2007, her entrepreneurial flair, talent and sheer drive to succeed marked her out as a special talent. She scooped our Creative Promotion Award, one of six prizes at that year's ceremony, designed to identify the businesses that had created real buzz, inspired by innovative marketing.

In an aggressive and demanding market like the UAE, creating differentiation and stand-out from the competition is key to driving and sustaining success. Against this backdrop, Divine – and Kelly – truly impressed our judges.

Now she's peeled-back the commercial lid and asked some of her own favourite entrepreneurs just what it takes to succeed in Dubai. Is it luck, judgment, creative genius, sales expertise – or a hard-to-bottle combination of them all? Read on, discover for yourself, and you may be inspired to start a journey of your own.

Now, as Kelly enters the next phase of her business journey, we're proud to be with her every step of the way.

Richard Musty
Head of Consumer Banking
Lloyds TSB Middle East

Lloyds TSB

Acknowledgements

Business ideas, fundamentally, succeed on the foundations of supportive family and friends and this book project is no exception. Despite my family living over 3,000 miles away, my mum helped fuel my creative inspiration whilst my sister encouraged me to keep an eye on the details; proving that distance does not exclude staying connected anywhere around the world.

My Dubai family have been fantastic sounding blocks and all input received has been immensely appreciated. Friendships have been made and cemented; with the encouragement from my 'VC girlfriends' **Sarah** and **Yvonne** at our monthly 'meetings' which have been unstinting. Sarah B. who was with me on a business trip in Kuwait, when I first told about foray into writing, and **David** who has supported me in so many ways unfaltering and endlessly, I know that I would not be where I am today if it wasn't for you all.

Thank you.

Ed and **Kirsty** from Lloyds TSB, your enthusiasm and encouragement have given me and Divine boundless confidence. There is no price one can put on that level of unstinting support.

This book would not be complete without the expert help and dedication of my editor **Lisa** and the creative direction of **Ravi**, who has interpreted, at times, my very sketchy ideas into this fabulous production. I sincerely thank both of you for taking this 'labour of love' to the next level. Hopefully, this book will inspire others to follow their dreams too.

Finally, there have been many people whose opinion I have sought-thank you for listening and for your thoughts. Those of you will know who you are and will see your amendments incorporated in this publication, I do hope you approve. ☺

Introduction

Had anyone told me that by the age of 28, I would own a successful business, have established Middle East's first online wedding registry, been a Lloyds TSB Small Business winner, be nominated female entrepreneur of the year, be voted as one of the 'top ten things to do in Dubai' and published my first book, I would have asked who they were referring to because I'd love to meet them.

THE DIVINE IDEA

It all began on October 9, 2005 when I finally made the move from Emirates Airline to start my own business, Divine. Excited about what the future would hold, I was naive about what I was about to embark upon. It would take over six weeks for the phone to ring, bringing my first paying client, and has in turn led to the point of writing my first book, sharing the stories of inspirational people I have met. It's surprising how a Personal Stylist has collaborated with people from so many walks of life. Differences aside, everyone I have been fortunate to meet has a divine story to tell. Are you ready to embark the rollercoaster of owning your own business? If you are, then I suggest you consider the following:

HAVE PASSION AND SELF BELIEF

I love the line 'anything is possible', it's true and I have put this to the test again and again. Great examples of successful entrepreneurs are found everywhere; Richard Branson, Mark Zuckerberg and Elie Saab to name but a few have proved that you don't need to be university educated, have millions in the bank or a have 40-page business plan. No doubt it helps, but with passion, determination and the support of those near and dear, you can succeed.

LET PEOPLE INSPIRE YOU

My business idea was in its infancy when a chance encounter with a friend gave me the courage to ask him what he thought about the viability of me

establishing a personal shopping service in Dubai. Sitting in Left Bank at Souk Madinat Jumeriah, on the back of a napkin I scoped out a plan. He had also set up a business in steel from scratch. Although it had nothing to do with what I had in mind, and financially not even on the same scale, he now owns a multi-million dollar company. His words of encouragement were inspirational, giving me the confidence to pursue my idea.

HAVE ENOUGH CONVICTION TO BELIEVE THAT THE MONEY WILL FIND YOU

(just get a good accountant to balance it)

Most of the contributors in this book have self funded their business, or found a creative way in which to set up. My personal favourite has to be Thomas from 'THE One', who has over ten banks' and personal investors' rejection letters framed and hung on the wall for all staff to read. I too started my business without thinking too much about funds and even paid my trade licence deposit on my credit card before my funds came through (although I would not advocate this as a positive business tip). I managed to secure a personal loan from a bank (that shall remain nameless) by telling them I would like to purchase a car. The bank manager was interested to know what kind of car I would be buying. Slightly thrown off by the question, as I had no idea how much cars cost, the most expensive one that sprung to mind immediately was a Porsche. Those really were the heady days, so he smiled and told me I had excellent taste; the funds were in my account less than two weeks later.

LOOK AT EVERY ENCOUNTER YOU HAVE WITH SOMEONE AS AN OPPORTUNITY

You have to constantly keep looking at fresh ideas for your business; those are the ones that can often turn out to be better than original ones. 'Outdoor Concepts' is confirmation of this when you see how natural an extension such as 'Caveman' is to their portfolio of products. 'Property Finder' started as a magazine that evolved into a lucrative online portal. Whilst I never imagined my self writing a book, let alone planning a series of sequels, it could prove to be more financially rewarding than my

personal shopping service. Who knows… You never know till you try. Personal styling, however, remains my passion and I have immense job satisfaction seeing the visible difference in presentation and personal confidence of my clients. It's a blissful feeling when you see the odd client discard their multi-coloured Crocs and realise there is life after diabolical footwear.

ENJOY YOUR SUCCESS SO FAR AND LOOK FORWARD TO WHAT'S NEXT

Many entrepreneurs are guilty of this, I am no exception. Owning a business is an amazing rollercoaster ride, and to be treated as one of life's fairground adventures. You become so focused in your product, service and delivery, to planning the next stage or defining your brand that there are times you never fully enjoy the moment until it passes by. Learn from other people and enjoy every milestone you encounter. Surround yourself with positive, energetic, like-minded people who, like you, have had ideas but have taken it to the next level. Inspiration comes in many forms, keep your eyes open for every new opportunity.

Throughout each chapter I have tried to establish at what point 'an idea' becomes reality. A chance meeting or blue sky moment? When you secure the finance? When you find a suitable location? You can make up your mind. Much has been written on the subject of entrepreneurship and whilst there are common themes to be found in every chapter, my simple theory is that typical moulds do not exist. Many thought an 'ex air hostess' at 24 years old would not have what it takes to be successful; so never underestimate the *divineness* you have in you, even if others may do at times.

Enjoy!



Kelly Lundberg

P. S. I still don't own a Porsche!

A6-VA

bluebanana.com



Simon Ford
32
British

When I was little I wanted to be a... F1 driver.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was...
frustrated and angry with my current employer.

To me, the word successful means... achieving what you set out to achieve.

My friends describe me as... very optimistic, if a little arrogant.

I am... abnormally optimistic and excited about the opportunities the current recession might bring.

The best piece of advice ever given to me was…
Optimists are usually wrong, pessimists are usually right, but change and innovation comes about from optimists.

"The idea came to me whilst walking around the department store looking for new and creative ways to boost our sales revenue."

Simon Ford arrived in Dubai in November 2003; he transferred from the UK to work as an Area Manager for a well known retailer. At that time, he had 15 years of experience in the hospitality and retail industries. You could say that Simon had a colourful career path ranging from being a Head Chef with a seafood restaurant in Missouri, to a being a member of motor racing team regularly getting his hands grubby working in the pits.

Simon's original career plan was to go to university and study mechanical engineering. However, halfway through his first year of studies, he decided that the idea of being a rock star was far more appealing and blew his entire student loan on a fender guitar and all the paraphernalia that went with it. Simon discovered in his second year at university that the grants authority had refused to fund any further studies unless he sat the prescribed exam. With no other course of action available to him, and his budding career as a rock musician not exactly bearing fruit, he complied. "I entered the exam hall and sat down, wrote my name at the top of the exam sheet, waited five minutes and walked right back out." He immediately changed track signing up for a Business Management degree at Birmingham University and fortunately for him further grants funding.

Simon realised fairly early that his new position as Area Manager in Dubai was not going to be a lifelong one. He had his eye on grander things to happen to his career, all of which he knew could happen in an emerging city full of opportunities. ***"I was frustrated with the bureaucracy in large organisations. A simple transaction to just get a biro pen from stores took up to 17 signatures to secure. I wanted to be able to make my own decisions that would shape my future."*** The inspiration for Simon's personal business venture manifested when he and a visiting colleague were exploring ways in which to increase company revenue. A product was being successfully marketed in the UK, whereby opportunities to purchase gift experiences were offered through a company called Red Letter Days. It gave Simon some serious food for thought and the research began in earnest as to what similar concepts were on offer in Dubai. It did not take him long to realise that there was nothing that could compete in this market. There were individuals and corporate clients interested in the concept of gift packaging experiences, one that would fit well within a Dubai lifestyle.

With two ways in which to set up a business in Dubai, either own your trade licence solely or seek sponsorship with a local Emirati, in 2004, Simon was ready to present his proposal to launch an independent company offering gift experiences within the company he was working. The aim was for those packages to be offered through a concession within the department store he was working for. "***The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to do it by myself. I had identified that it had a relatively low start up cost and it had huge potential for growth."*** Therefore, he made a momentous decision to take the project on alone, without the support of a large organisation behind him. Whilst his enthusiasm was boundless, the change of plan was met with less than eager enthusiasm by others. Simon was no longer a single man on his own making decisions for himself; he had within a short time met and married Mandy, just eighteen months after moving to Dubai, with their first baby on the way. "***Many people thought I was crazy to leave a stable job and set up on my own, it was now or never."***

Coming to fruition

It took 12 months of research to formulate a succinct business plan. Taking stock of what he wanted to deliver, Simon never travelled anywhere without his notebook. It was a journey of discovery and soul searching for the right products to position in the right market. In February 2005, Simon took a hard-earned break with Mandy - as ever accompanied by his notebook.

"We took a week's honeymoon in Oman and went off-roading, then spent the second week back in Dubai finalising my business plan."

He hit his first snag very early on with an unexpected six month waiting list to obtain office space in Dubai Media City Free Zone. Never one to be daunted, Simon used his charm to persuade the free zone authorities to speed up the application. By May 2005 his efforts were rewarded and the licence was granted.

Simon left his current employment in April 2005 two weeks after his daughter Myah was born. With launch day planned for 1 September 2005, the initial investment of AED 80,000 personal savings had been committed to the start up venture. ***"My attitude was – what's the worse that can happen?"*** Whilst the worse did not actually happen, ***"the first three months were tougher than I expected with scarce liquidity."*** The concept firmly established but yet to

bear fruit, both he and Mandy were constantly brainstorming and noting down names to brand his new and fledgling company. Everything they came up with seemed clichéd and came nowhere near the mark in terms of innovative. Initial options like 'Dubai Experiences' were just plain bland, Simon recalls. One day, at her wit's end, Mandy suggested: "***Why not use a name that doesn't pigeon hole you to offer one specific product – what about Blue Banana?"*** And there it was. The name stuck, after all who ever heard of blue bananas?

Within weeks of launching, Simon noticed potential concepts that had not been incorporated in his original business plan. ***"I wanted Blue Banana's company image to be energetic and innovative."*** Offering unique gift experiences for birthdays and anniversaries which catered for a wide audience, they found they were approached not only by individuals looking to send a gift to their granny, but also by a growing corporate market with requests that were outside their initial scope.

"Here we were, this new company offering loads of cool activities and clients were asking us to tailor make gift packages for them, we even had an approach for an employee rewards programme."

One of the first customers that bought a gift experience purchased a four-hour charter on the Andorra Yacht worth AED 1,500.

Blue Banana started as a oneman band 'just Simon'. Within just eight weeks however, his manpower needs increased with more of a personal touch needed. He hired his first employee, a customer service assistant responsible for phone calls, uploading images and dealing with general enquires. Simon has since moved offices and now employs a team of 15, all with their own unique titles. ***"I am the ideas man, our accountant is known as 'human abacus', our project manager is our 'action woman', and we actually find it's an excellent way to break the ice."***

Clear blue vision

"I think I was a little naive to think that people would buy lots and lots straight away, it took its time for the concept to really take off." Simon's company and personal bank account had dipped to AED 1,800 in just three months following the launch; clients were buying but not enough. If Blue Banana was to survive he knew he had to take an even larger risk if he was going to make it through the Christmas period. Embarking on an advertising campaign worth AED 40,000, and knowing the invoice payment date would be 30 days later, Blue Banana signed up for daily radio commercials during December. Thankfully this paid off, as was the invoice.

Having launched the company at what Simon describes as a "lucky time", Blue Banana boasted a unique offering, a price match policy; the USP was impeccable delivery of customer service which underpinned their initial success. Gift experiences were meticulously packaged and hand delivered if required. A formal booking system was managed by Blue Banana. Hotels had begun to see the potential and started using services to book for their guests.

Even today, Simon's enthusiasm for the services he offers never falters, and using his retailing background he has been quick to pinpoint retail outlets as ideal distributors through which to sell gift experiences. Bearing in mind his customers' demographics, Simon contacted the bookstore Magrudy's, to target those purchasing a gift. He then secured contracts with Go Sport, Al Boom and Rip Curl with the intention of attracting the active audience in the store buying sporting goods for themselves.

"Having a great relationship with our suppliers is an integral part of business, being able to brainstorm and devise marketing strategies together always has a more profitable outcome."

One of their most successful campaigns in the early days was a 'two for the price of one' hot air balloon experience: a trip to the desert in the early morning to watch the sunrise over the Hajjar Mountains, 3,000 ft in the air. Blue Banana swallowed up the operational cost of the experience by investing AED 50,000 into marketing the promotion, and their supplier absorbed the complimentary passengers. During the course of this offer, Blue Banana flew 800 passengers, which finally launched Blue Banana onto Dubai's leisure radar.

Being the best of the bunch

"To be seen as a fun brand, with creative new ideas, better brand exposure and for our staff to live the Blue Banana life, is what we are seeking for our 2009 plan."

Simon was finding that whilst they were great at telling clients to get out there and do something on the weekend, as individuals they were doing the opposite; their lives had become totally desk-bound. Therefore, at the start of 2009, each Blue Banana team member committed to their own personal life challenge to fulfil, activities to include climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, training to take part in the White Collar Boxing event and competing in the UAE Arab Emirates Desert Challenge in March 2009. Their activities will be blogged on bluebananalife.com and featured on You Tube. Whilst Simon feels that he may have bitten off more than he can chew by choosing to learn how to ride a bike off road in a cross country bike challenge – Ewan McGregor style - he successfully secured sponsorship through KTM. However, the challenge is proving to be far more gruelling than ever imagined.

Simon's marketing antics are unusual by general standards seen in Dubai. He has applied a tactic called 'guerrilla marketing' (not to be confused with warfare) which has proved to be successful. It is an unconventional system of promotions that relies on time, energy and imagination rather than a big marketing budget. Typically, guerrilla marketing tactics are unexpected and unconventional; consumers are targeted in unexpected places, which can make the idea that's being marketed memorable, generate buzz and even spread virally. For instance, Simon recalls that dressing up as a giant Blue Banana and walking around several events proved to be a real eye-opener. ***"It was really rewarding to hear people say 'oh I have heard of that company' or 'my husband would love that experience,' not knowing that the owner was actually underneath."*** However, on one occasion there was a downside. Mandy accompanied him to hand out promotional flyers and someone made amorous advances towards her. ***"I wanted to say 'leave my***



wife alone' but I knew that I could not break out and was left there to watch the scene unfolding in my big blue shoes and my wide Blue Banana grin."

Simon has little time to relax now with three children in the family. He does not even allow the time spent in traffic to go to waste as he catches up on business techniques whilst sitting in Dubai's traffic listening to audio CDs. "***I have found reading and listening to the right books relevant to the business has the most profound effect on me. I am working on developing the best team for 2009 and have found 'The Five Dysfunctions of a Team' by Patrick M. Lencioni to be hugely inspiring; his business model is incredibly useful."***

It comes as no surprise that the company's growth has increased 200 percent year on year. Trading for 2009 is already 23 percent up on last year. Did Simon ever imagine this scale of success for Blue Banana?

"In some ways, yes. As a successful entrepreneur, you have to aim big – that may sound a little arrogant. Dubai, though, is a great launching pad."

Simon believes that in Dubai there is much less persecution for failure than he has seen in the UK, and has adopted a more American approach to entrepreneurship. ***"Just think Walt Disney."*** He was a true hero, failing many times and ultimately encouraging entrepreneurs to actualise their potential.

Divine Next Steps

Simon has recently taken on a new business partner, Naz Mausa, previously a Business Development Director for lastminute.com who now has a 20 percent stake in Blue Banana. Having just purchased the bluebanana.com site for AED 100,000 they are working together to expand the fun, youthful and high-energy brand to other cities such as Hong Kong, Russia, South Africa, Brazil and India.

bluebanana.com

Have a lot of fun

Do business with people who enjoy doing business

Conduct all business with integrity

Aim ridiculously high and ignore all the doubters

Talk about and share new ideas with people, this will socially commit you to delivering on those ideas


ChoCo'a

ChoCo'a
CHOCOLATIER



Assem Hamzeh
41
Dina Hamezh
39
Lebanese

When I was little I wanted to be a... physicist and work for NASA (Dina) and I wanted to be a DJ (Assem).

My catchphrase or word is... 'haram' (roughly translated as poor soul), because I often feel bad for people (Dina).

The defining moment in my life was... the death of my father. He gave up a lot for us and never stopped believing in us (Assem).

The best piece of advice ever given to me... was if you're ashamed to say it, then don't do it (Dina).

I'd like to spend more time to... with my girlfriend ☺ (Assem).

"Inspiration can come from anywhere, for us it was the movie Chocolat."

Fifteen years ago, Assem Hamzeh knew nothing about chocolate manufacturing, production and distribution. Today, Assem and Dina, his wife of 11 years, own a multi million dirham business called Choco'a. This is a blossoming regional chocolatier based in Dubai, specialising in just about everything conceivably connected with chocolate; from the sourcing of beans, to the manufacturing and distribution. When it comes to the delicious decadence of chocolate, with over 65 varieties to succumb to, Choco'a tantalises the palate.

"I literally fell into the chocolate business." Initially working in Lebanon, Assem enjoyed a lucrative career in business marketing. At that time, his client was quick to recognise talent and identified that one of Assem's unique qualities was his strong work ethic and brand integrity. Once he offered him a position in his company, with his employer's mentoring and tutelage, Assem rapidly progressed to the role of Assistant Manager. Over the next ten years, Assem spent many hours watching and learning the successful production process to marketing new concepts. Witnessing both the achievements and mistakes was part of the daily management of what was, at that time, one of the best known chocolatiers based in the Middle East.

"I really liked creating new chocolate experiences and found production the most inspiring, but the owners, a husband and wife team, didn't share the same vision."

In 2003, Assem was asked by his then employer to consider a new venture, the chance to launch and operate a new production factory in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. This offer reflected a natural progression and outlet for Assem's talents. ***"I had managed the start-up and established 12 highly successful franchises on behalf of the company, both in the Middle East and the UK".*** The manufacturing plant was destined to be the largest factory that the company had ever owned. ***"For seven months I ran the entire operation; 125 employees and accounted for up to eight tonnes of chocolate production a day."***

In the meantime, the strain of coping with a ramified operation was taking





its toll. Assem was finding increasingly testing to balance his work and home life; he was still working full time in Saudi Arabia, while his wife Dina and their first child lived in the family home in Lebanon. Increasingly, Assem became less inspired by the daily grind of his work life, added to by the inability to influence a wider market with his own fresh ideas. ***"I had taken the company as far as I could, within that scope there was nothing fresh for me to achieve."*** The need for change was becoming more acute as he knew that this way of life was not sustainable; ***"With Dina expecting our second baby, in a flash of sudden awareness I decided enough was enough."*** Unsure about what he really wanted to do work wise, he simply resigned and took a two-month break to consider his future and that of his family.

Sweet beginnings

Once Assem had decided to go solo, there was no looking back, ***"Dina supported my decision wholeheartedly."*** Several weeks of brainstorming and thinking objectively about the skills he had acquired in his previous employment ensued. He needed to understand how he could capitalise on these, whilst still being able to embrace his passion for taste and creativity. It was during a rare quiet evening when he and Dina sat watching 'Chocolat', a movie set in France about a young woman and her daughter who ran a small shop manufacturing and selling chocolates with magical qualities that his inspiration took shape. Although it seemed like an idyllic and somewhat

farfetched idea for them to own their own chocolate boutique, Dina and Assem believed that this was where their niche lay. For Dina in particular, it was a far cry from her original career path studying Physics and Mathematics.

"I am from a very scientific family, mostly engineers, but I was supporting Assem, it was his dream - it wasn't about me."

Their decision on the choice of where to base this new venture was a simple one for him, ***"Although Dina was thinking more in terms of Lebanon, Dubai was booming. Arabs love to eat and buy chocolates, both for personal pleasure as well as business; the choice was a sound one."*** There was no doubt in Assem's mind that Dubai was the perfect base for the production and distribution. With the emirate in the initial phase of its development; opportunities were in abundance. However, it was going to require a huge amount of work, preparation and planning. ***"Anything is possible if you are willing to work hard."***

Comprehensive market research was vital, as there was much to consider even before they could think about the products they would manufacture. Maintaining a base in Lebanon, Assem travelled once a month to Dubai. ***"Over the next 12 months I knocked on as many doors as I could, so many that I lost count."*** Assem could have found it overwhelming, but he was able to draw on his past experiences, ***"Everything needed to be considered, starting from a detailed business plan, engaging lawyers, finding a suitable factory for production, machinery; not to mention skilled staff and retail space in which to sell our produce."***

Back in Lebanon, Assem and Dina would invite friends to their home for an evening pizza and ask them to sample chocolate recipes that they made in their kitchen. As important as the choices in their chocolates was what to call their company. The idea of Choco'a was born. A clever blend and unique combination of 'chocolate and cocoa', the corporate identity was determined by the true turquoise colour of a cocoa bean.

Establishing their brand was essential: ***"we knew that if we were going to do it right and not become swallowed up in Dubai's expanding market, we had to aim big and for that we needed significant investment."*** The business plan required borrowing $1,000,000 and machinery, with rent being the biggest outlay. To raise that sort of capital, Assem and Dina knew that they needed to



find an investor, fast, who would believe in them and their idea. Never giving up, the investment support they required came in the most unexpected form, that of a family friend.

"We recognise that we owe him enormous gratitude, he had immense trust in us and our ideas. He is an integral part of us and Choco'a - our dream."

With plans firmly in place and investment secured, Assem moved to Dubai in 2004. He had to leave Dina and his family behind until they could find a suitable home and schooling for their two children. ***"I was surprised that setting up the business was actually very stress-free. It took just three days to become official. Finding premises, however, proved to be less straightforward'."*** Having secured a small office on Sheikh Zayed Road, Assem set about cementing Choco'a's presence. Mohammed was the first employee he hired, who assumed the role of a driver and after five years today, he still works closely with Assem and Dina.

One of the pre-requisites for Choco'a's setup was the need for factory space, as well as retail space for their chocolate boutique. ***"I must have viewed over 200 spaces, nothing seemed right, but our agent Diana never gave***

up." Late one Thursday evening, Assem received a phone call from Diana about a potential suitable location. ***"It is in the desert, a little far out and little known at the moment but there is a new shopping mall in the final stages of completion on the doorstep - Mall of the Emirates."*** Without hesitation and just seconds after viewing, Assem knew that it was the perfect location for the chocolate boutique, ***"Making a decision without Dina was difficult but I knew I had her blessing. We shared the same vision and there is no way that you can describe the feeling, you just know when something feels right."*** Choco'a's boutique is now prominently situated in the middle of Al Barsha, which certainly could no longer be considered as 'in the desert'. It stands out as a vivid turquoise display to passers-by, which has proved bountiful since then.

Getting the 'right mix'

Dina and Assem share the same values, producing an affordable luxury product with attention to detail and variety. Assem is responsible for the business operations and is supported by a 52-strong team. He is proud that five years on, his first corporate client, RAK Bank, remains one of his key clients and year on year have a 100% increase. ***"We have never lost a client and always try to go out of our way to make them happy. We will make as many samples as it needs in order to make sure we get what the client wants."*** Dina runs the chocolatier boutique and her specialist team of nine handle the retail side of the business, organising chocolate arrangements and cakes for weddings (which in the Middle Eastern culture are notably vast), along with anniversaries, baby showers and of course, the divine ice cream. What makes Choco'a's stand out is in Dina's words; "***Strength in your business is all about finding a niche, it can be a service or product, ours has proved to be 3D birthday cakes"***. These cakes are unique sculptures of cartoon characters or even real life people which currently no one else offers.

"In the face of adversity you always have to be planning one step ahead, having crisis management in mind for every eventuality." With the business exceeding all expectations, in 2005, they were opening a brand new factory when there was a catastrophic power cut. ***"It couldn't have been a worse time for there to be no electricity."*** Faced with the possibility of losing all the stock they had purchased the sweltering summer sun, quick action had to be taken. ***"I made several frantic calls to Dubai Electricity and Water Association (DEWA). Remarkably, certainly by Dubai standards, within three hours they had sent an enormous back up generator to keep us in production until everything was back on track. I was astounded at the high quality of service provided."***

As with any small business, word of mouth proves to be the most effective marketing tool. ***"We invested massively in our grass roots sampling and we gave away copious amounts of chocolate in the early days."*** This hands-on

approach reaped rich rewards and, within three years, Choco'a was breaking even, even having sufficient capital to reinvest for further expansion.

Despite this, things have not always been easy "**We face challenges every day the increase in flour and eggs and covertures have had an enormous effect on our business, for example."** Assem and Dina are very proud of one further astonishing achievement; they have to date the highest retention of staff known for a company in Dubai. ***"Our staff is immensely loyal and has extremely strong work ethics and values, just like us, for this we are eternally grateful."***

Can a husband and wife team work together successfully? ***"This is our second attempt at working together, the first time was a disaster, but from that initial experience we have learnt a great deal."*** Choco'a is a partnership.

"We share the same beliefs and foresight; we have proved that we are resilient and adaptable."

Many a night when the children are in bed, Assem and Dina have been known to sit at home in their living room sending emails back and forth to each other. ***"We never really switch off in the pursuit of chocolate perfection."*** This time their partnership is well balanced and richly rewarding. They are content that they have achieved their dream as chocolate really is their passion.

Divine Next Steps

At present Choco'a produces 300 kg of chocolate a day. In 2013 this will increase to 2,000 kg with the opening of their new factory in Dubai Industrial City, which will cover 150,000 ft. Two new Choco'a boutiques would have opened in Azerbaijan by the end of 2009, with another in Germany to follow. They have found that despite the economic crisis, the demand for chocolate has increased. Could this be a stress relief?

Use your brain and not your heart

Nothing is impossible; there is always a solution for everything

Don't shout - listen to the whole story first

Delegate responsibilities sooner rather than later

One Minute Manager. Read it. It works

Believe in your staff; foster a happy atmosphere, appreciate them

chocoachocolate.com




Complete



Nicole Silvertand
38
Australian

My catchphrase/word is… "Plan your work, and work your plan."

If I was not an entrepreneur, I would… be lost. I consider myself extremely lucky in that I'm doing what I love.

I relax… rarely. Having your own business is a bit like having a child; you are never really off duty.

My least glamorous job was... working in a pizza restaurant. I earned the princely sum of three Australian dollars (about AED 8 an hour) and thought I was rich…

One thing that would surprise you about me… is that I can speak Cantonese.

The most unusual place I have ever been… is Toraja in the mountains of south Sulawesi in Indonesia. I was fortunate enough to be invited to the elaborate, traditional funeral of a tribal elder. It lasted several days and involved the public slaughter of and consumption of several bulls.

"I designed and sold my first leather product at six years old. Admittedly, it was a far cry from fashionable, but my Dad was immensely proud."

Nicole's father had spent more than 50 years crafting handmade shoes and handbags. He had a passion for leather in his blood, and Nicole was keen to follow in his footsteps. Like many other parents, however, he was determined that his daughter should pursue a university education, rather than follow him into the business – a sentiment Nicole respected. ***"He was proud of what I'd achieved before, but he would have loved to have seen my own leather company emerge and evolve."***

After graduating from Queensland University of Technology, Australia, in 1990 with a degree in Business and Journalism, Nicole worked for five years as a Hansard Reporter with the Australian Federal Parliament, recording and editing speeches made by politicians in the Senate and the House of Representatives. In 1994, she was offered a government contract working for the High Court of Hong Kong. ***"I'd already planned to work overseas, probably in London for a few years at some stage, so being offered such a prestigious position, in a country much closer to Australia that imposed only a negligible tax rate was like a dream come true."*** Nevertheless, Dubai had always fascinated her. So, when Nicole's Hong Kong government contract expired in mid-1998, she decided to try the Gulf. ***"It was the best decision of my life, and now, 11 years on, I can't imagine ever leaving."*** Nicole continued to focus on a career in journalism, balancing full-time work and part-time studies, leading to a second degree majoring in Sociology. ***"Juggling demanding full-time days working with part-time study was tough. I don't think I could have done this had I not loved what I was doing, both professionally and academically."***

It was 2002 before Nicole decided to take the plunge and branch out solo**.** ***"If I didn't start my own business now, I never would."*** She sold her properties in Australia in order to fund the set-up of her own luxury bespoke leather company, called Complete. **"To me, the name 'Complete' was perfect. 'Complete' means 'entire', 'absolute', and 'all-encompassing', so it imbued a sense of being able to satisfy all clients' needs."**

Taking inspiration from her father, this determined 38 year old decided to focus on the originality and superlative craftsmanship she had seen him develop in his own business. **"*My father set up his first atelier, or leather workshop, in Holland back in the early fifties, and learned the leather trade***

from a group of wonderful, renowned leather craftsmen. He was probably the most hard-working person I've ever known, something I came to respect more as I became older. When I was younger though, I saw the benefits of his skills – carrying one-off handbags and wearing shoes he would make especially for me."

However, Nicole quickly realised that creating a one-off bespoke product was a labour of love, taking up a great deal of time and creativity, which frequently the financial reward did not justify. ***"That's how I came up with the idea to create Complete – I wanted to offer the same level of value, service and quality as my father did, but to a wider range of clientele."***

Nicole thought about the markets that could benefit from high-quality, luxurious leather products, but where she'd previously seen only poor-quality 'leather' (usually PVC) items being used, and she began to target those sectors specifically***. "Like my father's company, much of Complete's business revolves around creating bespoke designs for our clients, but with an option of ordering higher quantities of that product. The client loves the idea of having something designed and made just for them, and Complete can justify its existence as a viable business enterprise. It's a win-win situation."***



Taking time to become Complete

But starting a new company is a process of discovery, as Nicole soon learnt. Establishing Complete in a free-zone had its pros and cons. ***"It proved to be much more expensive than I'd initially anticipated, establishing my office in Dubai Media City. The start-up outlay was three times what I had originally budgeted for."*** Nicole adjusted her plans to fit, and to keep costs down. For instance, she rented a smaller office than she had originally intended to, and took on tasks that she would have preferred delegating to or at least sharing with a team. ***"It was frustrating. I could see what could and should be done to succeed, but was slowed down by the logistics of doing it on my own."***

On the plus side, carrying out every role from basic administration to design and sales, gave Nicole a better understanding of her clients' needs, and the opportunity to build strong client relationships, based on trust, respect and a mutual love of quality.

"In hindsight, I'm happy that Complete started modestly. Spending so much time with my clients meant that many of them have now become close personal friends."

From the outset, Nicole realised it was critical that Complete set up its own production facility. ***"You simply cannot control the quality of leather goods you offer, if you have them made in a factory you don't own."*** Nicole decided to set up her factory in Vietnam, taking advantage of the country's long history of craftsmanship. ***"Whether it is embroidery, woodwork or leatherwork, Vietnam is known for its traditional skills, resulting in superior-quality items."*** The Vietnamese government allows 100 per cent foreign ownership of companies, as long as they adhere to a number of workforce regulations. These include shorter working hours with higher rates of pay than local Vietnamese companies, and a minimum age for staff. ***"With those and additional benefits that Complete offers, such as daily English lessons, free lunch, and motorbike helmets for all staff, plus annual bonus schemes, our team is always motivated and happy. It's a great environment."***

For the first two years of operations, Complete was just Nicole and eight craftsmen in Vietnam. However, in 2004, the business took a quantum leap. Three craftsmen who'd previously made leather goods for global luxury brands joined her team. These three men identified an additional 13 leather craftsmen

who also shared their traditional skills in complicated leather work, such as the highly intricate art of skiving, stamping, stitching and, most importantly, French-pleating leather by hand – a key component of Complete's designs. ***"These professionals were impressed not only by Complete's ethos and focus on detail, but also by the advantages our modern factory and exclusive workforce offered, making them keen to become part of the team. The years of experience in working with high-end leather products that these 15 men and women brought with them, meant that Complete was now able to respond to virtually any design challenge – no matter how intricate."***

Sourcing high-quality leather has been another of Nicole's obsessions right from the start. Complete has always employed the services of a skilled leather broker to supply it with the superior European A+++ grade leather that Nicole and her clients expect. This emphasis extends to all elements of production, with all metal 'hardware', or fittings, such as studs and key rings, being sourced from Italy rather than Asia. ***"Complete will always use high-end, premium fittings in its products. Otherwise, regardless of how gorgeous the leather product may be, it will look dreadful after a few months of use."***

With a workforce of 70 staff in Vietnam and Dubai, and a healthy 2008 turnover, Complete's business remains vigorous. ***"Our clients buy from us because we offer a premium product at a great value, added to a personal service. We use only the best leather and fittings. And basing our factory in Vietnam is a great advantage. Many Vietnamese have the aptitude to learn and the expertise in traditional leather skills. It's a dying trade worldwide, but one I'm anxious to preserve for the future."***



Completing the dream

Having built up an impressive network of contacts prior to setting up Complete, Nicole secured her first deal with 'Pinctada', a Dubai-based South Sea pearl company, for whom she was asked to make some bespoke packaging. This initial order led to a request from Burj Al Arab to urgently design and supply several small leather items, as the hotel had been let down by another supplier. The relationship between Complete and Burj Al Arab has evolved over the years, and Nicole now provides a number of its in-room leather goods, as well as products for its shop and VIP gifts. Other clients include Aston Martin, Armani Dubai, The Palm, Al Maha Desert Resort & Spa, Shell, Atlantis, as well as several government entities.

Today, Complete designs, produces and markets a wide array of leather goods, from laptop bags and corporate VIP gifts to menus, as well as hotel amenities. Nicole's design philosophy is simple: ***"Complete designs pieces that you want to use. Not only are they beautiful, but the designs are well thought out, with, for example, ample pockets for absolutely everything. The practicality of an item is just as important. A travel bag that doesn't open fully or a zip that doesn't pull easily is a waste of time and money."***

That design philosophy has prevailed in Complete from the beginning. More recently, Complete has been able to offer its clients a full range of 12 leather colours, from traditional black and brown, to elegant turquoise and blue, as well as vibrant orange and silver. ***"Some clients opt for brightly coloured leather items, while more conservative clients can choose coloured stitching or embroidery on classic black or brown leather. This is the part I love most about Complete – sitting with clients and watching their delight when they see what together we've created. All of Complete's items are made to order, which means that everything can be branded and personalised. Everything is unique."***

The one commonality amongst Nicole's clients is that they are perfectionists.

"Near enough is never, and should never be, good enough."

Complete's uncompromising commitment to design, quality and service prevails from start to finish, from agreeing with each client a particular design to the execution, packaging and delivering of the product.

Using only the most beautiful calf skins, investing in highly skilled craftsmen

and deliberately remaining small in order to ensure quality all demonstrate Complete's commitment: ***"To deliver beautifully presented luxury leather goods at a realistic price point."***

Would Nicole encourage others to set up a business? ***"Absolutely! I have learned so much and met such a diverse range of people since starting Complete. It's immensely satisfying to be able to provide beautiful, practical and unique products that everyone loves… it's definitely worth it. It's also financially rewarding, provided you're willing to put in longer hours than you ever knew existed, especially at the beginning. Complete has exceeded all my expectations!"***

Divine Next Steps

Complete's aim is to continue to provide its clients with the great quality, great value, gorgeous leather products for which it has become known. Nicole is also keen to devote time to a further business venture, which grew from an idea she'd developed long before Complete. While still in its infancy, 'Crocodylus' will be another luxury bespoke brand, this time using superior quality crocodile and other exotic skins to produce one-off handbags as well as the ultimate in luxury home-ware, including photo frames, desk sets and magazine holders.

The product concept remains the same as that of Complete; it is simply elevated to an even more exclusive level. Each Crocodylus product will be handcrafted and individually personalised, and the discerning owner of a Crocodylus product can be reassured that the piece they own is unique and nobody else will, or can, ever have the same. By offering bespoke-designs using crocodile and other exotic skins, Crocodylus caters to those who harbour that dream and desire their own little piece of luxury. As Oscar Wilde said, "give me luxuries and I can dispense with the necessities."



Start small, focus on details and get it right

Surround yourself with strong staff. You're only as good as your team

Opportunities don't come knocking on your door. You have to go find them

You can mix business with pleasure

Live every second of your life to the full. Most of the things you worry about will never happen




d'pr
d'events



Lucy D'Abo
32
Camilla D'Abo
36
British

When I was little I wanted to be… a pop star. (Lucy)

When I was little I wanted to be… a diplomat. (Camilla)

One thing that would surprise you… I lived in Namibia with no water or electricity for three months. (Camilla)

My catchphrase is… at the top of every uphill struggle there is a bench with a lovely view. (Lucy)

My least glamorous job was… working in Pizza Hut. (Camilla)

The defining moment in my life…
Leaving England in 1997. (Camilla)

"Come to Dubai"

Lucy recalls that it was the culmination of one too many electrifying telephone calls from her sister Camilla that cemented her decision to return to the emirate in 2000. Daunted by perennially damp weather in England, increasing taxes and the distance from most of her family and her partner's family who were already long time Dubai residents; she knew that the time was right to make the journey back to the idyllic location where she had been brought up as a British expat child living in Dubai.

Lucy's passion was the theatre, and whilst studying for BA Honours degree in Theatre Arts at Manchester Metropolitan University, she spent numerous holidays working part time as a waitress filling in time waiting for her lucky break. Whilst waiting for the next thespian role knowing these to be few and far between 22 year old Lucy said adieu to waitressing and embarked on a career within the telemarketing industry. Starting from the bottom, it proved to be a path to greater things; a role in marketing. This eventually led to a position marketing racecourse events at the Sandown Racecourse, in the UK.

Camilla D'Abo returned to Dubai in 1998 at the nascent stage of Dubai's fast track expansion. With a banking and finance background, she quickly secured an advertising role within the same sector.

"I enjoyed the job but eventually realised that my results were not sufficiently tangible and consequently this led to the role becoming less and less rewarding."

It was not until two years later, in 2000, that Lucy D'Abo finally joined her sister and parents in Dubai and a further four years - until 2004 - that the two sisters ideas' started to come together in the form of their entrepreneurial PR event partnership. "***We were close, working within similar industries and capable of so much more."***

With the combination of their skills, ranging from Lucy's aptitude in creative visualisation to Camilla's strengths in finance-added to the shared experience of having both married within a year of each other, they scoped out and designed their business plan, which by today's standards still remains relevant. "***Our initial plan was to offer a unique wedding and events planning service,***

it was a growing market and in our opinion not one sufficiently catered for."

Camilla and Lucy were quick to identify that their strengths lay in the contacts they had already established within Dubai's corporate arena, as well as those of their parents who, as long-term residents, were soundly ensconced in Dubai's expat elite.

"As with many businesses, the initial concept is not always the one that you planned to roll out initially, or you end up pursuing."

With their business plan defined, the budding entrepreneurs soon realised that if they were to succeed it was not going to be solely as wedding and events planners.



Reinvention with a d'ifference

"Ultimately, we were both unhappy with our roles and felt that together we could offer something superior to what was currently being offered in the market place." Camilla and Lucy identified quickly that, while there were many advertising agencies in Dubai providing event management, no one was focussing on a strategic format that would address the market needs with specific 'attention to detail', to attract the 'right audience' where they could offer a complete package 'a one stop shop' from concept to delivery. This was truly where they could identify their brand offering as being different and where their niche lay.

"We wanted to offer a creative turnkey solution within events and PR management." Since that exciting initial inception in the good old days when Dubai was an embryonic environment bursting at the seams with a desire to promote, develop and elevate entrepreneurship to a get-rich-quick art, Camilla and Lucy have determined that a major part of their success in the emirate has been attributable to their established reputation for seamless service delivery based on an innate talent for quality, detail and originality. Their business progressed in parallel to Dubai's own fast track expansion.

"We have never felt the need to advertise, all of our business comes from word of mouth, referrals are key to our success."

While they admit to having invested a large amount in public relations, Camilla and Lucy believe that this is a crucial element to the establishment of their personal business brand. ***"Public relations and events are interlinked. When you are launching a new product or service you need to ensure you organise an event that everyone will know about, that will be remembered, and one which people want and need to attend."*** Their most memorable events include the Atlantis Hotel launch at The Palm Jumeirah in November 2008. d'pr was appointed PR agency for the hotel, while d'events was given the role of Middle East celebrity management. In addition, d'pr won the Middle East contract for the launch of the BMW 7 series, whilst d'events managed a packed guest attendance of ambassadors and celebrities at the launch of Frankie's Italian Lounge and Grill.

With plenty of research, soul searching and a perfect business mentor in the shape of their father, Philip D'Abo, who also runs several successful businesses, the sisters have been able to capitalise on his business acumen.

Having owned and established several businesses in his life, ranging from trend setting restaurants in Chelsea, to property developments in Surrey, his attitude has influenced them. ***"If you see an opportunity, grab it, because it may never appear again."*** Theirs is a sterling example of how second generation Dubai expats can discover a viable niche and grow a business based on intrinsic talent, an exhaustive contact base and sound knowledge of the market. This inimitable combination has resulted in d'events and d'pr mushrooming to a 30-strong team of professionals from over 14 countries, resulting in a growing PR and reputation management practice; creative turnkey event management, and as per their business plan.

Camilla and Lucy invested a mere AED 70,000 to establish d'events and d'pr, with the 'd' literally meaning 'of' in line with their distinctive maiden name - d'Abo. The rationale behind this nomenclature was that they could apply it to any area of business and of course it benefited from the all important retention with their established market presence, as well as with their surname.

"We knew reputation was everything."



Making d'reams reality

"We chose the option to set up with a professional business licence, which nowadays is difficult to obtain. This avenue was perceived to give us a more professional standing as a secure option at a time when Free Trade Zones were new and relatively unknown in the Middle East market." It took the pair no time at all to finalise all the relevant paperwork with their local service agent, who has no ownership or control over their business. ***"This type of licence is only an option for the professional services sector. The strengths lie in the 100 percent right of ownership; you are established with the Dubai Economic Department and can work without restriction throughout the UAE. The weakness of this option is that you are an unlimited company and therefore need to take legal precautions in the event of any company litigation."***

Once the decision had been made to shift into entrepreneurial gear, it was agreed that Lucy would be the first to leave her job as she was the unhappiest. Camilla followed suit three months later. In just the first week of Lucy's notice period they secured their first offer of a pitch for an event with



Kinnarps, a Swedish interior solutions provider. Competition was fierce; there were two other major agencies in Dubai working all out to win the contract. Camilla and Lucy were over the moon when they heard that they had sealed the deal. ***"It was like scene from the movies. We left the office quietly and entering the lift we were jumping for joy, the feeling was indescribable."***

Their first assignment with Kinnarps was a polo event. Nicknamed 'the mint with the hole', with Camilla still at work in her soon to be previous employment, they were unable to disclose anything and had to keep the event and their company formation under wraps until all company procedures were finalised. Working initially from Lucy's spare bedroom until they found suitable office space was one of their biggest challenges. In those days, decent office space was scarce.

"If you were unable to view a location within an hour of the newspaper advertising it, you would miss it. Moving fast was absolutely essential."

Finding their new work haven represented another stroke of luck, Lucy recalls. "***It was by chance that I was passing a building with a rental sign. Making a phone call to the agent, without having time to consult Camilla, I took a leap of faith and secured office space in White Crowne Building on Sheikh Zayed Road within half an hour. I paid the deposit whilst on the phone with Camilla even though I had not even seen the space with any lights on, as my hand barred the door to stop the next viewer making his ardent bid."***

d'estined for bigger things

In October 2004, d'events and d'pr began as a company of two, followed quickly by a receptionist. While the office space was being furnished, a throwaway comment by the contractor, already aware of their presence within the market, was that within a year they would outgrow their office. Whilst an amusing thought at the time, their initial intention was not to grow into a large organisation. ***"It wasn't about gaining a large database of clients, it was about delivering impeccable service."***

The contractor's prophecy proved to be apt. By the end of 2005 the team grew to four and then to eight. Shortly afterwards they heard that they had been shortlisted as finalists in the prestigious Campaign Middle East Awards – an accolade that many established companies never reach.

"Being nominated in such an influential regional competition against hundreds of other marketing agencies was one of the most exciting achievements as it proved to us that our belief in our work paid off."
Today, approaching their fifth year with a team of 30 in place, the girls have moved offices four times and have a gross turnover of AED 10,000,000 per annum.

With a client base that includes Visa, Cannon, BMW, MBC and more recently, the most talked about hotel, Atlantis at The Palm, they are both the first to admit however, that hiring staff and taking on such responsibilities is supremely challenging. ***"You expect it will get easier the longer you own a business, but this is not the case, there are always more dimensions to the operation. In effect, it becomes your life and an all consuming passion, so there are definitely things you have to sacrifice along the journey."*** Both Lucy and Camilla admit their personal life often gets put on the back burner as their jobs often mean working weekends and spending birthdays, anniversaries on business trips. "***You do it because you are passionate about what you believe in and have to have unwavering belief in yourself and your product."***

d'riving force of success

"We have read many business books; they can all tell you a great story. But the one we have found to have the biggest impact is 'Any One Can Do It'" written by Sahar and Bobby Hashemi. It is a story of how a brother and a sister founded 'Coffee Republic', the UK's first US-style coffee bar chain. An honest testimonial of how they built one of the UK's most recognised high street brands.

"Everyone has ideas, this book's mantra is to 'Stop thinking about it and do it'. That is the difference between a dreamer and an entrepreneur."

In a bizarre twist of fate, Camilla and Lucy were asked by the London Speakers Bureau to work in partnership and organise an event in Dubai at which Sahar Hashemi was to speak. ***"It was an awe-inspiring moment to finally be able to talk to those who had inspired us so much in the early days."*** The sisters firmly believe that it would have been so much harder if they had not been so fortunate in their partnership. Thanks to the mutual and constant inspiration and encouragement, they have complemented their respective vision into a single highly successful offering. This excellent synergy is born of their shared

fundamental core values and ethos fostered as sisters in a close knit family. ***"We trust each other and know each other so well. For the first six months it felt like a marriage and despite the fact we bickered like crazy, we have learnt and developed so much through this journey together."***

Do Camilla and Lucy believe that they could have aspired to such stellar professional heights in the UK as they have managed in Dubai? The answer is swift.

"Very unlikely, Dubai's business community supports entrepreneurial sprit like no other. Everyone is extremely encouraging, but at the end of the day… passionate people succeed."

At the end of the day, so do sterling contacts and a so does a distinctive d'name.

Divine Next Steps

Neither Camilla nor Lucy have been required to make any further financial investment in their business, aside from the initial capital set up of AED 70,000. Within the first year of operation, they were already achieving a healthy profit and have continued to reinvest their returns back into their 'organic' business. They are committed to the region and both share a long term vision to stay and grow the brand with their selective and key quality clients delivering a reputable product. Their belief remains firm 'bigger is not always better'.

Deliver what you promise

You are only as good as your last job

Do everything above board

Don't be greedy

Research your market, gather your facts and figures so you can differentiate yourself

Don't be too trusting

Talk to as many people as possible

Don't borrow too much money!

d-events.ae


dubizzle.com
Classifieds
Search:
Property for Sale
Property for Rent
Community
Education
Home > Log in
Sign In
Log in or sign up
Already have a Dubizzle.com ac
Email address:
Password:
SIGN IN
BLV
NOTTE
THE
FREE
BEANIE
WITH AN
ORDER
Dubai Classifieds | Dubai Property | Jobs in Dubai
Place an Ad! | List a Property! | Employers Click


dubizzle.com



JC Butler
28
Sim Whatley
28
American

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was... unemployed, unattached and unmistakably impoverished. (Sim)

When I was little I wanted to be… a baseball player, although that was mainly due to pressure from my Dad. (JC Butler)

To me, the word successful means… well… full of success obviously. (Sim)

My catchphrase/word is... do people still have catchphrases? (JC Butler)

If I was not an entrepreneur, I would... be a restaurateur. (Sim)

My friends describe me as… you would have to ask them. (JC Butler)

"We bought the 'Idiots Guide to Building a website.' From there on it was pretty much on-the-job learning."

It was beyond the wildest dreams of a 28-year-old enterprising duo that they would someday own Dubai's answer to the popular US site 'Craiglist'. This website, providing local classifieds and forums for jobs, housing, personals, services, local community and events, was the brainchild of an internet entrepreneur from the US.

JC and Sim met in Brussels five years ago while taking part in a short training course for the same company. JC Butler was born in Boston, Massachusetts and grew up both in Santa Fe, New Mexico and Southern California. He moved to Belgium in 2004 after gaining degree in International Economics from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Spending his first year of full-time employment working as a business journalist, it was here that he met his now business partner Sim Whatley. Also American, from Louisiana, he also found himself in Belgium after graduating in Finance at LSU, Louisiana State University, eventually joining the same company as JC.

Both travelled extensively for business. While JC worked in Germany, Kuwait and Dubai, Sim had a stint in Kuwait and Jordan before ending up in Abu Dhabi. Reaching a point in their lives where their jobs no longer held interest for them, they both shared a similar desire to explore new employment opportunities; and along with that change was a change of location and direction. ***"We knew of each other having worked in the same company, although we did not become friends until both of us ended up in the UAE."***

By March 2005, the duo were both officially 'out of work', and found themselves looking for a place to live, a car and, most importantly, a new job. Unsure about what the future would hold for them, the only thing they knew for certain was that they could find it in Dubai. As an emerging regional powerhouse, they were frustrated by the usual urban challenges of an environment in fast forward mode. To them, even accessing the basic necessities needed to make life a little easier when settling in a new country was virtually impossible. In terms of information sharing, JC and Sim found that aside from daily newspapers and supermarket noticeboards, there was little available. ***"Back in the States, securing employment, finding a place to live and even buying a car was pretty simple. We would have logged onto Craiglist.com."***

By now JC and Sim had established a friendship, realising that they shared



a similar perspective on life. In April 2005, an opportunity lay in launching a community-based online marketplace, where the growing number of expats setting up in Dubai could interact. In the US, the Craiglist website was already being used by more than 40 million people. Boasting lists of local classifieds and forums for 570 cities in 50 countries worldwide, it was designed largely as a source of jobs, housing, goods, services, romance, local activities and general advice. "***We had grown up in an environment where web culture was widely available and easy to use. In Dubai it was evident that no one had got the bug yet."*** JC and Sim were about to change all that. Analysing Craiglist's business model, and taking a little more time to research Dubai's potential market, their plans began to take shape swiftly.

Dubizness in Dubai

It was May 2005, a crucial investment was made by the website entrepreneurs, and one which they still say today is the best $30 they have ever spent. Their purchase was 'The Idiots Guide to Building a Website'. ***"Although familiar about how to use a website, we had no knowledge of programming and certainly no experience in the design and development of one, we needed all the help we could afford".*** With very little money in the bank, JC and Sim pooled their personal savings, which amounted to the grand sum of just $12,000. ***"It was all we had. We had to be able to survive on this until we***

were able to make a living from our new undertaking; it was both our capital investment and living expenses." To eke out their savings and preserve as much as they could, they opted to share a small room in a friend's apartment on Sheikh Zayed Road. The room consisted of bunk beds and not much else. It was frugal living. Living sparingly, they set about interviewing companies experienced in web development. Keen to make sure that they secured the one that best suited their business profile, they interviewed more than15 before finally making their choice. The fundamental element in their selection criteria was ultimately cost.

"We chose the best salesman, which is not always the wisest decision."

However, as luck would have it, everything went to plan and literally five weeks from conception of their idea, the project went live. It was August 2005, the duo were now set to take on a new title- co founders for Dubizzle.com, Dubai's very first people website, a means of communication that would finally allow Dubaians a community voice.

Naming the business had required painstaking research. Many options were considered, such as Dubailists.com and Dubaiclassifieds.com. But nothing fully expressed what they were trying to achieve with their business model. JC and Sim realised that if *they* could not connect with the name, then neither would their client base. If they were to deliver a business that would become as embedded into the community as they foresaw, they definitely needed unique branding. And, with that, a definition of their true intent, to target the appropriate audience.

'Izzle' derives from urban American slang. In the US, it is common practice to take a word and add 'izzle'. Since their market was 'Du' (-bai), their origin the States, the notion of Dub-izzle was born.

"This concept has worked well. We are now looking at moving into other Gulf regions and had we taken the approach to have Dubai woven into our brand, we would not have had such flexibility for future word association."

Nevertheless, there has been a downside to their naming approach as Dubizzle is not recognised in the English language and people have often asked if it has a letter missing, or is it a typo. Some even struggle to grasp the pronunciation, but the boys believe in their experience the uniqueness of the name has been an advantage. "***It has become a part of the UAE vernacular which has helped to reinforce brand recognition.***" Dubizzle users refer to themselves as "Dubizzlers" and, in a recent comic, one character asked another to help him "Dubizzle" his furniture.

JC and Sim's original business plan was very similar to that of Craiglist, whereby an individual person using the website pays for whatever they choose to list. However, on launching the website, they soon realised that credit card penetration was very low in Dubai. Alternative solutions to pay online such as Pay Pal, a common method in other countries, were neither available or very difficult to access.

"Clearly, our website needed to be more upscale and a little more creative; particularly if we were to succeed. For this we had to attract companies to advertise with us - and not just individuals."

Adopting this approach came about fairly quickly after the initial launch of Dubizzle in December 2005. Within four weeks, JC and Sim were hard at work with their web development company redesigning the website, this time with a re-code. Ready to face the market, they had to then encourage new potential clients that online marketing was indeed efficient and cost effective - one that would attract a far wider audience than more traditional forms of marketing. Cold calling secured their first paying advertiser, 'Western Autos', in September 2005. They now have a portfolio of growing and fast moving consumer goods companies, as well as blue-chip organisation such as Nokia, Mercedes, Nike and several banks in addition to widely recognised local events that are intrinsic to the growth in culture within Dubai.

"Aside from Google Ad Words, our business growth has been largely attributable to word of mouth." Never in a position to spend heftily with their own advertising budget, JC and Sim skills in the art of negotiation meant that they were able to successfully barter deals under the banner of events and concerts that Dubizzle was promoting. It provided an affordable medium in



which to flash their name around the fast-expanding markets within Dubai. Many magazines and newspapers picked up on their unique success story and PR proved to be another successful brand-building method. They were soon dominating advertising space.

With what would be considered as an incredibly small start-up budget these days, JC and Sim initially set their business up as a subsidiary of another company.***"We were selling visual advertising space, as opposed to a product, which made our set-up a little easier."*** As their business, bank balance and vision grew, they changed their approach and in 2007 established a Ras Al Khaimah Media City trade licence.

"It was much cheaper, much quicker, and had much less red tape than Dubai Media City."

It took a further few months for the pair to negotiate all the paperwork and obtain a Dubai trade licence, to lease a large commercial office in Dubai outside of a free zone.

"There has never been a time when we thought that our business wouldn't be a success, although there were times when our bank manager may

have disagreed with us." There were several close moments when funds dipped and reached a point where there was barely enough left on which to survive.

"No matter what, we knew that the experience of setting up a business and the lessons learned would always be valuable. Therefore the sacrifices that were being made were totally worth it."

JC and Sim's frugal approach worked in their favour. They ran the company very leanly and still continue to do so today. As a start up venture, their results bore instant results. Within six months, they broke even. They admit to never having drawn more out of the business than their salary. Every time they experienced business growth they reinvested; initially it was to hire a complement of skilled staff. Their first hire was a sales person in November 2006 and soon they had a dedicated team of 13 staff. Eventually the tipping point was reached and they began to stop outsourcing their requirements and stand on their own two feet. ***"It was a big step but we were ready."*** The initial operating arrangement for dubbizle.com, with an external web development company hosting and developing the service, worked well for over a year. However, the time had come for the website to finally run in-house.

JC and Sim were longer relying on an external provider to support their website, and there was no turning back. Their success culminated in 2008 when they set about redesigning the website to revamp its coding and functionality. Along with a new front-page design that would highlight the most up-to-date popular content, Dubizzle website users were seeing an expanding portal.

As the founding partners, JC and Sim enjoy a solid partnership built around shared values and vision. Whilst good companions, they feel that it has been to their benefit that they have not been life long friends. They have grown together and through their experiences feel quite at ease to stand their ground and challenge one another; it's a healthy position from which to build a successful business. ***"We can only recall once having a disagreement. In the early days we lived and breathed the same space, with meagre start-up funds and sharing a bedroom - that is no small achievement."***

Markets fizzle

"There is no doubt about it - the recession has worked in our favour."

Dubizzle's business growth has catapulted 100 percent from January to March 2009 on 2008's figures, and reached over 1,000,000 hits and 15,000,000 page views during March 2009.

One of the few companies still recruiting in these volatile times, this is all attributable to the increased traffic generated through the site thanks to needy people looking for jobs, cheaper rental options, or selling cars and furniture. As a result of the many people leaving Dubai, their website is providing a valuable medium in with to maximise the impact of the market downturn. As for companies advertising, with marketing budgets slashed, many are looking for more affordable ways to gain presence in the market place and online marketing is a massively successful way to do so.

The original premise behind Dubizzle was clear. ***"We wanted to give members of our diverse community an opportunity to talk about local matters, both big and small."*** Dubizzle is providing a creative forum to explore this at a grass roots level. ***"Many of the challenges facing Dubai can be solved when our community pull together and 'discuss'. It is an excellent platform to create positive solutions which will affect the whole community."*** JC and Sim feel that Dubizzle is well positioned to respond actively to the challenges that are faced in these times of global transition.

So, has it been easier to set up a business in Dubai than any other part of the world? ***"There are advantages and disadvantages; Dubai has been proved to have a very fertile environment resulting in an abundance of opportunities."*** As far as the process of setting up a business, obtaining trade licences, numerous hidden administration fees and the general cost of living in Dubai, they realised that it was a more expensive start up than they could every imagined. ***"There were many times we had to make pleading calls to my parents for a loan, it was a bit more than just pocket money I was looking for."*** Sim's parents were always supportive and quick to reassure him***, "If you are that determined you will find a way."*** Their words ring true; JC and Sim have a modem with a powerful voice. They reach not only communities but institutions, they adapt to meet individual needs and that of multi national organisations. Today, dubbizle.com is not just confined to Dubai offering unique solutions they are able to speed through a sophisticated portal reaching well beyond the Gulf.

Divine Next Steps

JC and Sim have been approached by a number of interested parties who are keen to buy out Dubizzle. They don't have any desire to sell their business. For now, they have their sight set on expanding their business into other areas, initially including websites for Abu Dhabi, unlocking other markets and translating an Arabic version. "We want to be regional before selling on to anyone." With a monthly audience as off April 2009 of 1,145,000 visits and over 16,000,000 page views, who can blame them for wishing to keep a firm hold on dubizzle.com?

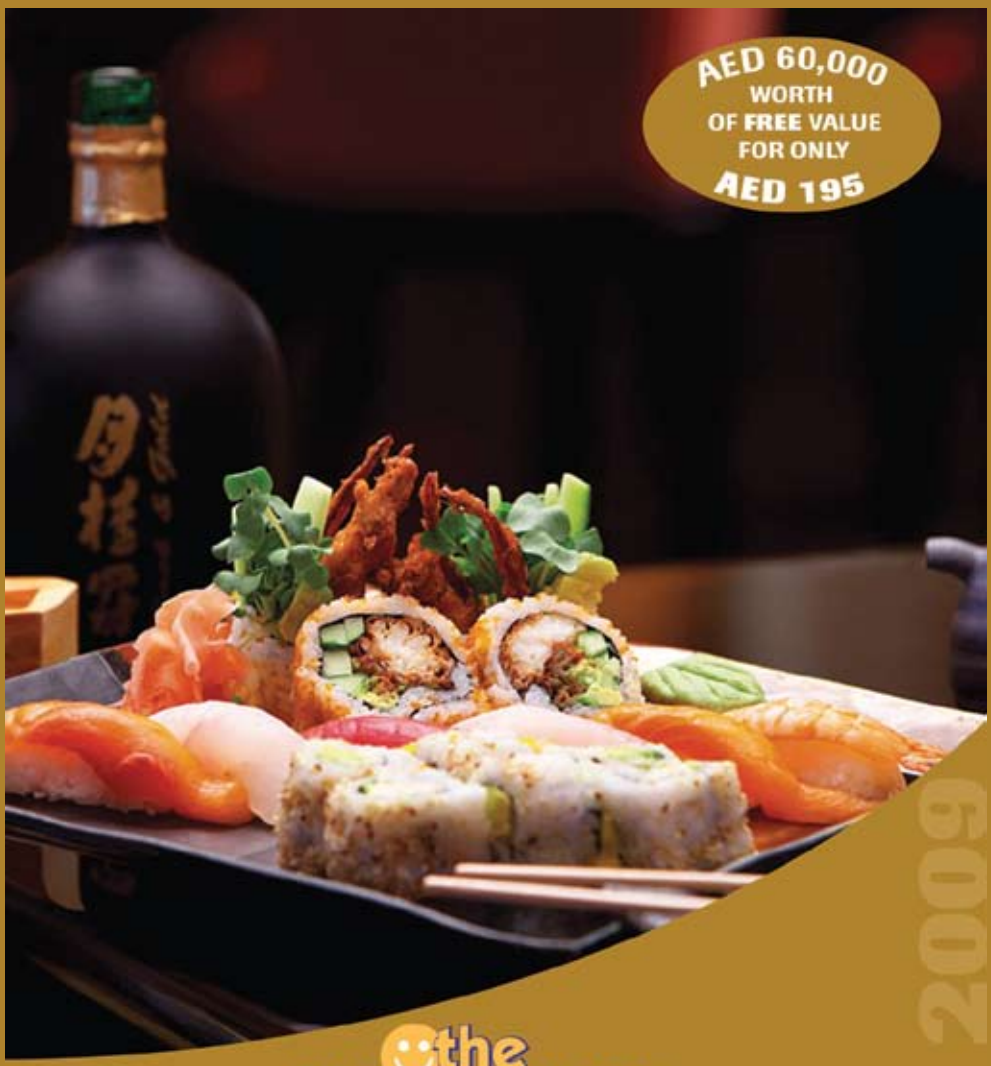


Necessity is the mother of all invention: Set yourself a budget when you start out that is extremely moderate. You will be surprised with what creative ideas you'll have to promote your business, when you don't have any money. (Sim)

Find extremely talented people: Never settle for cheap labour. Find talented people and let them take ownership of their work. In the beginning, have them sacrifice short term gain for long term rewards. They must believe in the idea as much as you do. (Sim)

Ask yourself: Would I pay for it? And answer truthfully. (JC)

Make your marketing strategy part of your business plan, not an afterthought. (JC)



2009

the ENTERTAINER

FINE DINING

DUBAI & NORTHERN EMIRATES

Your personal invitation to receive buy one get one Free offers
to the best 4 & 5 star restaurants

www.theentertainerme.com

NEVER PAY FULL PRICE AGAIN!!


the
ENTERTAINER
PUBLISHING



Donna Benton
35
Australian

When I was little I wanted to be… a teacher.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was... scared but excited.

To me, the word successful means... hard work, honesty and loyalty.

My catchphrase/word is... 'never pay full price again!' and 'everything happens for a reason'.

My friends describe me as... bubbly and organised.

If I was not an entrepreneur, I would... be in the FBI.

"I had absolutely no background in publishing, and no clear direction of what I wanted to do, except that I wanted to work with people."

At the age of 26, Donna Benton was headhunted in her home city of Melbourne and enticed to a new role with a jewellery company based in Dubai. The farthest she had ever ventured outside Australia was Bali, so by making the decision to accept the role, her attitude was that she would stay for a year, save money and return home.

Born in 1974, she did not follow a traditional path of higher education. Instead, upon leaving school at 18, Donna took a job at a sports centre in Melbourne. After a year ,Jenny, her boss went on maternity leave which left Donna in the fortunate position of being able to take on greater responsibilities than would have been originally expected of her at such an early age, with so little work experience. Dabbling in all areas of the business, from payroll and finance to human resources, marketing and operations, Donna relished the challenges of having to manage people and found quickly that she thrived on all this learning. Her boss returned from maternity leave and Donna spent a further five years working at the sports centre until Jenny sold up. Together they set up a new business in events and promotions management where Donna divided her time between running the new company and working with the Crown Casino in Melbourne, a job which she loved. However, it was not long before she received the phone call tempting her to Dubai. A new life was being offered in a totally different career path, which would have her entertaining more than just people; she would entertain a whole city.

Arriving in Dubai in 2001, the first three months were a testing time for Donna. "***It was scary, aside from having holidayed in Bali; I had never experienced life outside my home country. Dubai was unlike anything I could have imagined, so I decided to look at it as an adventure. I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason."*** The transition to the new city and culture was made easier as her aunt and uncle were living in Dubai; the job she had arrived to take up was not, however, quite what she thought it would be.

Entering the unknown

In this fast paced city, Donna knew she had to find her feet quickly and while out driving, not long after her arrival, she found herself pondering on all the wonderful restaurants that she knew in the emirate. Since her experiences

of socialising and eating out were more convivial, coming from Australia's tradition of casual al fresco dining, she could not help feeling disappointed that the love of eating out which had been an everyday occurrence for her back home, seemed less accessible in Dubai. Flexibility and restaurant offers had been the norm in Australia; however, in Dubai, the most that restaurants offered clients was a 10 or 15 percent discount on dining. There was very little encouragement to try new dining experiences; in a city like Dubai, which offered so much, Donna felt that change was possible.

Armed with this conviction, her aim was to establish a concept to incentivize people to step outside their localities and sample different eateries, cuisine and entertainment. In 2001, crossing the Garhoud Bridge to reach either Deira or the Beach hotels was seen as a fair distance to travel. Donna wanted to change this perception. With a blank sheet of paper, and absolutely nothing to lose by exploring her newly formed idea, she set about putting a feasibility study together with the view that if it didn't work, she could always get another job.

"I had no computer, so I spent most of my two months research in the internet café on Sheikh Zayed."

Donna eventually decided to create a book packed full of vouchers offered by vendors allowing individuals to receive incentives to frequent establishments for any day or time of the week* and to experience new restaurants. For this approach to be successful, the book and accompanying vouchers needed a uniform format. Those who wished to feature could not take the approach to merely offer percentile discounts. Instead, the 'buy one get one free' voucher system, with each participating company offering three vouchers per publication, was the model. The voucher system allowed for a one-off use or for a group of eight to dine together resulting in only four having to pay. ***"I wanted to make it affordable for everyone, those purchasing should feel they were getting great value for money."*** To be retailed at AED 195, Donna was keen to ensure that her publication would include not just places to eat, as this she felt would be restrictive, but included recreational activities too, such as bowling, kids play areas, safaris and water parks.

To build capital, Donna embarked upon securing contributors and investors. The clients she initially contacted were all made through personal recommendations and reviews read on the internet. Arriving in Dubai with

* *With the exception to Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Years Eve, New Years Day, Mothers/Fathers Day and Valentines Day*

only AU $3,000, she knew that she had to find an investor who would be able to understand her vision and have confidence in her business plan. Using her valuable contacts, she put the word out that she was looking for someone who had 'spare cash to flash'. It did not take long for that someone to appear and agree to invest AED 120,000, and remain a silent partner. With finances finally in place and a Dubai Media City trade licence on the way, the first publication hit the book shelves in September 2001.

Purely Dubai-based, with vouchers valid until December 2002, the first 33 pages were offered only to fine dining. Participants were allowed to advertise their menu along with their complimentary vouchers, whereas everyone else was only allowed to offer the complimentary 'buy one get one free' vouchers. All the merchants had to sign an exclusivity deal that meant they were unable to offer the same deal to any other publication or any other loyalty programme. In addition, a small section at the back of the book was dedicated to sports, pleasure and leisure opportunities. Although 80 percent of the book was dedicated to fine dining, Donna did not want to have her book labelled solely for this purpose. Selecting a title for the book was going to be vital in order to attract the right audience. ***"I brainstormed with friends but nothing flowed. Then it came to me, when you go out you are entertained."*** In a flash of inspiration Donna knew that the perfect title for her book was 'The Entertainer'; as a 'people person' who enjoyed entertaining with a passion, it fitted the bill perfectly.

"My first client was the Marriot. I met with a gentleman called Jeff Strachen." Donna recalls it was challenging in the beginning because she was selling an idea; her concept had no tangible evidence that what she was creating would be successful and well received by, not only the merchants, but the general public too. The Marriot were sold on the idea and booked places for their five Fine Dining restaurants.

"I couldn't believe it, they had committed to AED12,500 worth of vouchers, it was more than I had moved to Dubai with."

Buoyed by the successful outcome with the Marriot, her next confirmed client was the Rotana Group, who has remained for the past eight years extremely supportive of her initiative for the past eight years.

Working solo for the first year, she only took a miniscule wage with which



to survive. Until her third year of publication, Donna was responsible for everything; compiling the books, advertising, arranging new client meetings, design, printing, finances and distribution. ***"I can remember personally delivering boxes to Spinney's in the soaring summer heat."*** The Entertainer sold over 1,000 copies in the first year. For the second book publication, she hired three staff members. The team gradually grew and now tops 35 staff, which does not including her 50/50 joint venture with Al Hilal in Bahrain which, in 2007, established its own edition of The Entertainer.

With companies now approaching Donna for their vouchers to be included in 2002/3 copy, it was time to change The Dubai Entertainer to The United Arab Emirates Entertainer with the addition of 'buy one get one free' vouchers from contributors in Abu Dhabi and the Northern Emirates. Since it had always been her intention to expand the Entertainer portfolio, Donna found herself thinking about suggestions received during the course of her business dealings to include vouchers for hairdressers, spas and salons. Why not apply the same principle and compile a beauty book which would feature superior spas, hair salons, beauty treatment and fitness centres? With her team finishing the 'The Entertainer' in November and not due to commence again for the next publication until May the following year, it would prove the ideal stop gap to keep the production team busy and to compile a new publication which today is called 'The Body Book', encompassing everything about body wellbeing and which would run production-wise from November till April.

Entertaining more than just Dubai

It became apparent that such substantial savings would not only attract individuals but also companies, and in 2003 Donna approached Mashreq Bank to design a pocket sized loyalty book to include 50 vouchers for their credit card holders. ***"Banks at the time were already offering a diners card or a haphazard 10 percent discount here and there."*** Donna saw a marketing opportunity since it made sense to offer vouchers that could only be redeemed by customers using the banking facilities by using their credit card. Mashreq Bank loved the idea and has been loyal over the years. Since have then, all other banks offer this facility to their customers. When Mashreq Bank said they wanted a loyalty book scheme in Qatar; it prompted Donna to establish The Entertainer Book, launched in 2007.

As an additional advertising stream utilising all the information they had already, Donna established a range of Eating Out Guides in five different territories: Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and Goa,

"One of the girls in the office suggested Goa as she was from there."

Always keen to encourage suggestions from staff, Donna gave her a chance to visit her home country and develop the book and it worked.

It took till the second year for Donna to break even; initially selling 1,100 books in the first year, The Entertainer Company as a whole now sell over 40,000 books, per annum. Having achieved success so far, Donna admits there were one or two mistakes made along the way. "***The first year I didn't shrink wrap the books, kids came in and stole the fast food and sports vouchers."*** She also says she invested money into making marvellous stands for the books, but realised afterwards that bookshops didn't carry enough space for these and the books just went on the shelves anyway.

Donna says there is no satisfaction than being in a restaurant when a diner is using the vouchers. With a focus on service at all times, she still meets with her clients, and reviews each outlet every year. Eight years since the initial publication, The Entertainer still charges it clients AED 2,500 for premium pages; advertising costs range anything from AED 10,000 to 45,000 - way below the average magazine rate. When asked if Donna eats everywhere for free, she laughs.

"I certainly get plenty of offers, but I would far rather use my vouchers and check that the staff are administering them properly to support the outlets. I am very loyal and rarely go anywhere that is not in the book."

Divine Next Steps

In 2007, The Entertainer had begun to publish a few magazines; however, since the economic downturn they have closed one of these and continued working on the staggering success of 'The Entertainer' books and the 'Eating Out' guides. With the tagline, 'never pay full price again', book sales have soared. In the first six months of 2009, they have sold as many books as they did throughout 2008, as everyone wants to save money.

Having bought out her partners in 2008, Donna now works alongside her husband James Gosling. He is responsible for business development and building their website which also has a range of 'buy one get one free' offers.

Even though Donna has been approached to franchise her idea, and admits that the company is probably ripe for this, she is unsure about being ready to let go. Then again who would blame her? "I believe entirely on, what you put in is what you get out."



Research thoroughly

Compile a feasibility study – do the numbers such as projected earnings less your projected expenses. Be realistic.

Ensure you have cash flow to live. If you cannot afford it, look for an investor.

DIY – do as much as possible yourself to learn and understand processes.

You have to take risks in life to succeed

theentertainerme.com


Boutique 1


expression
Marketing & Integrated Communications



Scott Feasey
36
Scottish

When I was little I wanted to be… Jon Bon Jovi, but the position was filled.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was… out of work.

To me, the word successful means… turning passion and hard work into a thing of beauty.

My catchphrase/word is… quality.

My friends describe me as… a slightly humorous control freak, who is a very bad driver.

If I was not an entrepreneur, I would… teach.

"Being out of work is the best time to start up your own business. It's a great motivator!"

Many expats arrive in Dubai planning to stay for two to three years; Scott Feasey was no different. Circumstances change, however, and Scott has remained in Dubai for the last eight years. In this time he has married his wife Haneen Said, had a beautiful baby girl, Sofia, and set up a successful advertising agency, Expression. Since its inception seven years ago, business growth has been entirely organic: long hours for modest returns. Only now does he feel that the agency is really going places. He would not, however, change it for the world. Looking back, he knows it was without a doubt the best decision he ever made.

Born in Glasgow in 1973, Scott moved to Southampton when he was just two years old, after his father, a captain in the merchant Navy, was given a posting in the South of England. ***"I had my Scottish accent beaten out of me at school."*** As a major under achiever at school, it only transpired in Scott's final school years that he was dyslexic. Combine this with too much partying, he flunked most of his exams and was lucky to scrape an entry to the University of Northampton, the only further education facility willing to offer him an opportunity to study. Knuckling down, Scott successfully achieved a major in Business Studies with a minor in Psychology. ***"I always knew I wanted to be in advertising, from my early days at school and winning a competition to design a chocolate bar, to having the coolest internship at a London adverting agency when I was 16."***

Following the completion of his degree in 1994, Scott was ready to go travelling, but his parents soon put a stop to that by telling him to get a job instead. Having missed out on most of the advertising agencies' internships, Scott started work selling advertising space in the hope it would take him one step closer to the role he really wanted. ***"The money was great but it was a horrible job. It did however give me a great foundation in sales. It taught me the vital skill 'to listen to your consumer', which for any entrepreneur and businessperson is key."*** It was a further 18 months before Scott was able to follow his dreams in ad land. Taking a massive pay cut, he accepted a role as an Account Executive on a graduate scheme with a small independent agency called Mediator Marketing, based in central London, just behind Saatchi & Saatchi; the ad agency that Scott had always dreamed of working for, a dream he would later fulfil.

In 1997, having served a two-year apprenticeship with Mediator Marketing, he moved to a larger network and stepped into a role as Account Manager

with one of the largest and most awarded agencies in Europe: 'Arc' (formally known as IMP). It was here that he met Hamish Urquhart, who seven years later would be working with Scott again, this time on a very different level. Advertising agencies in London work on the principle that you eat, breathe and sleep the job, the ultimate 'work hard, play hard' ethic. ***"In my early 20s, I was living a champagne lifestyle with launch parties, mixing with celebrities, driving fast cars and meeting lots of interesting people."*** However, Scott was becoming disillusioned, not so much with the job but with London. A recruitment company suggested that Scott apply for a senior role with Saatchi & Saatchi, this time based overseas in Dubai. ***"I had no idea where Dubai was, but figured that a five-day reconnaissance trip in the sun was a great opportunity to find out. And hey, it was Saatchi & Saatchi!"***

Experiencing entrepreneurship

His initial trip in 2001 went well and Scott was offered the position of Account Director with Saatchi & Saatchi. He settled into Dubai life and got stuck into his new role, receiving a promotion within a year and a half to the dual role of Group Account Director and New Business Director. It didn't take long for him to realise that Dubai had an amazing entrepreneurial spirit; one that he wanted to be part of.

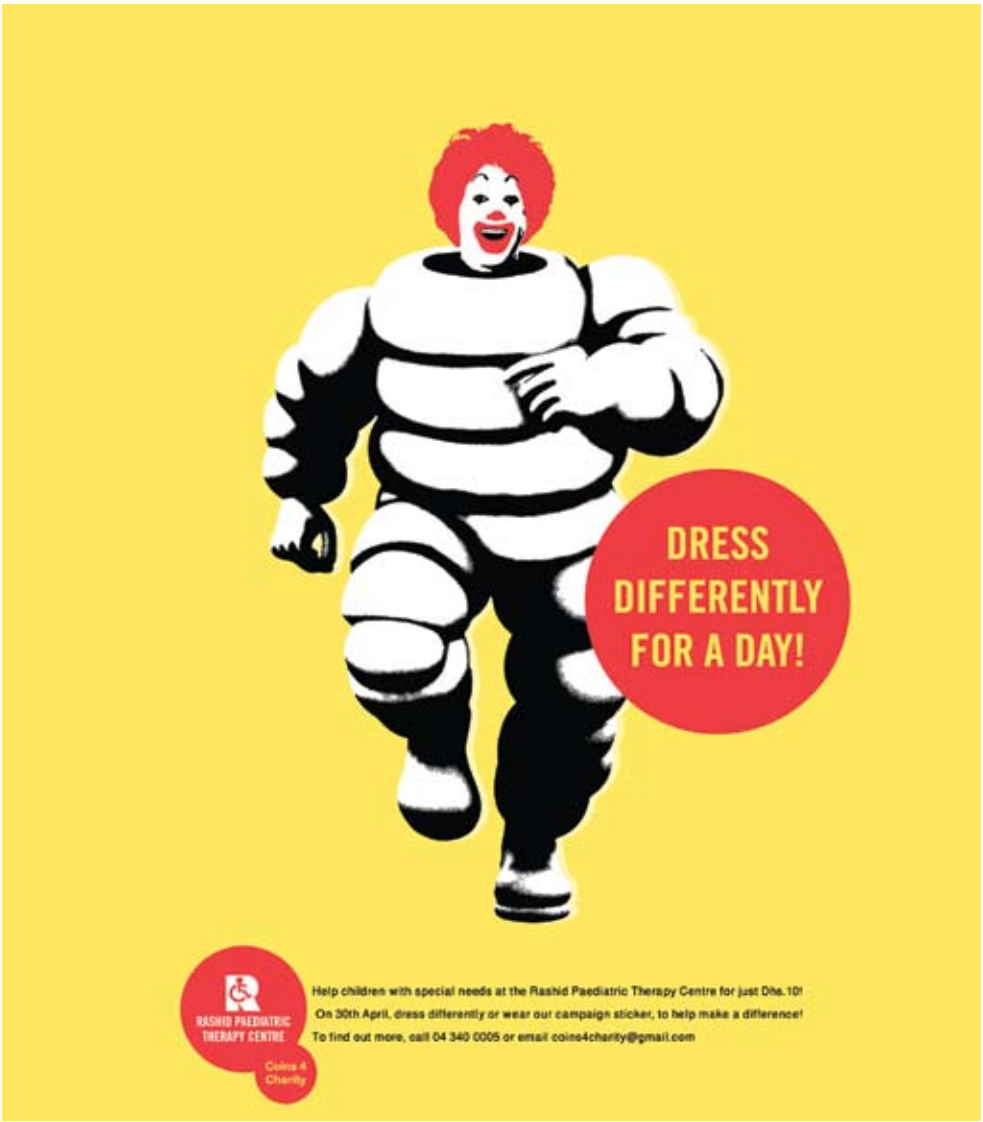
"I began to wonder if agency life was right for me, as all around me there were exciting new opportunities."

In 2002, he started to talk to a client of Saatchi & Saatchi about a business idea he had. The client liked the idea and went and enlisted the services of a third party, going ahead with it without him. Upset, Scott sat with Saatchi & Saatchi to discuss the recent chain of events, and eventually Scott was asked to leave. ***"To be honest, I was excited about this business idea and that doesn't demonstrate loyalty to my employer. So, I can't blame them for letting me go. I was sad to have left under such circumstances, but it was the best thing that happened to me."***

Despite this career hiccup, Scott was still well-known and respected in the advertising industry. Then a business opportunity presented itself to him: Scott was approached by two businessmen with a print and production management shop, responsible for print management and simple art work. "***I discussed the idea for turning their organisation into an integrated agency."*** A couple of months later - with a single investment of AED 120,000 Scott had two new silent partners and a potential advertising agency, which contained



himself, one Indian production manager and one Syrian Mac operator. Their first office was a smoke-stained office in the heart of Deira that was about the size of a small broom cupboard; it filled him with dread. "***It was soul destroying. In the early days there were times I thought I couldn't follow through with it. Passionate about succeeding, I knew that failure was not an option."***



Scott had given himself a year to build the business, paying himself a salary that was equivalent to what he was on when he had just left university, despite now having 11 years experience under his belt. He set about looking for a creative department. Since both, print and production and a one man studio was already in place, Scott became the account handler. At the same time, two friends were starting up a design agency from their back room. They were creative guys but had no account handling experience - exactly the opposite of Scott's own company, Expression. The design agency owners were not convinced to join forces with Scott to create a single entity at such an early stage; however, they were happy to be paid their share for winning joint clients. ***"It was not the best option, but both parties were happy to progress that way."***

Scott had already re-branded his new operation, Expression, with the full support of his silent partners; he knew that it was crucial to secure a regular client on a full time basis if the business was to be successful. He would need to nail this within his first three months of the start-up if he was to stand any chance of reaching out to a wider audience.

Having worked previously with MasterCard in the UK and Visa across the GCC, Scott made American Express his first port of call, pitching his below-the-line and direct mail capabilities to the Territory Manager for Merchant Relationships and Marketing in the UAE, Mohammed Al Hulaibi. He liked what Scott was promising and awarded Expression their first brief with the promise of more work if they outperformed American Express'current agency.

"It was probably one of our hardest challenges in the beginning to get marketing managers to believe in us. We had little evidence to prove our ability, which is where my sales experience came in handy."

The first full-time account was in the bag and the second was not far behind. Keeping his ear to the ground Scott had heard that Schuh, a Scottish shoe retailer, were about to launch a new operation in Sharjah. Never one to miss potential advertising revenue, Scott made a call to the Marketing Manager and offered to design a launch campaign for them for free, on the basis that if they liked it and ran with it, they would pay for his services. ***"In the early years, our success was based on the fact that our clients were happy to look at what we could offer because their current level of service provided by their existing agencies was so poor."*** Scott's vision for his agency was very much in tune with that of the 1996 movie 'Jerry Maguire', with his philosophy being 'more time with clients'. ***"I concentrated on our service, under promising but over delivering. I made sure we were always surprising them, fulfilling their specific needs more than expected."*** Such was his determination to never lose a client.

It took a further three years before Scott awarded himself a pay rise. He invested every penny back into Expression in order to grow a viable and diverse brand portfolio including MasterCard, Hilton, EFG-Hermes, Johnson & Johnson and Ray Ban. Over time, Scott gradually parted company with the design agency and employed more staff to work with him in his new office in

Dubai Media City. His latest recruit arrived in March 2009, bringing his team number to 26 to date.

In 2004, however, as business growth was gathering momentum, Scott had less time to approach new clients. He knew that he needed a number two to come onboard; someone trustworthy and like-minded, and able to contribute new skills. All this pointed to one man, and one man only, Hamish Urquhart. Their friendship, which had been established during Scott's time at IMP in London, had flourished, and when Hamish had visited Dubai in 2002 on a stop-over during his round the world trip, they discussed numerous business ideas. Although Hamish had been supportive of Scott's decision to go solo, it took numerous coaxing calls from Scott to persuade him that, following his career break, he should also make the move to Dubai. Hamish finally took the plunge in June 2004.

Expressing a little magic

Expression's unique selling point has always been account handling. From outside, their ad agency looks like every other ad agency, but the work ethic and the promises to the clients are vastly different. ***"Every time we pitched for a job and won it, we carefully hired additional staff to manage the increased workload, keeping our Jerry Maguire-like promise to not overload staff."*** *This was a* common complaint within the bigger agencies. ***"It meant more time, expense and fewer margins. But if we were to be in a sound position to steal client accounts from the big agencies, our reputation had to be faultless.***"

With punctuality a vital element of successful client relations, Scott and his now fellow business partner Hamish once realised they were going to be late for an important new client meeting. Ever resourceful, they left their car in traffic ridden Bur Dubai and jumped on an Abra which they knew would take them close to the client's office.

"It was an uncomfortable and unforgettable experience. It was June and the mid-day sun was beating down and the Abra had no air conditioning."

Their discomfort was worth it as they made it to the meeting on time, although, dressed in black suits, both Hamish and Scott were more than a little wet with perspiration on arrival. Their 'soon to be' client was concerned for the bedraggled pair and could not stop laughing when told about the journey. ***"I am sure she gave us the business out of pity!"*** On another occasion, Scott recalls pitching an idea to a client, aimed at increasing sales staff effectiveness. Their innovative approach was to make use of Hamish's background as a professional magician and to use a magic trick to communicate the benefits of their product over a competitor. Throughout the presentation, the clients sat motionless and expressionless, only erupting into an overwhelming applause and fits of giggles when the magic trick had been shown. ***"It was the strangest pitch presentation I have ever done. That said, we always try and get some theatre into our pitches, but this one was special."*** Expression won the pitch and went on to teach over 300 of the client's sales staff their very own magic trick that would see brand recognition increase beyond expectations.

"Life deals you bad and good cards, but in the end, all of them are opportunities."

Scott says the knack is to spot them, use them and grow them. For instance, not long after losing his job at Saatchi & Saatchi, Scott was offered a Group Account Director role at another network agency, heading up the regional account for a large airline. ***"I turned it down and everyone thought I was crazy, and I think I did a little too.***" However, less than five years later, Expression would poach one of that very agency's largest clients.

Like all exciting journeys, it has not been an easy ride for Scott. There have been times when those he has met have been unwilling to help, and at times been destructive rather than constructive. Nevertheless, Scott's positive and engaging manner is hard to ignore. ***"Nine times out of ten they actually end up assisting me in making the most positive changes in my life, whether they wanted to or not."***

Divine Next Steps

Scott continues to grow the agency at an organic rate, but accepts that it might be time to seek larger investment for faster growth. Scott admits Expressions has a long way to go and is keen to strengthen the UAE operation even more. “Our growth is organic and built on solid foundations with clients that continue to believe in us.”

At the time of going to press and at the height of the recession, Expression just won an international FMCG client and was in talks to open another agency in the Far East off the back of this recent win.

Nevertheless, Scott wants to first cement Expressions’ GCC offering and make sure the company enjoys a firm footprint across the region.

expression

Marketing & Integrated Communications

Do it with passion and belief
Never stop believing and working hard. This is possible only if you adore what you do.

Employ people better than you
Know your weaknesses as well as your strengths and compensate for them by employing and empowering good people.

Offer something different or special
Why else would your consumer switch to your product?

Watch the cashflow
The true killer of any small business start-up; get the money in quick and pay it out in a reasonable time.

Know what you are getting into and have fun
It's tough and the challenges are different, but remember why you did it… and have fun doing it!

expression-me.com


UAE 1
NAKHEEL
THE WORLD


FORESIGHT
أمـــل الـــيـــوم إبـــصـــار لـلـغـــد
TODAY'S HOPE TOMORROW'S VISION



Katy Newitt
43
British

When I was little I wanted to be… a sailor.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was… a mother of three children.

To me, the word successful means… helping the world to find a cure for hereditary eye disease and really making a difference.

My catchphrase is… 'where there's a will there's a way'.

My friends describe me as… crazy.

I would not describe myself as… an entrepreneur, more the inspiration behind an entrepreneurial team and a team player.

"Running one marathon was enough. However, news of an amazing breakthrough gave me reason to believe a cure may be found within my lifetime. It spurred me on to train for the Dubai Marathon and raise as much money as possible."

In 1986, Katy Newitt was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP), a medical condition that could lead to blindness. Blindness is currently thought to be the highest cause of disability in the UAE. Retinitis Pigmentosa, is a hereditary eye disease which affects approximately 1 in 3,500 people worldwide; ophthalmologists believe that number is double in the UAE. ***"My parents and I were told bluntly that I would go blind perhaps within the next 5-10 years and that no cure was likely to be found in my lifetime."*** They were handed a leaflet about the BRPS (British Retinitis Pigmentosa Society) and told that Katy could return to Moorfields (the leading eye hospital in London) if she thought it was necessary. Previously, Katy had thought it normal not to see in the dark and throughout her teens even went to cookery school and learned to drive. "***I even drove in the dark under the glare of streetlamps in London, with only a couple of incidents involving central reservations.***"

At the time she was diagnosed with RP, Katy was working on sailing yachts in the Mediterranean as a cook/crew which she loved. ***"I was almost able to ignore the prognosis that the doctors had given me."*** Nobody questioned Katy's abilities as she was able to hide her visual impairment quite well. So, for a while, it did not have a devastating effect and life just carried on as before. However, as her eyes slowly deteriorated, she began getting frustrated at the increasing loss of independence. Nevertheless, Katy was keen to continue sailing. She was approached to join the Royal Yachting Association and was part of the team that went to the first international blind sailing regatta in Auckland in 1992, where her team won the gold medal.

Finding work was tough, however she secured a position working for a charity fundraising organisation. "***I had difficulty adapting to working in an office and using the equipment for the visually impaired which had been supplied via the RNIB; it was of little use since I had no training."*** Katy left six months later.

After marrying her then long-term boyfriend Edward in 1992, Katy travelled for seven months before settling down and starting a family. "***We visited Moorfields again to speak to the consultant who assured us that my RP was***

caused by a recessive gene. So, our children were not likely to have RP, at least they had no more chance of having it than I had." Katy's sight loss was still gradual and so occasionally she could still ignore the problem, and consequently not come to terms with it. Interestingly, pregnancy seemed to hasten the rate of deterioration. Moving to Dubai for her husband's job, in 1996 when Thomas was 18 months old, the bright sunlight and white walled villas made life a bit easier. ***"Although going to a new house with low coffee tables was usually a painful experience for my shins."*** Two more children quickly followed. "***I was a pretty exhausted mother of three with a visual impairment and not admitting it."*** Their second child was born with a congenital heart defect which required a series of major operations at Great Ormond Street in the UK over three years - it was an emotional time for Katy.

"Why me, haven't I got enough to deal with already?"

Feeling that at the time it was all too much, she did eventually seek help and although it did not address the reality of coming to terms with losing one's sight; it did make her rethink what was important in her life, which was her children and family.

Setting sights on a new vision

Running to keep fit, Katy and her running partner Nicola decided that if they were to keep it up, they should stay motivated and aim for something big. With that in mind, the pair set their sights on the London Marathon in April 2005. A friend suggested that Katy should run and raise money for a charity and as her sight was deteriorating, she should associate it with that. ***"I was slightly dismissive about this as I felt that there was no research, no breakthroughs and no cures in my lifetime."*** Making a call to the BRPS who remembered Katy from her fundraising days in the UK, they were pleased to inform her that much research had been developed and progress was happening with a cure to be expected for some people within the next 20 years. "***This was the news I needed and finally there really was something to run for.***"

Feeling excited about the news she had just heard, she gathered a group of 10 mutual friends and volunteers around her kitchen table in June 2004. Each of the volunteers brought to the table their own range of skills. Amanda Sheridan, Campaign Manager, pulled out a white board to make notes; Katy was completely oblivious to what this was for. ***"I had no office skills, as it was difficult to secure work without specialist equipment. Nowadays, it is easier for the blind or visually impaired to enter the workplace in a wide variety of roles particularly with the assistance of voice-enabled technology."*** Sally Prosser



and Amanda Sheridan, both from marketing backgrounds, were aware of the benefits of events that raised sponsorship. As everyone made suggestions for bake and garage sales, Sally and Amanda suggested another way to raise money.

"We needed to raise our profile and make lots of noise about Katy and her marathon effort to attract sponsorship."

They looked for the most effective way to invest any money raised in line with their aim of helping to find a cure for hereditary eye disease. The infrastructure for research, such as medical-based universities, did not exist in the region (although this is now starting to change). So they looked for the best research projects in the world. They found that there was scope for more to be done to support, emotionally and physically, those facing this debilitating condition in their community.

In September 2004, the volunteers regrouped to work on their new project. ***"Collectively we all came up with the name Foresight. Thinking of a strap line took a little longer."*** Eventually they came up with - *Helping to find a cure for RP*.

As the non profit organisation has evolved over the years, they have since revised this to - *Today's hope, tomorrow's vision.*

In an effort to run the non profit organisation as professionally as possible, everyone had job titles and job descriptions from the start.

"Our meetings used to go on for hours; can you imagine 10 women in a room together?"

What they do recall as being an advantage was the educational background of some of the team and with their contacts, they gained much needed awareness in schools and colleges.

Running for a reason

Foresight's first event was an Iftar Fun Run on November 11, 2004. Tracy Schwerin, who managed their accounts for them at the time, suggested an optional donation of AED 1,000 from the volunteer team to cover all expenses. It wasn't compulsory and, provided the event covered the costs, they would recoup what they had invested. ***"Each and every volunteer was so committed to raising funds; it took over our lives but had amazing results."*** By the time Katy and Nicola got round to running the London Marathon, they were on target to raise their goal of AED 1,000,000 to contribute to the research for a cure for hereditary eye disease.

Loss of sight did have an impact on the way Katy ran and throughout her training she suffered from some painful injuries. At one point, it was doubtful if she would run at all. ***"Training was harder than I thought; I never imagined that my visual impairment would make it even harder because of the extra stresses and strains on my limbs, which have caused me more injuries than I might have had otherwise."*** Nevertheless, Katy and Nicola were among a record breaking 35,680 runners that started the 2005 London Marathon. Entering with a group of other runners with disabilities, they were among only a few visually impaired entrants. During the 42.2 km run, Nicola's support was invaluable as she had to remain alert and communicative for every minute of the race, even when she was coping with her own exhaustion. The pair successfully completed the London Marathon on April 17, crossing the line in 4 hours 47 minutes, well under their target of five hours.

"With a friend offering to double his money if we made it within our five hour target it really spurred us for the last 10K; after all, it was only three more times round Safa Park."

After returning from London, it was decision time on whether to run the non profit organisation full-time. Everything up until now had been focused on the London Marathon. With hugely positive feedback from the volunteers, those that could devote their time stayed and Katy's renewed enthusiasm meant she was ready to take on anything, and she was nominated Chairwoman. They then employed Sally Prosser as a part-time communications manager and Christine Jones Knill as an information and resources coordinator. Catherine, who worked with them full time for three years was responsible for the events. ***"We spoke to everyone related to or with a visual impairment and were fortunate to be introduced to Tamkeen, a Sheikh Mohammed initiative in Knowledge Village."*** Hamish Mackenzie was an instrumental part of their official set up. A British expat who suffered a four-wheel drive accident in the desert and severed his optic nerve, underwent rehabilitation in the UK and Australia before he moved back to Dubai with a mission to help set-up an organisation to train people of a working age, giving them a meaningful role in the work place. In June 2005, Foresight became a branch of Tamkeen. ***"Being affiliated with Tamkeen has worked extremely well for Foresight. There are great synergies there. We are focused on research, Tamkeen are on the educational front – we meet in the middle, raising awareness about visually impaired people and their needs."***

Deciding against being a 'donations only' charity, Foresight felt on the whole it was not a sustainable business model, and establishing an events division worked in their favour. ***"We wanted to give something back to the community for supporting us. Giving people an enjoyable time in return for their donations meant that they were more likely to become long-term sustainable donors."*** Even though events gave Katy and Foresight a much bigger profile, the work involved was often gruelling. Despite the hard work, they have organised many memorable events. For instance, 'Cycle ForeSight' proved to be a massive success, bringing the sport of cycling for visually impaired people to the UAE, as did the Foresight Polo event which has become a feature on many Dubaians' calendars, in addition to the first Foresight Ball sponsored by Grosvenor House which raised over AED 450 000.

Their net average amount of funds raised annually is about AED 1 million, of which over 80 percent is generated solely through the events that Foresight

runs. They pride themselves on keeping their event operating costs as low as 5 percent and running costs well below the UK statutory guidelines of 30 percent. ***"We must be accountable to the community that supports us. Therefore, the maximum amount of funds raised should go directly to help fight blindness and support people in the UAE who are losing their sight."***

Foresight admits they are lucky to have a strong support network.

"Atom advertising agency has worked with us since day one and has never charged us. Our website has been designed and developed for free and our huge support network never gives up and neither do we."

This way they can improve understanding of the causes of RP and related hereditary disorders of the retina identifying ways of preventing loss of vision or restoring visual function through funding of high quality research furthering world progress towards a cure.

Divine Next Steps

Foresight has funded five research projects over the past five years. This includes stem cell research at Southampton University, co-funding, with the British Retinitis Pigmentosa Society, a three year project into the identification of a major gene for Autosomal Recessive Retinitis Pigmentosa and a local screening project where Foresight is working in collaboration with Moorfields Eye Hospital Dubai and the Dubai Health Authority to identify suitable families. Whilst the economic downturn has affected companies' sponsorship budgets, Foresight continues to work even harder to meet companies' objectives as much as they can, and hope that some will still see the benefit of supporting such a worthwhile cause.

Stay totally focused on your core goal – there will be many reasons to be distracted – but always remember what you set out to do at the start of your organisation.

Learn how to say 'no' graciously – do non-profits receive more unsolicited advice than traditional businesses?

Remember to thank everyone and recognise their contribution – your organisation will be built on people's generosity.

Remain business minded and subscribe to continuous improvement. This will ensure you fundraise with maximum efficiency and effectiveness for your cause.

Operate with utmost transparency and keep your supporters informed of where you are spending the funds they have helped raise.

foresightrp.com




Frankie's
FRANKIE DETTORI
MARCO PIERRE WHITE



Frankie Dettori
38
Italian

When I was little I wanted to be… a petrol pump attendant.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was… sitting in Marco's restaurant with Marco Pierre White; the idea came to both of us and just clicked…

To me, the word successful means… be the best.

The defining moment in my life... winning 7 races at Ascot in 1996.

My friends describe me as… a complete lunatic.

I'd like to spend… more time at the top.

"I have always wanted to own my own restaurant, having starved myself for years – it has to be every jockey's dream?"

Best known as one of the elite stars of the world horse racing circuit, Lanfranco Oscar Dettori, better known as Frankie, first set foot on Dubai soil in 1993. He was 23 years old. Frankie was travelling to Dubai at the personal request of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who was at that time considering a revolutionary step - moving four of his race horses from the chilly English winter to the warmth of Dubai. Horse racing was certainly not an established sport in Dubai like it was in other parts of the world; there was no official racecourse and no formal racetrack; it was a time where Dubai was yet to make its mark in so many ways. Frankie's invitation was for just one-day to ride out, in the very first desert race. Invariably, the results were spectacular, and the seeds from which Dubai-based Godolphin Stables would emerge, had been sown. A partnership was born and Frankie was appointed as retained jockey to His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. A phenomenal success for the jockey and breeder followed fast and furiously. In just a year following the arrival of the first four horses that had originally made the journey from the UK, Godolphin boasted 60 horses in its stables.

Frankie, son of Sardinian jockey Gianfranco Dettori who in his time was a prolific winner in Italy, has followed in his father's footsteps - or should we say stirrups - since he was 14 when, having dropped out of school, he moved to the UK and trained at the famous Newmarket stables. At that time, any thoughts of owning his own restaurant were definitely not on the cards as all he wanted to do was make a name for himself in the cut-throat field of international horse racing.

Spending up to four months a year in Dubai, Frankie would arrive in mid-January and stay until mid-April. Home was the Hilton Trade Centre, Sheikh Zayed Road, which no longer exists. ***"In those days there were very few places to go, my local haunts used to be Alamo, which later changed to Trader Vics and Zinc Nightclub."*** As a regular visitor to the emirate, Frankie spent time in the Crowne Plaza Hotel where, not surprisingly, he got to know the staff very well. One relationship that he struck up in particular was with Anthony Liddiard who was at that time the Director of Operations for U.A.E. & Qatar for Intercontinental Hotels. They found they had much in common and the relationship endured over years. Although he was not aware of it at that time, Anthony was to play a major part in Frankie's life later on.

Track success

Frankie's riding prowess had given Godolphin some prestigious wins. He rode out on Dubai Millennium and won the world's richest horse race, the Dubai World Cup in 2000; he also won the same race riding Moon Ballad in 2003 followed by Electrocutionist in 2006, once again for Godolphin. Racing accolades were showered on him, thanks to riding 233 winners in 1994. Till date, he is still the first and only jockey to win all seven races at Ascot in September 1996; accolades that have this effusive and yet diminutive Italian well and truly ensconced in racing history forever.

By a fortuitous coincidence, Frankie's then PR manager was also handling Marco Pierre White, a three star Michelin star chef and restaurateur. On the occasions that Frankie had met Marco Pierre, it was evident then that they had similar interests and backgrounds; therefore an instant bond was created. ***"His mother was Italian, his father was called Frank and he had been a chef, I liked his restaurants and he loved the racing and so on."*** In spring 2004, Frankie was back in London following the conclusion of the Dubai racing season and found himself passing close by to Marco's restaurant ***"I called him up and told him I wanted to share a little Carpaccio and a glass of fine wine, so we enjoyed a dinner together."*** Their dinner together that evening concluded with an unexpected twist that neither had considered as part of the menu.



Food is a constant bitter sweet preoccupation for jockeys who must stay lean in order to ride; it is imperative that weight is controlled at all times. At just over 50kgs, Frankie has had to enforce the art of 'thank you but no thank you' when it comes to food. He has maintained his size by eating healthy well balanced meals, since this is as important as his performance on a race day. Splitting his time between his home in Newmarket and his second home in Dubai, shared with his wife Catherine and their five children Leo, Ella, Mia, Tallulah and Rocco, he found that he was increasingly faced with challenges of where to take his hungry brood to eat out. Popular fast food joints may have been a hit with the kids, but certainly less so with Frankie and his wife; whilst fine dining was not suited to a younger audience. Since he was not averse to looking at new business ventures, Frankie had already been dabbling in a new enterprise well away from the race track. It was a branded frozen food enterprise, however the venture did not make it out the starting gate.

"I really enjoyed creating the many variations of pizza, designing the packaging – it was such a lot of fun. The competition was steep and sadly we couldn't compete with the big UK supermarkets."

Marco was quick to echo Frankie's experiences of dining out *en famille*. As a father himself, he had already decided that he wanted to recreate his Knightsbridge (London) restaurant with a family feel to it. With similar family values, backgrounds and market presence, and where ideas quickly ignite, ***"we began discussing the creation of a dining experience that was not quite a pizzeria and not quite a fine dining restaurant; we were looking at meeting some way in between those markets."*** During their energetic and passionate impromptu brainstorming session, Marco scribbled down every idea they came up with and wrote them down on the tablecloth. They finally reached a common goal. "***Our aim was to introduce a concept to the market that was reasonable enough so that everyone could enjoy it, such as families of all ages and teenagers meeting up with friends; to the more stable business lunch market***."

Starting out of the gates

In September 2004, a mere five months after their chance meeting and unusual dinner party for two, the newly branded Frankie's Italian Bar and Grill restaurant opened in Knightsbridge. ***"We designed the menu together; well it was more like I gave him all my favourites to consider."*** Keeping the theme simple, with six starters, six pasta dishes, six main courses and four deserts, they included a further small yet affordable selection of Italian wines. At the outset, Frankie and Marco Pierre had established that their goal wasn't to reach the most elevated gastronomic levels worldwide, but to offer a quality dining experience at an affordable price, in a casual environment that had enjoyed a welcoming ambience.

As with any new business, start-up costs can skyrocket. The décor, hiring staff and meeting rent in areas such as Knightsbridge did not come cheap. In order to control costs and ensure sufficient funding, they secured nine investors to participate in their project. ***"The plan was to minimise the risk of going belly up and spread the personal liability. Even though we were committed to the idea, we realised that return on investment would take a lot longer to achieve."*** Frankie was keen to ensure that they took time to develop the new business. Securing investors would mean that quality would not be compromised. Allowing the partners to meet their desire for high standards they considered pivotal to the sustainability of their brand. Such was the success of the Knightsbridge restaurant that they have since, opened a further three Frankie's all within the UK.

"Marco's culinary success meant that he had numerous contacts in the industry and they were able to open many doors, including at the basement of Selfridges in London."

Back in Dubai during the winter of 2004, Frankie caught up with his now firm friend Anthony from The Crowne Plaza. Anthony had already heard from his fellow restaurateurs in London how popular Frankie's Italian Bar and Grill was doing. The quality of produce, menu selection and clientele it was attracting was making waves. Aware of Frankie's growing popularity in Dubai, both on the race course and off, Anthony mentioned in passing to Frankie that TGI Friday's lease in the Crowne Plaza Hotel was soon to expire. He made a bold proposal to Frankie to open one of his eponymous eateries in Dubai too. He would, however, have to tailor the name to suit a Middle Eastern audience

by calling it a Lounge and Grill, for obvious reasons. "***It was an ideal location, Marco flew out to Dubai and discussed the proposal and the viability, the seed sown and it was soon decided to expand their operation beyond the UK.***" It was clear that if this Middle Eastern venture was to be successful, it was going to need greater involvement and as the now Chief Executive Officer of Rmal Hospitality, Anthony knew that part of Rmal's plans for business expansion was their desire to bring world class dining and hospitality a wide clientele. With a growing trend in Dubai for unique dining experiences, Rmal Hospitality was perfectly poised to fold Frankie's new enterprise into Rmal's growing food and beverage portfolio.

With the terms agreed for the franchise, construction was well underway and nearly faltered, hitting the rails because of the fine print in the TGIF contract, stipulating that the lease agreement continue for an additional 10 years. It was impossible for them to consider any long term option on such an arrangement. Anthony had another solution however; he suggested an alternative venue with potential - the Al Fattan Marina Towers located in the heart of Dubai Marina. Frankie is first to admit,

"It was a blessing in disguise that the first venue didn't get off the ground."



At that time, Dubai Marina as a location was a long shot as it was at its infancy of design and development. ***"I wasn't too sure about the alternative choice for a potential restaurant site, I couldn't really imagine who on earth would be attracted to this area, let alone eat there."*** Nevertheless, in Dubai anything is possible, and in just three years the landscape of the Marina in the heart of so-called New Dubai has been transformed. ***"It was beyond my wildest dreams to ever think the Marina would look as fantastic as what does now; let alone the exceptional success that the restaurant has achieved in such a short time."*** Right on the doorstep of the Marina, lies freehold residential projects such as Jumeirah Beach Residences, Emirates Hills, the Meadows and the Greens Community. They all fitted perfectly into the ideal cliental for Frankie's new Lounge and Grill.

The winning post

On November 2007, Dubai saw Frankie's Lounge and Grill open its doors for the first time. Both Frankie and Marco flew over for the the grand opening event which saw a host of Dubai's movers and shakers attend the launch party. Including the likes of Sir Bob Geldof and champion boxer Chris Eubank, the format has changed slightly from the other restaurants in the UK. Since in Dubai it is owned as a franchise, the décor is a little more casual and modern than those found in London, and Marco has introduced some new dishes to their menu, slightly richer and fuller bodied, amongst those is Frankie's particular favourites lobster and foie gras.

There is strong competition in the Marina area, Frankie's is surrounded by restaurants keen to challenge what he delivers. Situated right opposite is BiCE, a restaurant group also offering an Italian flavour, which is well known in Milan, Tokyo and New York. They are a mere five minutes away from Bussola and just a stone's throw away from the newly opened Ronda Locatelli found on The Palm. Ever successful, Frankie's remains packed at the weekends and boasts a continuous flow of clients during week days. Still keen to keep their options open and explore different markets, six months after opening the restaurant, they launched their version of the ever popular Dubai Friday Brunch. Frankie happily admits that they now recognise their niche. ***"We are quite content to stick with it, traditional Italian cuisine with a contemporary twist, which is reflected in the elegant styling."***

Frankie declares that food is one of his enduring passions. "***I am Italian, you know, I love cooking, too."*** As a family man, he is keen to ensure that their children eat healthily. Frankie's Lounge and Grill in Dubai offers everyone the opportunity to share their eating and dining experience. Good food like good dining should become a way of ever day life. "***I am not quite sure what pulls it all together so successfully, whether it's the open plan oven, the piano bar or the choice of décor and menu, everything combines to creating a winning atmosphere."***

Being quiet and retiring is not for him. Frankie is as busy as ever with the racing season in Dubai. He is keen to keep in touch with those that he represents on the race track and those that continue to frequent his restaurant. He laughs, loudly, when he hears people on the race track on a Thursday night shouting, ***"Frankie, my steak was great last week or my chips were cold! Sometimes I wonder what they expect me to do as I am just about to mount for my next race."***

As for Dubai and what that it offers, he remains as passionate as ever, believing that there is an opportunity for everyone.

"If you have a positive outlook and believe that anything is possible, if you want it enough; then there is no better place in the world to launch yourself than Dubai… I should know."



Divine Next Steps

With another successful launch in Shanghai in 2007, Frankie's is set to open a third restaurant outside the UK, in Abu Dhabi by the summer of 2009. Frankie's retirement dream that many continue to dissuade him from is taking shape. "I hope one day to have 10 or 15 Frankie's globally. Our strategy is not to rush it. Everything will happen that is meant to happen, given time."



Do your homework

Have a good financial advisor

Give it 100%

Good luck with the rest….!

frankiesitalianbarandgrill.com




hotShots



Charlotte Simpson
40 *something*
British

The best piece of advice ever given to me was…
listen to advice but don't always take it.

I'd like to be remembered by… my images that will be forever cherished by families ….and supporting a charity.

My catchphrase is… "think cheeky thoughts", it always gives nice expressions on faces for me to capture

My friends describe me as… totally committed to what I do.

If I was not an entrepreneur, I would... be a very frustrated employee.

I am... very driven, energetic, a bit crazy sometimes, love humour and love life.

"My grandfather and father were photographers. It had, however, never occurred to me when I left school to follow in their footsteps. I had other ideas that I wanted to pursue."

After graduating from the London College of Fashion in 1984, with a diploma in Business Studies, Charlotte became a window dresser working for Harvey Nichols and Next stores throughout Central London. She only managed three years there deciding to join her father in his photography studio, learning the ropes before the itchy feet syndrome set in and new challenges beckoned. ***"I disliked the UK winter intensely. Once the clocks were turned back, the dark nights depressed me. I knew that I wanted to leave the UK in search of warmer climates."*** The ideal solution was a job overseas that would also enable her to focus on travel photography too.

It was 1989 when Charlotte applied for a job as cabin crew with the then thriving airline, Gulf Air. She moved to a permanent base in Bahrain. ***"It is amazing how naive I was when I was younger. I knew nothing about Bahrain other than it had all year round sunshine and I would get the chance to travel."*** Her posting with Gulf Air took her to numerous global destinations: Africa, Australia and Asia. In the earlier days of aviation, a crew layover really was just that, long lazy days seeped in relaxation. Often as many as seven days spent in any one location, waiting for the next crew change over. It was an idyllic existence. She did, however, find that she had much time on her hands and took this opportunity to develop her burgeoning hobby, photography.

Dubai was a city that she visited many times during her flying days. The glitzy façade of a rapidly growing city had quickly captured her eye. Even though she was grateful for the opportunity, flying had never been intended as a long term career. It had merely been her 'get out of the UK card' and the next stepping stone to a new destination. Charlotte had no real aspirations at that time to follow any specified career plan. After serving a two-year apprenticeship with Gulf Air, in 1991 she decided to take the plunge and leave the glamorous (or as some would say, the rather unglamorous) world of flying and relocate to Dubai, where she had secured a role as an account and business development manager with an advertising agency.

Her father, a second-generation photographer who had owned a successful studio in Hounslow and Chiswick, UK, had influenced Charlotte's creative flair that was always at the forefront of both her working life and personal pursuits.

She had a quick eye and found that her hobby was fast becoming a greater passion with a much stronger focus.

"Every weekend I would take my camera out to the desert and take rolls and rolls of slide film. In those days Sheikh Zayed Road had only a handful of buildings on it, they were however, iconic."

Work in the advertising industry involved long hours, and the working week often stretched into six and sometimes seven days, depending on the assignment. Such demands are rarely sustainable for long and the energy Charlotte had poured into the exciting new world of advertising faded and the itchy feet returned. Taking full advantage of her dual New Zealand and British citizenship, she packed up life in Dubai and took the long trip to Christchurch, where she lived for over eight years. Those years were to see her continuing to work in the industry where she had gained her most lucrative experience, advertising, this time concentrating in the area of sales. New Zealand proved to be a fantastic backdrop in many ways for her to continue her photography. Nevertheless, in a change of events in 2003, she found herself on her way back to Dubai, this time with her husband and a new baby on the way.



A flash of inspiration

After taking only 12 weeks' maternity leave, Charlotte slotted very quickly back into the agency lifestyle. She was still unsure if this was the right direction for her and if there were any alternative work avenues suited to her eclectic skill set and creative spirit. **"It never *occurred to me that I could turn my hobby into a business."*** While still working at the agency, she found herself responsible for assisting with the creation of layouts for clients using stock images, which were registered with the agency. Charlotte realised she too had a huge personal database of images that could easily be applied in the same context as those of her employer and realised that the revenue potential for an individual approach such as her own business could be satisfying. After reflecting that very evening on her comprehensive database of images gathered during her working and travel experiences, she made the snap decision to get them registered with an independent stock library and then take time to consider her options.

Charlotte had been working for a couple of agencies over three years and found herself with increased responsibility, casting models, actors and actresses for various assignments that were being run by the agency.

"I remember being critical and thinking how over priced the photo shoot was for what you actually got. I was confident that I could provide the same service and better."

Having identified an opportunity that could prove to be a win-win situation for both her and the agency, she knew she had nothing to lose. "***I offered my photographic experience to the agency and did secure a couple of assignments."*** The immediate upside was that Charlotte understood the business from a commercial aspect and from a photographic content angle too. Realising with more commercial experience, and upgrading her photographic skills by learning digital photography online, Charlotte's services could then prove a cost saving to any agency.

It wasn't until November 2006 when a friend visiting her at home commented on the photographs around the house depicting Charlotte's growing family, of two children, that the penny dropped, or rather, that the shutter clicked. Her friend asked who had taken them and, when told that it was all Charlotte's work, she asked her to consider doing a photo shoot of her family

too. Always happy to get her camera out and expecting nothing in return, Charlotte produced a portfolio of shoots for which her friend immediately insisted she take payment for. ***"It was at that moment when I realised I could do this for a living."***

However, it was going to take more than one photo spread to generate interest in a wider market. By specialising in children's shots, she decided the best way to test an audience would be to put together a collage of her photographs, have them printed and, as a very simple advertising strategy, place then on public noticeboards in busy shopping centres such as Spinney's and Park and Shop.

"Within days my phone was ringing off the hook, I had so much interest and those that came to see me recommended my services to their friends."

Her marketing approach was minimal yet cost effective; with very little in the way of savings, and in receipt of a small salary from the agency, she had little scope to do much more than this.

Having tested the market and receiving an overwhelming response, Charlotte decided to forfeit her weekends by taking each Saturday to building up her own client based to generate sufficient cash flow in order to start up her own photographic studio. It proved to be the best move she had made in years. In just ten sittings, her income was more than the monthly salary that she received with the advertising agency. "***It didn't take a rocket scientist to work out I was in the wrong job and I decided to resign. Once the decision was made, there was no going back."*** Charlotte knew that if she was going to be successful and realise her goal, every ounce of energy was needed to study how the business was going to operate. Design, sales, merchandising and customer service would be essential to get it right. ***"There were times when I wondered where my life was taking me, and then it all clicked into place. This was the perfect way in which to combine all my experience; from the visualisation skills learnt through window dressing, photographic skills learnt from my dad's studio, customer service training I learnt as cabin crew, in addition to the advertising, marketing and sales expertise gained from advertising agencies. It was the obvious choice to start a business doing something I loved doing – photography."*** As good as the promise she had made to herself, Charlotte worked for the agency for a further six months,

enough time to put together a marketing plan, then purchasing a template website, together with a web developer friend who created her website and www.hotshotsdubai.com came into being.

Creating a name that represents a business powerfully is vital. The name HotShots Dubai originated from her initial client base of mums and dads asking her to do their 'kids shots'. This was an improvement on alternative name options: stockShots and kidShots, both of which had been conceptualised in an ad hoc way. ***"I scribbled them down on my business plan which was on the back of a menu."*** The website design was initially rudimentary - primarily designed to generate business for her children's photo shoots. Whilst that had been her primary target, it was not long before she was getting enquires about weddings and even approaches from interior designers. HotShots allowed her the freedom to add to her portfolio by taking on new and diverse assignments: stock shots, food shots and further expansion into model and casting shots. ***"HotShots Dubai was the only name that fits with the range of services I offer and I have yet to meet anyone who cannot connect with what I do through this name."***

In March 2006 Charlotte resigned from the advertising agency. ***"It was in hindsight probably one of the hardest things I have ever done."*** Her timing was certainly far from perfect as Dubai was just heading into the unbearable summer months when her main clientele was just about to go on holiday.

"It was a frightening experience and I barely survived financially."

Whilst work was scarce, it did allow her to take some additional time to fine tune her business plan. With winter approaching overseas, the influx of expatriates flooding back to Dubai in early September heralded the end of the long hot summer. ***"By then I was well prepared and ready to launch my marketing campaign."***

Once again taking the creative view that she would keep her advertising approach simple, Charlotte took a print run of personal postcards and hand delivered flyers to schools, doctors and dentists. ***"I even built up my own database."*** It worked. Two months later she was inundated with work requests. Unable to handle both the role of photographer and photo editor, she took onboard her first employee, a part time editor who stayed for just six months before leaving to have a baby. It was June 2007, just around the time when Charlotte found herself applying for the Lloyds TSB Small Business Award, when she joined forces with Juliet, a skilled graphic designer and photographer. **"I *wasn't in a position to afford the luxury of a full time staff member, but I did make a promise to Juliet that if I won an award, by the end***

of the year, I would secure her employment with me - full time." An accolade quickly followed, and Charlotte won Entrepreneur of the Year 2007. Juliet is now Charlotte's right-hand girl and they work together on wedding and hotel shoots, which now play a large part of HotShots' core business.

"Last year we worked on 22 weddings during a nine-week period alone. On my first wedding assignment, however, I was more nervous than the bride!"

Charlotte believes that her application to Lloyds TSB - albeit a challenging one - was rewarding as it made her more aware of business opportunities for her brand, which proved to be the platform to catapult her business. "***Just making the application gave me an enormous amount of confidence."*** She made a further investment, a professional business coach who worked with her prior to her presentation for the Lloyds TSB Small Business Award. If she was to have maximum impact she had to face her demons. ***"I had an innate fear of public speaking and didn't want this to ruin my chances of winning."*** No longer behind the camera, she knew that she had to present her work to a much wider audience. The partnership with Charlotte coach taught her the effective art of communication, primed her approach to developing a winning business, and helped to cement her personal life too.

Business hots up

One of her greatest achievements, which Charlotte remains incredibly proud about, is that she never took any financial loans to set up her business. She is even happier to admit that to this day has never owned a credit card. ***"My first digital camera took four trips to the shop before it could be mine, each time I left a cash deposit, it was the best way to make sure I got what I wanted as I was not always the best at saving."*** Her first camera was then supplemented by a laptop and then gradually updating her equipment. Charlotte purchased four computers, investing AED 15,000 of her personal savings, saved over six months, plus a small contribution, realised from the sale of her house in New Zealand. This cash flow enabled Charlotte to officially set up her business through the Links Group. Conscious of the need to make sacrifices, Charlotte refused to draw a salary and constantly reinvested revenue back into HotShots Dubai, buying a better lens for the next job or a new laptop. This was all part of the growth plan and a desire to land the next big job. The reinvestment has paid off. ***"It's amazing now to think that what I earned working for a month in my previous job, with lots of pressure and time***



away from my kids, I am now able to invoice for a full day's photo shoot that still remains affordable to clients."

While little has changed in terms of her working hours, Charlotte admits that although she remains busy and still has to work many weekends, her life balance is infinitely better. A Mary Poppins team; a nanny cum driver who helps with school pick ups, this has allowed her to enjoy quality time at home and has even managed to attend far more swimming galas and sports days than she ever would have at the agency. ***"My husband was nervous when I left full time employment. Our income had dropped by one salary each month. I felt it could be justified as the long hours I had been working for someone else meant that I saw very little of my own family."***

Her success is based on the quality of the product she offers, not the money made. HotShots charge a flat fee of AED 950 for a 45 minute family photo shoot. This entitles the client to full ownership of approximately 24 creative images in colour and black and white, all edited and compiled on a hi-resolution CD; this means you can take them away and print to choice, as many as you wish, as often as you want.

"Our mission statement is to provide creative, yet affordable photography with no copyright."

Charlotte started small with true words of wisdom from her Dad ringing in her ears. "***Never over spend and think carefully before you buy."*** Charlotte has learned from her experience in advertising that there are much more affordable ways to get your name out there, but ultimately, you are only as good as your last job. ***"The number of repeat clients is the best feeling."*** In the past two years she has photographed the golfer Henrick Stenson's wedding, Gordon Ramsay, the New Zealand rugby sevens team, and local companies such as DNATA, Dubai Duty Free, and Grand Hyatt Hotel just to name a few. Charlotte has collected three business awards, in addition to the Lloyds TSB Award, which she won in 2007. She has also won two Middle East Business Awards (MEBA) as Best Small Business of The Year 2008 and Best New Company of the Year 2008. To top it all off, her initial basic website was revamped and has won the UAE Web Award – 'Bronze' in the Services category. All these achievements have been part of a wider dream. "***I was never particularly good at anything I did at school except art. I left with no formal qualifications."*** However, she did make her Dad a promise… ***"For every O Level exam I didn't pass I will win an award – I only have three more to collect."***



Divine Next Steps

The economic downturn that the world is experiencing has resulted in no loss of sales or projects for HotShots Dubai. Her belief remains strong, that what she offers is quality and excellent value for money. "Everyone wants to keep their images, whether they are personal or commercial and Hotshots are firmly positioned to continue to do this." Her focus behind the lens remains as strong as ever; there is no downturn in her business plan, growth is firmly on her agenda, and she has a promise to keep for her father…

Never say never

If you are really passionate about what you do – just do it!

No success comes without 'total commitment' to your business at all times

Don't focus on money – focus on your product and your customer… and success will follow

Always ask your customers how you can improve your product

Never stop learning new techniques

hotshotsdubai.com


10
A
WEEK
General Fiction


Magrudy's™
bringing you only the best



Isobel Abulhoul
59
British

I'd like to be remembered by… making a difference in education.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was… excited and sure it would work.

My catchphrase/word is… passion.

My friends describe me as… an ideas person.

The best piece of advice ever given to me was… trust your own instinct.

My least glamorous job was… working in a jam factory.

"I have always been an ardent reader; one could even describe me as slightly addicted to books. However, it never occurred to me that what I enjoyed as a hobby could be turned into a business, where I could indulge my passion and call it work."

Having made Dubai their home for over 40 years, and raising their family of five here, Isobel and her husband Abdullah Abulhoul never imagined that they would establish Dubai's first bookshop, one that has 35 years of successful trading behind its family origins.

Born in Cambridge, Isobel met her husband in 1968 after being introduced by a mutual friend; they were both students at that time and Isobel was studying at the College of Arts and Technology, she visited Dubai to meet Abdullah's family. They got engaged and then married in 1969, and have been living happily in Dubai ever since. Even in those early days, Isobel recalls. ***"Dubai was a very special place to me, it held so much promise."*** Isobel taught at the Dubai Infants School; she was also involved in founding the Al Ittihad Private School, a school still going strong today.

In the early 70s, it was apparent that there was little in the way of educational toys and books available for children in Dubai. It was even more obvious to Isobel, once she had her first daughter in 1971. Each trip to the UK meant making a careful selection of as many interactive and educational toys and books that she could take back with her to Dubai. ***"Looking back, I guess this was really the beginning of a business opportunity. Neither my husband nor I recognised this at that time."***

By 1974, Isobel had had her second child, a son, when she decided that the time was right to explore a fledgling idea of establishing an educational toyshop in the city. ***"I knew that if I was experiencing difficulty in finding a good source for books and toys, there would be others who would be in a similar position as me."*** Isobel had transported her own book collection with her when she first came to Dubai and she used these books as a source of knowledge to get in touch with the publishers. She took a similar approach with the toys and contacted the companies that produced toys that she loved." ***It was pre internet and email days, I typed letters and used the telex. Yet, it was actually very simple and cost effective. It was not instant in the***

way that emails are, the process took longer. But it did give you breathing space between sending out an order and receiving a reply. Looking back, I think that was a blessing. I didn't need to travel anywhere. I could work very successfully from my home base." With a fast-expanding brood, Isobel needed flexibility; it meant that she could commit the time to develop her new business venture in her spare time, and in the evenings whilst her children were in bed, an ideal scenario for any mother.

Isobel admits to never having put a formal business plan together, but actually spent much time planning the various parts of the enterprise. She focused very much on the end user, which for her initial marketing purposes was herself.

"My vision was to be able to stock products for a wide age range that were of solid educational value, safe, tested and ethically sound. I love toys. So this was a very pleasurable experience; to choose toys that I thought children would enjoy."

Having made the first careful selection of books and toys, she arranged for the shipment to arrive in Dubai a few months later. ***"I have no doubt that elsewhere in the world I would never have had this kind of opportunity – it was difficult to fail in those heady Dubai days though!"***

A new chapter

Dubai's expansion was very swift, and the container terminal was under construction. The first shipment of goods arrived in a 40-foot container. Once the stock was unloaded, there was nowhere to return the empty container. ***"It was a huge learning curve; neither the shipping company nor we had thought about how to return the container from the dock side. Fortunately, we found a home for the container and were able to concentrate on making arrangements to open our new shop."***

Choosing a name for their enterprise was another challenge, and many evenings were spent brainstorming possibilities. Magrudy's, which has several



meanings in Arabic, was the eventual winner. Oddly, one of its meanings is 'fated' so, in a way, it had to be chosen! "***It was easy to pronounce, in both Arabic and English and it was a name that appealed to us both."***

Isobel's global research had discovered that many of the world's best-known retailers used a family name or a name without an obvious link to the products sold. She believes that this allows these companies to move and expand in different directions without having to change their trading names. ***"People are always interested in why we chose Magrudy's as our trade name and often think it is my maiden name, which it is not!"***

Magrudy's was finally ready to open its doors in 1975, at its orginal location on the Ittihad Road at the end of the Dubai Airport runway. In those days, traffic was not a problem and you could drive from Jumeirah or Sharjah and get to Magrudy's in 15 minutes. ***"The original shop was very customer driven, I would listen to what customers wanted and then try and source it."*** The shop had an eclectic assortment of weird and wonderful things from haberdashery to cookbooks to childrenswear and swimwear. However, it didn't take long before books began to emerge as the largest category, although toys were, and still are, a very important product for Magrudy's and their customers. Based on customers' needs, it was decided to give more space to books and a larger shop was opened in Jumeirah in the late 80s as the flagship store for Magrudy's Shopping Mall.

"The early days were very much trial and error, but I took calculated risks,

based on my knowledge and experience and I always trusted my instinct." This has been proven to be an important factor over the years.

Magrudy's has a strong family feel to it and Isobel was very much involved in the day-to-day operations. Up to the late 80s, the staff that worked with her were a dedicated rota of part-time mums who all worked shift patterns: one day on, one day off.

"Friday was our day off, and unlike now, everything closed between 1 and 4pm, plus there was no traffic to contend with."

Isobel's family had grown to five and she affectionately thought of Magrudy's as her sixth child. It became more time consuming than she could ever have imagined and she had to reconsider how best to manage the growing organisation. Opting to take on full-time staff members, Magrudy's now has nearly 300 employees.

A further voyage of discovery was to occur when leafing through a copy of a trade magazine that would propel Magrudy's into a new decade of computerised software. With over 3,000,000 books in print circulation at any given time, it was impossible to stock everything. An advert caught her eye



for a specialist books software programme that linked into a book database, enabling Magrudy's to order any book in print. ***"It was one of our biggest outlays, but by committing a substantial investment on the software, we changed our whole perspective on how we sold books."***

The best seller

Isobel's business tactics have always been cautious over the past 35 years; not borrowing, not overstretching finances and allowing the business to grow organically have been key factors. Isobel believes that not having any preconceived ideas on how to do things, has also worked in the company's favour over the years. Until 2001, Isobel was responsible for selection of all books and other products that were to be stocked and regularly attended trade fairs in Europe and UK.

There is now, however, a dedicated buying team in place responsible for ordering the various types of products and books. Arabic books, which are a fast growing category, are achieving an excellent growth rate, partly due to more titles being available in the language. With so many magical moments, from opening new shops to continually delivering a high level of customer service, Isobel recalls one of her most memorable achievements.

Her involvement as Festival Director in the Emirates Airline International Festival of Literature (EAIFL) in February 2009 was a tremendous experience. It was the first international literary festival of this size and stature in the Middle East. With over 50 events, featuring 65 authors from 20 countries - whose books ranged from some of the finest contemporary literary fiction to inspirational lifestyle titles and the magical world of children's books - the objective was to stimulate, enlighten and, most importantly, entertain the large audiences who flocked to the sessions. It was declared a triumph.

Over 20,000 visitors attended the four-day event.

"The buzz was electric; the experience can never be understated".

Feedback from the authors was extraordinary; Terry Brooks said it ***"was the best-run festival he had ever been to",*** whilst Sir Ranulph Fiennes was ***"touched at the tremendous effort put into the successful event."*** Following the inaugural event, it is now on its way to becoming one of the most popular literary festivals on the international calendar.

An intrinsic part of Dubai, Magrudy's is a strong, ethical, family-run business

which always has the needs of the local community in mind. The team works to encourage reading amongst a wide audience, both nationals and residents alike. Affiliated with many book clubs that reach both adults and children, there are also regular sessions in the various shops: talks, signings, story tellings, art and craft activities are but a few of the current topics on offer. Magrudy's Education Resource Centre has built up excellent links with the school and college sector, offering professional development for teachers through regular seminars and by providing textbooks and library supplies.

With well over 30 years of trading, Magrudy's remains a much loved household name. With creative ideas for the future, it is clear that their story is far from reaching a conclusion, regardless of what the future holds…

"Concentrate on core values and never lose sight of that."

Divine Next Steps

As with any dedicated family-run business, Isobel and her husband are soon to face the challenge of what happens next. Still being able to retain the family values that they have both engaged with so much passion; protection of their brand is key. A newly launched franchise programme will make it possible to reach markets outside the UAE. Beginning in Doha, they have already selected their first franchisee to ensure their core values are safeguarded. "Being in business is not just about being profitable and successful – it's about pride in providing an excellent service for your customers."



Choose to be involved in something you enjoy

Learn basic business skills from constructing a letter to PC skills

Work to a timeline. This way your goals can be reached

Be open to ideas and change they may work for the better

Treat people at work as you would like to be treated

magrudy.com


MORE


MORE



Wouter Lap
48
Dutch

When I was little I wanted to be… better than my father.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was… highly charged.

To me, the word successful means… everyone who fights with me will be successful.

I'd like to be remembered by… honesty.

My friends describe me as… aggressive, determined, and passionate.

"Is it not natural for everyone to desire mOre from life? I don't think I am very much different from others."

Known to not do anything 'by the book,' Wouter Lap and his wife Marijke created a coffee shop, which is so much mOre than just any other coffee shop. They both have over 50 years of combined experience spanning the international arena in a multi faceted range of varied hospitality enterprises. What makes mOre so appealing is its own unique identity that mirrors the fruition of their partnership; creativity, passion, and an awareness and understanding for sustainable food trends. The ambience that mOre provides its many patrons is an aesthetically balanced and understatedly comfortable surrounding in which to enjoy a tantalising menu that is very 'mOre-ish'.

Born into a creative family, Wouter Lap 'senior' was never keen for his son to follow in his footsteps. "***My father has been recognised as one of Holland's six most influential post-war artists; he actively discouraged me from following in his footsteps***. ***As a child, I was certainly creative and was often told, a little hyperactive. I was by no means considered stupid whilst at school but let's put it this way- school years were not the easiest for me."*** It was only as his education progressed that he has been able to look back and realise that the difficulties at school were attributed to an underlying learning disability, which at that time was neither diagnosed nor well understood. Wouter was in fact dyslexic. His frustrations about his inability to learn quickly earned him the label of being very impatient and short 'fused'. With an undiagnosed learning disability, Wouter not only had to repeat kindergarten, but also years two and four of junior school. He became one of the oldest and longest serving pupils at school. However, it was to provide him with an unusual leg up the proverbial career ladder.

He began a part time job at the weekends in a restaurant - his first job was squeezing juice for breakfast - before progressing to work full time in the kitchen towards the end of his school years. ***"I would finish school at 2pm, be at work for 3pm and would work up to midnight, once again returning to school in the morning to attend class."*** It was enough for Wouter to know that he wanted to follow a career in hospitality and knew that in order to do this, joining a catering school was the way to go. Competition however was steep and out of the 2,500 applicants who applied each year, only 144 were selected and those that were successful generally had respectable high school grades. Never one to be daunted, he was smart enough to work out that if he got his fellow pupils, who were his friends and were considered intellectually brighter than him, to help with his studies, he might just be one of those 144 making their way to catering college for the next intake.





"***I was already earning money, so had the upper hand. It was a fair exchange - their academic knowledge and skills was what I was desperate to learn. In exchange for their verbal knowledge transfer, I bought lunches and paid for trips to the movies."*** It was a gamble but it eventually paid off as Wouter secured a place at the catering school.

As with all good ideas, they don't always go to plan and without his 'friends' there to help him with the theoretical side of the course, he found himself struggling; by 1982 he was asked to leave. Still determined to have a career in the restaurant trade, Wouter would turn up each morning at the Hoefslag, a then two Michelin star restaurant in Bosch and Duin; for nine consecutive days he went there asking the owner for a job. On day 10, he was taken on as a pot washer. Wouter was resolute and undeterred in his desire to become a top chef and true to his cause. Over the years, Wouter did indeed work his way up. It was an arduous apprenticeship but one that helped him to become Executive Chef, as a result of experience gained by working at a number of Michelin star restaurants in Holland. It was during this time that he met and made a pact with his then girlfriend, Marijke (now his wife). ***"We agreed that I would follow her twice around the world, and she would thereafter follow me."*** His career took him across the globe working in the catering industry in Belgium, Australia and Africa. In 1993, Wouter moved to Dubai with his wife and two children to work as Executive Chef for the well-known Sheraton hotel.

Cooking up a new idea

It was 19 Food and Beverage Managers and 11 General Managers later before Wouter decided, enough was enough. The life in five-star hospitality chains no longer fitted him well. "***I wasn't the most flexible person, plus my wife gently suggested we needed to earn more money for schooling and other basic living expenses."***

"More out of life, more happiness, more security… more friendship and more honesty. It became a driver for us and it became a perfect link to many other products that we now offer."

In 1998 - after using the AED 54,000 gratuities that the Sheraton owed him to he for living cost and school fees - Wouter was left with the balace of AED

12,000 which he committed to a new company that Marijke had set up. Called Creative Connections, it was a consultancy specialising in product launches and events. Now both self employed, things were tough. ***"There was many a sleepless night."*** It did however build the raft for their next enterprise, Intelligent Foods. This was a new business set-up suggested and supported by an Emirati friend, and thereafter also partner, who guaranteed a bank loan of AED 100,000 to purchase the equipment needed to come to market and meet Wouter's new audience, children. The philosophy behind this new initiative was to produce fresh natural products using cooking techniques that would ensure a tasty but trendy end result, and one that would definitely tempt the taste buds of kids.

In 2000, Wouter frequently found himself searching for the perfect coffee and a place to spend some time exploring his creative thoughts. That frustration was to fuel his latest venture, a new idea that combined the key principles of what they believed were important. It was to be their own café, and no different than if they were creating a menu for an evening's dining. Creating their award wining formula required the right balance, in terms of design, colour and choice of materials. ***"Contrast makes things interesting.***" Indeed, this mix has served them well.

Where to establish his new café was critical. ***"I was initially approached to establish a sandwich-style shop situated in Garhoud, the heart of a cabin crew residential."*** After viewing the location, Wouter realised that the area was a hive of activity and passing trade. With Emirates Airlines on a massive expansion drive, trade was sure to be plenty.

Launched in June 2002, mOre was a veritable hub for the meeting of minds and cultures, the simple approach to dining made it stand apart as a place that brings people together. With choices to suit everyone, mOre's open plan kitchen, quirky design, generous portions and 70 dishes dedicated to good quality and health, all at a reasonable price, took off.

"Our menu has now become so big. However, we can't remove any dishes as many of the regulars get very upset."

Aiming to please as many patrons as he can, Wouter asks his most regular clients to sample new dishes that will only go on the menu if the diner gives it their seal of approval. ***"Anything you create should have a heart beat – a centre point."*** There is no doubt that mOre hit the spot. Only five months after the launch, they broke even. Since then, they have won accolades and are proud that they do not rely on tourists for business. "***We have never needed***

to advertise, people come to eat here because they know what we have to offer is good – word of mouth is everything."

mOre in the making

Wouter and Marijke adopt the same commitment and fighting sprit working for themselves as they did when they worked for others. ***"Our two values are honour and pride. When we commit to a task or make a promise, regardless of who it is for, we do it. Thinking only of money does not reap a satisfactory end result."*** By fostering this same approach, Wouter has built successful relationships and friendships, and with this a high degree of trust. It was one of these trusted relationships with a friend, John Salek, that saw the foundation of another branch to his business, mOre ice cream. ***"I wanted to create product lines which compliment our overall concept."*** He combined forces with John who had an ice cream business, and they now produce 100 varities from 'funky monkey' to fat free options. With another friend, Mohamed Moledina, they established mOre coffee - a range of signature blends that they import and roast themselves.

As well as the profitable brand spin-offs such as mOre ice cream and mOre signature coffee blends, mOre café also supports creativity and the arts. Its interiors have always been a canvas for aspiring local artists to display their work, and in the coming months there are plans to introduce a bookshop into each of the café locations.





"It is exciting seeing how someone's personal work can be interwoven into the fabric of mOre's interior".

Through his outlets, Wouter has created a haven of calming tranquillity that caters for everyone. With an undeniable neighbourhood feel, all cultures can get together and mingle at mOre. Putting this all together has been absorbing and hugely rewarding. ***"It has absorbed all my creativity, I now need to start another one."***

Divine Next Steps

The mOre philosophy is to maintain the company as a family-run enterprise, with honesty, diligence and a 'never-give-up' attitude being the main ingredients that drive mOre.

A new outlet has opened at The Dubai Mall and regional expansion is underway within the GCC. The possibilities remain limitless...

MORE®

Look after your staff

Don't underestimate your clients

Give people what you would like to have

If it is easy, everyone would do it.

Stay calm (always)

morecafe.biz





OUTDOOR CONCEPTS

Stylish outdoor living



Mark Sykes
45
British

Alan King
48
New Zeland

On the day I decided to set up my business...
I was cold on a chair lift. (Alan & Mark)

My friends describe me as… a hippy. (Mark)

If I was not an entrepreneur, I would... be a ski bum. (Alan)

I relax… when I am in the mountains. (Mark)

The best piece of advice ever given to me was…
don't eat yellow snow. (Mark)

I'd like to be remembered by… assisting men to cook properly at BBQs. (Alan)

My least glamorous job was… milking cows. (Alan)

"We made our decision on a chairlift in Saint Foye that we were going to mount a campaign to take over and develop the Beefeater brand in the Middle East."

Mark Sykes, Alan King and two other close friends found themselves in an intriguingly unusual position of being offered the opportunity to purchase distribution rights for Beefeater, an Australian brand renowned for its stylish and quality barbeques made for alfresco dining.

Beefeater was as at that time being run as a 'cottage industry' by a partnership of four airline pilots who had taken the rights to market this high-end product in Dubai in 2001.

Even though the initial partnership had started well and developed into a reasonably successful operation, it had reached an impasse. Finding it increasingly difficult to meet the business demands of Beefeater, and keep up their day jobs, the initial partnership of airline pilots invited Mark and Alan to make their take-over bid.

"We saw a huge opportunity to develop the brand and take it to a new level." Having lined up an investment of AED 2,000,000 in personal savings, Mark, Alan and their two friends launched their campaign to purchase the shares and set aside the capital investment to undertake a needed commercial review of the development of the Beefeater brand.

Mark Sykes was no stranger to setting up a business in Dubai. Having moved from Bournemouth to the Middle East in 1987, to work in Qatar, he then honed his creative and management skills, and in less than one year of becoming a resident in 1991, he launched 'Face to Face', a Dubai based advertising agency. As its founder, he built up a respectable portfolio of campaigns across emerging Dubai and the Middle East**.**

It was not until 2001 that Mark met Alan King who was, at that time, an airline pilot based in Dubai. Ambitious expats with similar interests, their proven commercial backgrounds propelled them to start looking for new opportunities in an environment that was showing every sign of accelerating into high octane growth mode.

"***Dubai in those days was very much the land of opportunity, those days of gaps in markets were perfect for opportunists."***

With a sound network of business and personal contacts, as well as a combination of skills, the entrepreneurial ship set sail; another two friends, Alistair Jordan and Damien Hitchen, joined the partnership crew, and together they were all headed for one destination: success.

Having been approached to buy the rights for Beefeater in Januray 2005, they applied the same principals as Mark had used when founding Face to Face. ***"We have registered Outdoor Concepts as a company in the British Virgin Islands (BVI) with all four partners having an equal share. In Dubai, we have an agency agreement with our local sponsor who technically owns 51 percent of the trade licence company alone."***

Igniting the fire

"Our timing could not have been better." In 2005, Dubai's freehold property boom had begun in earnest. For the first time, expatriates were able to purchase their homes in designated areas of the city. New hotels, as well as leisure and entertainment areas, were springing up rapidly. The concept of outside living and alfresco dining was becoming an increasingly visible trend, and Mark and Alan knew that they were onto a winner. Despite their enthusiasm, the partners soon realised that, ***"the first thing we needed to do was change the old company name which was BBQ and Outdoor."***

They were aiming big; they did not wish their operations to be limited to the miniscule Dubai market; Mark and Alan, together with Damien and Alistair, devised a strategy to promote their products across the Middle East. In addition, they were especially keen to retain product flexibility by adding quality ranges of products to their existing Beefeater portfolio. From this rationale, the name 'Outdoor Concepts' was born.



Outdoor Concepts launched in 2005, just six months after that impulsive 'chairlift decision'. It went from retailing Beefeater BBQs in



two outlets in Dubai, to 13 in both Dubai and whole of UAE. Within the first year, their successes extended across to other parts of the Middle East to include Bahrain and Qatar.

"Having Beefeater as one of our brands, allowed us to step inside many doors, which then permitted us to offer our clients an even greater range from our varied product portfolio."

Since then, Outdoor Concepts has introduced a range of stylish outdoor living accessories: patio heaters, waxwork citronella candles, oils and they have marketed mosquito zappers. More recently, a new concept of outdoor kitchens has been marketed. ***"Retailers like our products, they are compact, functional and of a very high standard, our product range is designed to offer value for money, be low on maintenance and suitable for even the smallest of outside spaces."***

Despite being avid marketers who understand the importance of branding, being a B2B business, they don't advertise. ***"Outdoor Concepts is as it is a distribution company, we highlight our product brands."*** Beefeater has

however sponsored a handful of events; admittedly they have concentrated predominately on male dominated ones. This promotional avenue has allowed interested people the chance to try before they buy, thanks to a real barbeque station being mounted for them to have a go.

"Men just love to prod the meat, tell me a BBQ where you have been to and the man is not in the midst of the cooking, even though they may never turn their hand to it in real life."

Everyone has a different view of what is perfect. So it's no surprise that Mark, Alan and their partners are constantly faced with the challenge of those who will argue that cooking on charcoal makes food taste different. In their defence Alan declares, ***"We avoid the carbon taste. Our approach to barbequing is that our product is so advanced that every model boasts vaporisers and diffusers which allows any meat to flavour along with the cooking process."*** They are confident that their numerous taste tests have yielded nothing but many satisfied tasters. Additionally, important factors such as safer cooking and the easy-to-clean and store equipment makes their product ideal for everyone.

Caveman makes fire

As with any business, evolution is a natural part of the development plan. Having successfully tackled the retail outlets and established their market dominance, they saw their next big target as building developers. As an avid lover of the outdoors, Alan concentrated on designing a modular outdoor kitchen suitable for home living. ***"The property market had matured in Dubai and we found that an increasing number of homeowners wanted to redefine their outdoor living space from a sand dune into something more appealing and, in doing so, put their kitchen outdoors, permanently."***

Competition played right into their hands, with even more developments coming to the market in what was considered prime locations. In 2006, Outdoor Concepts were working closely with Nakheel on the Jumeirah Golf Estate projects installing their design of modular outdoor kitchens. Outdoor living now took on a new approach with all the comfort of indoor living moving to the outdoors. A luxury outdoor lifestyle had finally arrived.



As a partnership of enthusiastic entrepreneurs, they had even bigger ideas.

"We knew that there were two types of buyers investing in BBQs; impulsive and considered."

They were quick to see that an untapped market share was up for grabs and seizing this opportunity, they looked for a new approach to market their product line from a more affordable price point. Beefeater was a premium product which catered for the high-end considered buyer and its quality was reflected in its price. Outdoor Concepts, however, wanted to also target and meet the needs of young residents that were arriving to the UAE in droves.

Back to the drawing board to put this new idea to the market involved Mark



developing a new brand from scratch. Over the next 12 months, whilst Mark worked on the marketing plan, Alan was sourcing a BBQ with a maximum price point of AED 1,500.

In 2007, the marketing plan fleshed out. The team still had to procure a name for the new range. If it was to become a global brand, they had to get it right; the name had to reflect global positioning, along with associations that everyone could relate to.

"Many of the original business names were too clichéd, we needed to think outside the box and what was the essence of the brand we envisaged."

Having made contacts through trade shows in Frankfurt and China, Alan finally sourced a Chinese BBQ, that met all the criteria they had established were critical from a launch perspective.

It was Mark, with the creative mind that one evening when mulling over their business plans, had a flash of inspiration. ***"Fire, who was the first person to make a fire? The caveman makes fire."*** With their quirky marketing campaign taking off, focusing on how, as far back as 2 million BC, the caveman first made fire; some 482 generations later, the basic principles of the caveman remain unchanged. Despite modernisation, improvements in the equipment used to generate fire down the ages. 'Caveman' was therefore considered

an ideal name to take to the market, and 'Fire' the perfect product.

The brand image that these new age 'cavemen' wished to portray about fire is one of fun and irreverence revolving around light and heat, but still offering excellent quality and value - one which would appeal to the modern 'Neanderthal' in every man (and even women). It appeals to younger families and singles, who are increasingly setting up home in the Emirates but who may not want to invest in top end outdoor lifestyle accessories, such as large gas fired barbecues.

Just one year from conception, Caveman took Fire to market, with both Spinney's and Geant being willing retailers to test the product. By the end of December 2008, over 100 BBQs a month were sold. It was therefore evident that a wider audience was interested in their new merchandise, and further challenges were anticipated as they were unable to produce in volume.

"The retailer needs a good price, you can only get this from volume and this is where we needed to look at negotiating a licensing agreement with a big manufacturer."

Mark readily admits than when he first told Beefeater about their product, they were less than impressed. However, after reflection, they came to realise that they were not in direct competition. ***"You wouldn't walk into a Toyota garage and buy a BMW!"*** he laughs. He is adamant that Caveman does not wish to become a manufacturing enterprise. "***We, as in Caveman, are the brand and are doing what is necessary until the market is ready for us."***

It is still very early days for Caveman. But what is clear is that, through their proactive attitude and significant market presence with Outdoor Concepts, they have secured an excellent and trusted working relationship with Beefeater and many other manufacturers. Hopefully, the coming months will see interested parties buying the rights to Caveman as a brand extension to their existing products and distribute Fire globally.

Divine Next Steps

What began as a distribution company has now developed into a total redesign of outdoor living. Mark, Alan and their two business partners have equal shares in Outdoor Concepts. Caveman's sole investor remains as Mark, who continues to own the intellectual property rights, although Outdoor Concepts does have a participating stake in the nature of shares.

At the time of going to print, Mark is still waiting to receive confirmation from a company who wish to buy the rights to manufacture Caveman, and initial signs look positive.

Caveman has designs on expanding in other areas of outdoor lifestyle; Caveman Ski, Caveman Surf, and Caveman Hiking. You can be sure that these four entrepreneurs have more than enough fire in their bellies to make it happen.

OUTDOOR CONCEPTS

Stylish outdoor living

Always work with a hippy

Respect for everybody, if you don't give them respect – it's a two-way street

The easy way is not always the right way

Make sure everything you do is covered in writing

Define your goals and stick to them

Success is not always achieved at the first attempt

Don't listen to people who say 'you can't do it'

What ever you do have fun. "Refer to first point!"

outdoorconcepts.ae




propertyfinder.ae



Michael Lahyani
29
Swiss

When I was little I wanted to be… a businessman.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was... naive and thank God I was, or else I would never have done it.

To me, the word successful means... creating something that other people know and recognise.

My catchphrase is... enjoy what you do.

My friends describe me as... social and ambitious.

If I was not an entrepreneur, I would be... a plastic surgeon.

"Ever since I was little I wanted to have my own business. I was less clear about what it would be."

Born in Switzerland, Michael Lahyani made the permanent move to Dubai in 2005, when he and his business partner Leonard Dionisotti identified a gap in the thriving property market. Together they established a property listings magazine which reached a wide audience and boasted a circulation of over 70,000 copies in Dubai with an online property portal which in 2007 REA Group, a subsidiary of News Corp, paid USD 3.1 million to acquire 51 percent of the business.

After spending his childhood in Geneva, Michael went to HEC Lausanne, the renowned Swiss Business School. He specialised in finance before moving to America to spend his last academic year studying at UCLA California, where he gained an MBA before returning once more to Geneva. Michael's parents were no different from many others who invariably have strong ideas about what's best for their children and how they should apply their learning. ***"I wanted to set up a business then, but my father felt that I had been fortunate enough to achieve a high standard of education and I should gain some working experience first."*** Somewhat reluctantly, Michael began work in a local role with PricewaterhouseCoopers in mergers and acquisitions. After just two years, he realised that the corporate world had failed to satisfy his aspirations; he had no strong desire to continue in what he perceived to be a steady, regular but uninspiring job.

"It just didn't suit me, I wanted to make serious money for myself and I was certainly not afraid to work hard to get it."

He set about in earnest exploring different avenues in which to make his mark. Michael knew that in order to be successful, he needed to find a niche market. ***"I had no clear idea what type of business I wanted to own. All that I knew at that stage in my somewhat limited industry experience was that I liked reading magazines and found their content stimulating. I couldn't help wondering what mileage there could be to turn this into a money making scheme."*** Realising that a magazine generates its revenue through advertising, he began to research the possibilities of him making a successful venture through launching his own magazine. His girlfriend at the time had

an unusual career as a show jumper and, after networking with her contacts, it seemed that a magazine specifically targeted to the equestrian market was a real possibility.

He realised that if he was to get this kick-started, he would need advertisers to buy space and would need to target his readership at the high-end of the market. Michael sought the advice of a close friend Leonard Dionisotti, who owned a local property magazine. Buoyed by the information shared generously by Leonard, he borrowed $40,000 from his father, who had finally accepted that his son was determined to be an entrepreneur. In 2002, Michael entered the realms of the self employed; his new career as owner and publisher had begun and he had to learn very fast, much of it 'on the job'.

The first edition of Equestrio hit the shelves in the summer of 2003; it was six months since he had made the decision that this was his vocation. His magazine was a luxury bi-monthly publication packed full of glossy content, reports of major equestrian events as well as reportage, adventure, luxury travel and lifestyle, art and photography features. It was aimed to be informative and targeted the very audience he needed, both high-end and international.

When one door closes another one opens

Making a quick stopover in Dubai in 2004, whilst on his way to the Maldives for a holiday, Michael met up with his uncle who had been living in Dubai for some time. His arrival was perfectly timed for the world's richest horse racing event, the Dubai World Cup. ***"I met many people from the equestrian world, in particular a lady called Lucy Munro (who was later to become his publications' Editor-in-Chief) and Ali Albawadi from the Polo Club."*** It was at this event that Albawadi suggested to Michael that he should consider an Arabian version of Equestrio. Seeing the eclectic mix of sporting events that took place in Dubai and the emphasis placed not only on horse racing but also polo, Michael realised that Albawadi had just given him food for thought. Taking the opportunity to speak with advertisers, Michael set out to ascertain whether or not they would be keen to support a further publication of his magazine, this time operating out of Dubai. The response could not have been more favourable; by the summer of 2004, Arabian Equestrio was ready to hit the shelves. For a year after the launch, Michael travelled regularly between Dubai and Geneva, until it became obvious that the Geneva magazine had no real need for his physical presence. With both magazines running smoothly, he began to look at new ideas and a new product to launch. ***"It didn't take a genius to see that the real estate market in Dubai was buzzing. This city was in a major phase of expansion and I made an initial research to gauge what was available in the way of property listing magazines."***



Encouraging his friend Leonard, who is now his business partner, to check Dubai out, Michael made his pitch for the next business idea. It was agreed that they would launch a property listings magazine, which would be distributed free every two weeks. To fund this new business idea, Michael used revenue from Equestrio and Leonard sold his property magazine in Switzerland; together the pair had realised the capital start-up of Al Bab World. ***"It was a true partnership, we capitalised on our strengths and weaknesses. Leonard had a more serious nature and approach to business. As a superb organiser, his approach to structure was a crucial component of our success. While my expertise was on the business development and sales side, I leaned more towards the social side of business."***

Al Bab World was the chosen name for their new venture.

"Al Bab in Arabic means 'the door', it was a perfect pitch for us."

Our target was those buying, selling and renting anything from villas and apartments to commercial space. Michael and Leonard were also keen for the name to suit both the Arabic and English readership as they were to have the listing produced in both languages. ***"We wanted albab.com but it was not available so we had to add the word 'world'"*** In hindsight they both admit

that it worked to their advantage. ***"We were, after all, opening the door to the rest of the world from an exciting location, Dubai."***

Setting up the magazine proved to be far more difficult than creating the business name. For instance, there was confusion concerning how they were going to be able to distribute the magazine legally. ***"People were happy to give their opinion, mostly around the pros and cons of whether we should establish the company in a free zone, or enlist the support of a local partner?"*** They opted for the latter, a partnership with a local sponsor which turned out to be challenging. Despite his influential name, he was always very busy travelling and often unavailable for signatures that were required from time to time.

They started hiring staff swiftly: a graphic designer, a translator, an assistant and two sales staff. Their first magazine was launched in October 2005, but it was not without its challenges - a print run of 70,000 copies had to be distributed widely, promptly and cost effectively. ***"We chose to opt for high volume because we wanted to ensure that our advertisers had an attractive Return On Investment and that it would generate leads."*** In order to achieve significant market presence for their property listing magazine, they purchased 400 display stands from France. It proved to be a massive mission to get these through customs though! They then had to locate the best places in which to position them. Walking door to door, they knocked on as many doors as they could with the aim of erecting their display stands in as many suitable environments as possible.

The magazine was designed to have no editorial content, only listings. Being new to the market, many companies were unwilling to take a leap of faith and advertise in Al Bab World. It was not until the third or fourth issue that the tide turned.

"Tatikal Real Estate was one of the first companies to take advertising space with us and today we have maintained a great relationship with them."

Not long after, other companies such as Asteco secured advertising space. The world of advertising is fickle and full of pitfalls though, and there was a huge threat looming as Al Bab World was struggling to compete with the dominance that Gulf News property listings had in the market. ***"Those that had chosen to advertise with us were told that they could not advertise in Gulf News too, it was harsh for them and for us."*** Michael made every effort

to explain to Gulf News, which was keen to thwart his efforts, that competition was healthy and that there was plenty of room in the market for both publications. It was after all boom time for real estate and there was certainly more than enough business around for all. ***"For nearly two years it proved to be a constant battle, which we survived. At no time did we feel like giving up. We had ultimate belief in what we had to offer."*** Al Bab World was innovative. It included designated classified sections making it much easier for the reader to navigate the content, as well as a map and zones. The quality of paper was superior, the listings were translated into Arabic, and it even had an online presence.

"Our website was a plus to our print, we had never invested time on its development, but this soon changed."

The magazine publication ran at a loss for two years. ***"We always paid our staff on time, no matter what; they were very loyal to us and supported everything we did."***

The door to a new world

Still running at a loss, a timely fax landed on Michael's desk in 2006 from the Australian Consulate. This informed him that an Australian Media Group REA, owned by Rupert Murdoch but better known for their real estate portals all around the world, were coming to Dubai and had expressed an interest in speaking to them. ***"I confess I sent Renan Bourdeau, head of sales in my place to that first meeting."*** Michael quickly worked out that perhaps it was not his wisest move and that there were only two reasons that a company of this size were interested in Al Bab World: they were either out to set up a business for themselves or buy an existing business, ours. He made sure that he attended the next meeting himself and he was thankful that he did so.

"This was by far the biggest fish that had entered the pond, I had to be sure that I could snare them by convincing them that Dubai was a great market in which to dip their toes." It proved to be an elongated process; many meetings took place over the next year. Finally a meeting with Simon Baker, the CEO of REA was arranged. ***"We had been told he was a tough cookie."***

They had agreed on a novel approach to take Simon on a visit to one of their clients and to hard sell Dubai. You can never plan for the unexpected, and Michael and Leonard were left speechless when, with no messing about, Simon cut straight to the deal. REA wanted to buy 90 percent of Al Bab World.

"We kicked each other under the table, and couldn't believe what had just happened." Back at the office, discussions started in earnest. REA were still very keen to tie Michael and Leonardo to the business. ***"We decided that if they wanted that kind of arrangement, we wanted a greater share of the business in order to stay on and actively managing it."*** Whilst REA was keen to hold the majority stake, Michael pointed out that adjustments would be required if the deal was to be successful. REA agreed, but with a contract that allowed them to purchase the rest of the company from Michael and Leonard over five years.

Simon was keen to know what investment would be required to grow the business substantially. Michael and Leonardo felt that a sum of $2,000,000 would meet the needs and they set out a detailed plan on how those costs would be allocated. They were then asked to name their price for the sale of their shares.

"We were keen to get back what we had initially invested, we also wanted to make a little on top, so we asked for $1,000,000."

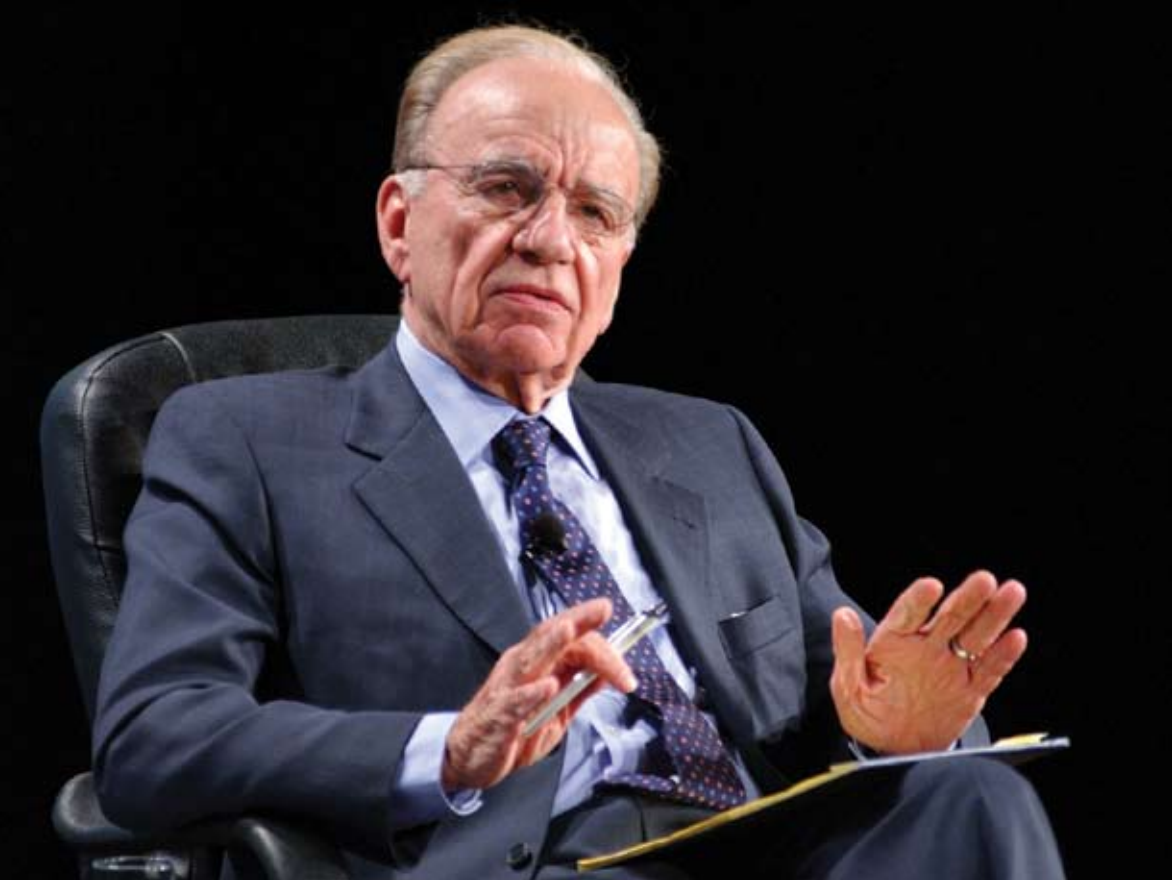
A deal was struck and in June 2007 the contract was signed. In October 2007, Michael and Leonard received their payout and the share transfer took place. On the day the money was transferred, Michael sent a screen shot and emailed it to Leonard:

Subject: *Leonard, I'm off to some islands. It was nice working with you."* ☺

It is testament to the trust that these two entrepreneurs built up between them. The deal was shared fairly and on they went.

World bears fruit

2008 proved to be a great year for Al Bab World. They had the injection of much needed cash and increased their staffing structure from six to 20. In April 2008, the last print issue of Al Bab World magazine came out; the way forward was now online. Michael set about his next purchase: propertyfinder.ae. Property Finder was already well established as one of the UAE's leading real estate websites and, leveraging from the success of REA's propertyfinder.co.uk, it gave the dynamic duo the tools they needed to grow. ***"We had great support from REA, who sent some staff from Australia to help us."***



Rupert Murdoch, CEO of News Corp

Then literally over night, after CityScape 2008, Dubai's property market took a huge hit. ***"All of a sudden our clients didn't have the budgets they used to and needed to look at more cost effective ways in which to advertise."*** Michael admits that he spent the majority of 2008 trying to convince Dubai's real estate market to advertise online. Then, in November and December, they had a breakthrough. Now, while the number of brokers have dropped away, those that are left in the property field have a more professional approach and much sounder business ethics.

"In boom time, real estate agents were not after cost effective marketing strategies, today its the moto of all maketing managers."

With the volume of traffic that hits their established site, it is reaching as many as a million hits a day. Even in an economic downturn, propertyfinder.ae continues to be a successful gateway to highlight the ongoing real estate activity in the Gulf.

Divine Next Steps

Michael returned the loan to his father when he turned 23; in just two years he had managed to finance his own business. His friendship with Leonard has turned into a powerful and very lucrative business partnership and they are still good friends. The landscape of property markets in Dubai has seen a massive shift and both Michael and Leonard have no doubt that it will continue to do so over the next few years.



propertyfinder.ae™

Be disciplined

Be passionate to succeed

Trust people, otherwise you will never grow

Learn to delegate

Take risks




sensasia
urban spa



Salina Handa
32
Indian

On the day I decided to set up my business I was...
in Vietnam, at a street-side noodle shop.

If I was not an entrepreneur, I would… not have it any other way.

My catchphrase/word is... 'Cool'.

The most unusual place I have ever been is… Fregate Island - Seychelles.

I'd like to spend… more time doing nothing.

The best piece of advice ever given to me was...
reach for the stars. If you aim anywhere near them, you still haven't shortchanged yourself and many a time you will reach far beyond.

"Had I never met the owner of the spa where I was having a gorgeous Shiatsu massage, it would never have entered my mind that I too could own and run one myself."

The idea of opening her own spa boutique in Dubai initially took seed in 2002 whilst Salina and her husband Kavit were taking their dream holiday and enjoying heavenly pampering in the Maldives. ***"Having sampled several divine treatments, we discussed which of them would be well received in the Dubai market, and whether we could open our own spa facility."*** At just 24, Salina recalls, ***"I recognised that whilst the thought to manage my own spa was appealing, I was somewhat lacking in both life experience and confidence."*** *Unable to ignite her dream,* ***"it slipped away as gently as the massage I had been enjoying."***

Salina was born and raised in Thailand, a favourite destination for those seeking the ultimate spa getaway. Accessible to everyone and with facilities to suit all budgets, Thailand is a popular region where spas are numerous and treatments plentiful too. After leaving her home town of Bangkok when she was just 18 to further her education in the US, Salina completed a Business degree with a major in Marketing from Boston University before embarking on a successful career in finance and marketing. A short stint at Merrill Lynch in Dubai was swiftly followed by an exciting new role at Tetra Pak, a packaging company. In 1999, Salina found herself flying to Dubai to visit her sister. ***"Growing tired of the corporate world, the daily repartee and a 9 to 5 routine failed to excite me any longer. Producing work for others and not being able to directly reap the rewards and shape a future, I was in dire need of a new business challenge."*** Whilst taking a welcome break in Hanoi, Vietnam, during the Christmas and New Year holiday season in 2003, the idea of a spa boutique resurfaced. This time it became much more than just a passing conversation between Salina and Kavit, who encouraged her saying,***"if this is truly what you believe in and want to do, then go for it!"***

With her husband being an avid golfer, Salina often found herself as a golf widow. She had plenty of time then to scout the city of Hanoi's most luxurious spas. Being a diehard fan of the 'Luxe City Guide', Salina followed their recommendations and took a visit to 'Spa Tropic', a renovated French Colonial-style house, home apparently to the best therapeutic massages in town.

Before experiencing her selected treatment, a Shiatsu massage, Salina had a brief encounter with the owner - a Vietnamese lady with a thick American accent and of similar age as herself. ***"I found the owner to be engaging and inspiring."*** The experience surpassed Salina's every expectation ***"it was my best massage of all time."*** Relaxing in the sumptuous surroundings of the spa's after-treatment area, Salina found herself thumbing through the pages of the spa's 'Brag Book' – a selection of their press clippings from all over the world. On reading them "***I just knew I could manage my own spa and do so even better."***



Sensing out the spa world

As a marketing guru, Salina knew it was all about developing and building her own unique branding and sticking to it. ***"It was simple; I just had to learn all about the spa business."*** In hindsight, it was a tall order since she had only been on the receiving end of spa treatments and certainly did not understand the nuances of having to manage an operation of this type, catering to diverse clients and requirements.



Salina now had greater confidence and self-belief than she had had before. Within two days of returning from her Hanoi holiday, and after extensive research on the Internet, Salina booked a spa development/management course in Thailand operated by Chivas Som Academy, a world-renowned spa destination with its own training Academy. At the end of January 2004, a mere two weeks later, Salina found herself on her way back to Thailand. ***"The course was tough, every element was covered. I had to submit a detailed business plan covering absolutely everything, from top to toe: product selection and collection of treatments; not to mention the fundamentals such as the architectural concepts, structure design, as well as a detailed financial plan."***

Overwhelmed with the scope and cost of this mammoth project, Salina began to question her choice of career change. With so much doubt in her mind and her body struggling to cope with the constant demands of making so many decisions, Salina began to think the task was approaching the realms of the impossible. In tears of exhaustion and frustration, Salina called Kavit from Thailand, who proved to be her rock. Salina recalls, ***"My husband is an amazing man, his strength of character and the unconditional belief he had for me, gave me the conviction that I could and would be able to pull this project off."***

With self-belief instilled and cemented, Salina forged ahead, motivated by the desire to succeed. Armed with the successful completion of her course, she returned to Dubai and began to find a suitable location to open her own spa. ***"I was still really scared of the sheer scale of what I was embarking on,***



the energy and drive that had been fuelled by my time in Thailand was me pushing me like nothing I had ever experienced before."

After making an initial personal investment, Salina signed the lease for her first spa in February 2004. ***"I reviewed many options, self contained villas and commercial space in both large and small shopping malls, then I stumbled across the The Village, Jumeira."*** She knew immediately that it had the look and feel that was right for the new business.

It was not all plain sailing, however, as The Village Jumeira nearly did not come through. With her her heart set on securing that particular space, Salina contacted the leasing agent only to be told that all commercial spaces had been filled 18 months ago! Refusing to give up on her dream, Salina called the agent again about another prime location. In a perfect twist of fate, she was told that a tenant from The Village had dropped out of negotiations and the space that she originally wanted was all hers for the signing.

"I had just 24 hours to sign the lease and pay the deposit; only slightly easier to achieve in those days when rent wasn't as expensive as it is now."

Just one month after signing the lease, Salina was able to leave full-time employment and enter into the realms of self employed as the owner of SensAsia Urban Spa.

Choosing the name was an important factor in Salina's brand concept. SensAsia is designed for today's modern woman, and Salina's desired location was the ideal place to market a spa product to her target audience. Choosing a name for the spa, and its treatments, was an important factor in creating the SensAsia brand. Each treatment room is named and styled after an exclusive destination in Asia: Ubud, Awaji, Java and Samui, to name a few. They offer a wide selection of trendsetting and trailblazing treatments such as 'Blissfully Unaware' (a signature hot stone massage followed by a facial), 'Hi-heeler' (designed for the suffering few who can't give up their Choos), and 'Bee My Honey' (a seriously softening honey based body treatment).

Salina used a local service agent to help her set up the business. As with many independent businesses, the biggest challenge that faces those in the start-up phase within Dubai is obtaining the crucial trade licence. ***"At that time, the Municipality had no category for what was going to be an independent spa***

facility and wanted to brand us as a medical facility." At a time when there were no other independent spa facilities in Dubai, aside from Cleopatra's based within the Wafi complex, that were either located or affiliated to a traditional hotel environment; SensAsia's approach was new and unique. It was built around Salina being the end consumer and, because she didn't have the skills of a spa technician nor any formal training or background within the wellness industry, her only approach was to draw on her experiences as a client. When putting together the spa's packages and treatments, she would constantly ask herself if this is how she would like things to be done. Over the years, SensAsia has defined its ultimate consumer in Salina's mind. Her name is Lilly and she represents the core values and personality that SensAsia caters to. When deciding on branding and marketing tactics, and even new treatments, Salina asks, ***"How would Lilly perceive this"*** *or* ***"Would Lilly go for something like this?"*** In order to create an inimitable concept, she realised that she must clearly understand the consumer's feelings, habits, motivations, insecurities, prejudices, and desires. And having "Lilly" has helped her do this. Lilly reflects both the SensAsia brand and Salina's own values, and she does not want to deviate from these; after all, they have served her well over the last five years. Salina puts her client's experience uppermost on her list. However, she admits that getting the skilled therapists to provide such quality services is not without its challenges, particularly as she has to manage a large complement of staff.

"My team is my product. Without a superior product, the experience would be just ordinary and that is not what I expect at SensAsia."

Salina personally manages all staff recruitment, and she recruits her skilled therapists from right across Asia because she has a familiarity with the region, having grown up there. Four years ago, Salina employed nine female staff; today she employs 50 staff following the recent opening of her second business in January 2009 - SensAsia Urban Spa on The Palm Jumeirah. This is twice the size of the original outlet at The Village. SensAsia Urban Spa's audience are able to enjoy a very different experience. "***We have created some new and unique services at SensAsia on The Palm which includes male treatments, beach access and a fully equipped couples' suite."*** During the winter months, she plans to take the indoor spa outdoors and create an outdoor spa pavilion in Dubai. "***Imagine a sunset massage; it will be stunning."***

Salina's considerable business achievements are now well recognised. Her

brand has been successfully nominated for a number of awards which include Spa Asia Award and Viva Spa Award.

"It wasn't until my second year that I felt comfortable that I had done the right thing and knew I had a successful brand to offer."

However, over the years, Salina questioned herself about whether she had done the right thing, but never so much as she did in the early days of the opening of SensAsia Urban Spa, The Village. ***"Our launch on September 15 2004 was superb; we had an excellent publicity campaign. However, it did not produce the outcome we expected and not one client passed our door in the first three days.*** Refusing to be deterred, Salina mounted a PR and marketing campaign. One by one as clients came in past the spa reception and into the spa's peaceful, yet urban environment. She smiles, ***"there's usually a pleasant gasp at first, obviously indicating their surprise to the extent of the spa. Once clients had experienced SensAsia, word of mouth went into fast-forward and that's how we built a very loyal client base."***

As 2008 drew to a close and the New Year approached, SensAsia Urban Spa was making a healthy turnover, much of which has since been reinvested into the launch of SensAsia Palm Jumeriah.



Divine Next Steps

SensAsia Urban Spa has some exciting expansion plans to reveal in the near future – after 5 years of being established in Dubai we are now being approached with some fabulous offers to take the SensAsia experience across the UAE and beyond!

Always lead with integrity

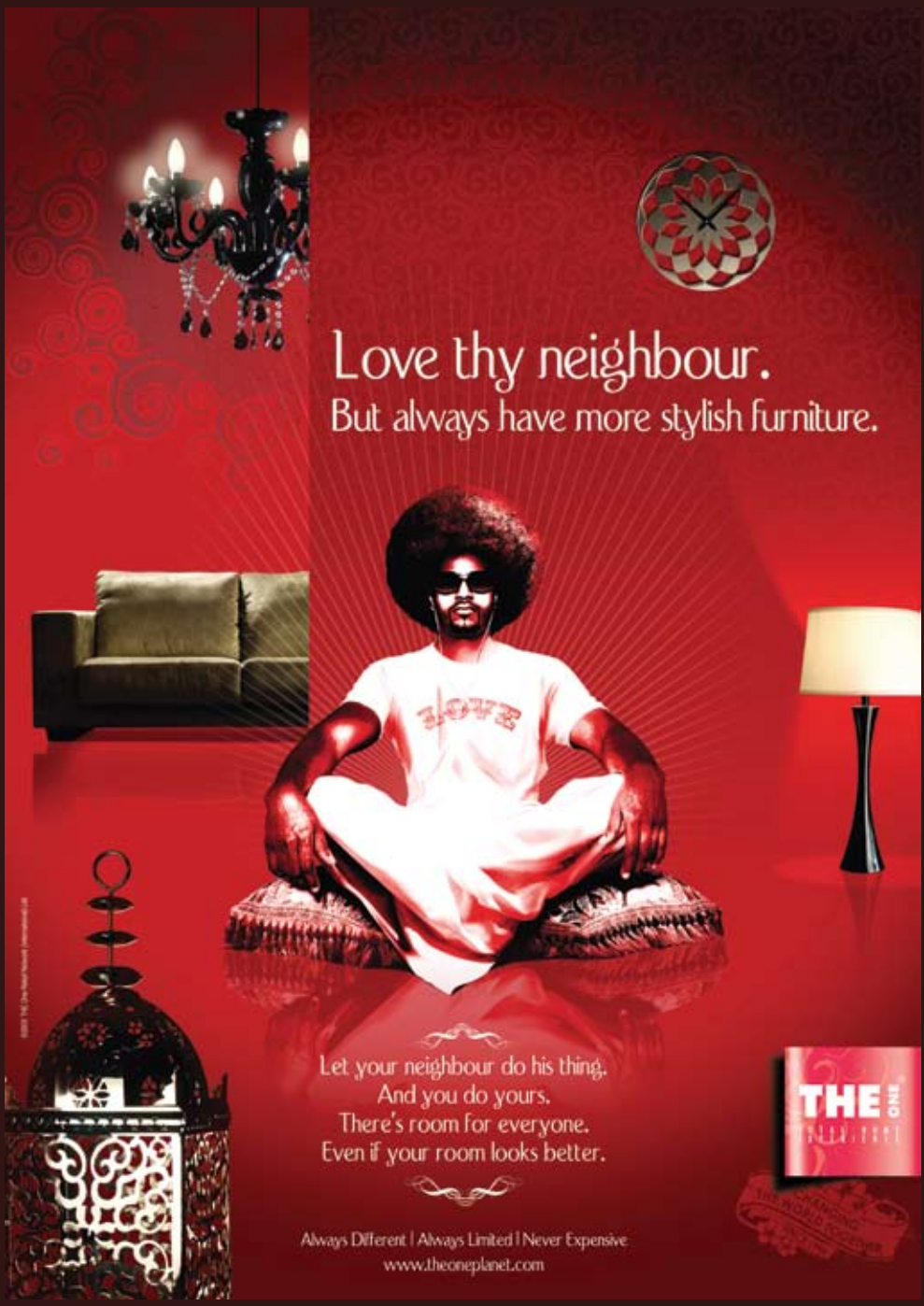
Know what you DON'T want in order to truly understand what you DO want

Be passionate about what you do

While profit is a great motivator, don't let your product suffer as a result

Be persistent

sensasiaspas.com


Love thy neighbour.
But always have more stylish furniture.
Let your neighbour do his thing.
And you do yours.
There's room for everyone.
Even if your room looks better.
THE ONE
Always Different | Always Limited | Never Expensive
www.theoneplanet.com


THE ONE®
TOTAL·HOME
EXPERIENCE

Thomas Lundgren
48
Swedish



When I was little I wanted to be… an ice-hockey player or a rock star, but mostly to be financially independent.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was… disillusioned, scared and excited.

To me, the word successful means… losing the edge. Success doesn't bring happiness. I will be happy if I can look back and say: "THE One really changed lives and made the world a better place."

My friends describe me as… having an attitude problem and a zany dress-sense.

My least glamours job was… working as a garbage collector.

"The idea came to me in a dream; an angel said that I needed to save the world from IKEA."

It was never Thomas Lundgren's intention to have his own business. Initially employed as a Market Hall decorator and then Decoration Manager for IKEA, Thomas envisaged working his way to the top, enjoying a fruitful career with the Swedish retail giant. Today Thomas owns THE One, a total home experience that he describes, not as retail chain, but as a 'theatre company', that employs a cast of over 600 staff, who are on hand to entertain an 'audience'. He holds an unusual style of business card, designed like a ticket which refers to himself as CEO, Chief Emotional Officer. With 14 'theatres' dotted around the Middle East, each is to be viewed as a magical place, crammed full with a vast array of props made widely available for his audience to enjoy diverse living experiences.

Born in the small town of Östersund, Sweden in 1961, Thomas moved to Stockholm at the age of five when his father passed away. For Thomas, it was a poignant moment in his life, that spurred him on to be ambitious. ***"Not having much when I was little, one of my primary drivers was having security. Everything we do today for our employees - my family of over 600 - is about that."*** Excelling in sports rather than in academia, where he struggled, his dyslexia wasn't diagnosed till adulthood. He was passionate about ice hockey and, such was his skill for the sport, that he nearly ended up playing for the national team - that was until his wayward behaviour was frowned upon by the coaches and he was not selected. In hindsight, he realises now that he was looking for an easy way out; he didn't want to play competitive sports, but had been unable to be honest with his coach.

Leaving his brief foray in sports behind him, in 1982 Thomas entered the Art and Advertising School run by Anders Beckman in Sweden. His first thought was to qualify as an air brusher. However, after discovering how painstaking the process was, and burdened with a limited attention span, he decided he wanted to become an art director. In 1983, after dabbling in an unfulfilling stint as freelance advertising designer, an advertisement appeared in his local newspaper: IKEA was hiring decorators to relocate to Saudi Arabia. It caught Thomas' eye and imagination. ***"I was desperate to escape my home town and had always dreamt of travelling to either Australia or Japan. Saudi Arabia was in the right direction and it seemed like an interesting option."***

He confesses that his application tactics were somewhat unusual. ***"I wrote what I can modestly say was the coolest letter possible, telling them how perfect I was for the role."*** After being called for the interview, he talked

himself into the job. In 1984, he moved to Saudi Arabia. Whilst hugely excited about his new role, he had a heavy heart as he had to leave behind Ewa, his girlfriend, whom he had just met a few months prior to his move. ***"We kept in touch every day by letter, there was no email in those days as there were no computers, even a fax machine was considered a fairly new piece of communication technology."*** After returning home to see Ewa some months later, they both realised that if their relationship was to work they would need to both be in the same country. With no possibility of this in Saudi Arabia, Thomas asked where else IKEA might require his services. He was offered Kuwait and took it on the condition his girlfriend got a job too.

Originally planning to spend a year in Kuwait, they stayed for a total of five years until the 1990 Iraq invasion. ***"I had gone home for five days to collect Ewa, now my wife, and our new baby daughter, when the invasion started and we lost everything."*** Thomas, at 30 years of age, found himself and his family with half a suitcase and nothing else left to their name. Everything they had possessed was in Kuwait.

"We found ourselves in an unusual position. With no residence left in Kuwait, we were officially regarded as refugees - something that our home country Sweden found difficult to understand."

It was common practice in Kuwait for personal savings not to be placed in the bank, unlike in today's society. Every home was fitted with a safe and Thomas and his family were no exception. All their personal wealth had been stored behind a wall safe which they considered to be well out of the reach of strangers. Unfortunately, it proved to be not quite so safe. During the invasion, houses were ransacked by the invading army and everything from floor tiles to wall sockets were taken along with the contents of their wall safe. ***"The only thing they didn't take was my art, they obviously had no taste."*** As 1992 approached, Thomas and a more determined Ewa made the decision to return to work in Kuwait with the aim to try and recoup some of what they had lost. While Thomas was Store Manager of IKEA, they found that Kuwait had changed considerably. In September 1993, Thomas had an epiphany; an idea that was about to change his career path dramatically. Deciding that he wanted to start his own company, he was about to burn all bridges with IKEA. After building their brand within the Middle East for roughly

10 years, Thomas had reached a point of no return. He had progressively become disillusioned with the tactics IKEA were taking in relation to the gathering momentum towards franchising worldwide. Even though their marketing strategy was to provide low priced items for the masses, he found that in practice this was not so and customers were not getting the good deals they should. It did not sit well with his principles.

Finding someONE to invest

Thomas and Ewa flew to Bahrain with a view to establishing their business there. Although it was far more progressive than Dubai; in those days, it was too small. When they made a trip to Dubai, however, they got a totally different feeling, their gut instinct was positive. ***"Contrary to belief, I did not acquire a manual from IKEA on how to set up and run a business. This could not be further from the truth as I was just a decorator who became a store manager within a franchise. I had no knowledge about the intrinsic operations that took place within IKEA."***

In receipt of a payout from his employer IKEA, he returned to Kuwait for the second time since the invasion. The sum of money received was a small consolation for everything the family had lost during the war. It did, however, pay for a lawyer who then introduced Thomas to a professional services firm called KPMG who worked with him to secure credit, which enabled Thomas to establish a sound financial plan.

"I really had no idea what I was doing."

With the help of KPMG, they managed to negotiate influential meetings with banks and potential investors. The stake he required to set up the business was $4,000,000. The name of his new company FAME - which is an acronym for Furniture Activities Middle East - had already been chosen but the investment meetings did not go nearly as well as he had anticipated. Banking monolith HSBC, amongst others, all rejected his idea. ***"It was a trying time, so many of those that I met in the course of securing investment were extremely patronising about my plans."*** It took a further 18 months to lock in the necessary funding and, in January 1994, they moved lock, stock and barrel to Dubai, with their first store opening in Abu Dhabi in September 1996.

According to the plan, Thomas needed $4,000,000 to get the business off the ground. He decided he needed four partners to contribute $1,000,000 each. For the next two years he tried to get every bank and business in the region to help him realise his vision. No one showed any interest in his plans collecting a large pile of rejection letters, which today decorate the walls of THE One's office reception area.

"My plan was to have an investor from Saudi, one from Kuwait and one from the UAE; that way I had the whole of the Middle East covered. In reality it rarely works out the way you plan."

Eventually in December 1995 one Arab businessman Rashid Mohammed Al Mazroui came forward with $1,000,000, his remaining and significant investor was a personal friend whom he had known from his time in Kuwait. ***"I am not sure what made me place a call to him and ask him if he has a spare $1,000,000. I was guessing that he would not, but I was at the point where I needed to explore every option."*** Nevertheless, gut instinct preceded his judgement and he called his friend Shakir Abal Sadeq. As luck would have it, Shakir had just made a considerable profit on a deal less than a week before Thomas' fortuitous call. Some may call it a random act of fate, others destiny, either way Shakir agreed to become an investor in the business provided that he make it happen. There was a final investor who put the remaining $500,000 dollars into the business, who Thomas later bought out in 1999.

After a trip to New York, Thomas recalls when he came face-to-face with a large hoarding advertising DKNY; it had the desired effect - he went straight into the store and bought a cap and mug. ***"I was impressed with the DKNY logo, as a marketing tactic, it was pretty effective."*** Whilst in New York, he also saw that Calvin Klein had launched their new home range, Total Home. It made him think about his company brand and, on return to Dubai, he called Shakir and Rashid round to his house to discuss a new name for the company. As Thomas sat with his new coffee mug, it inspired Ewa to make a comment "***You like this shortening of names business, so forget about Scandinavia and Home Wear, why not call it THE; after all it's about us - Thomas and Ewa."*** Reflecting on this idea, it transpired that this was an acronym for Total Home Experience, which was still linked to their current tag line. Shakir was very aware that Thomas had big aspirations for many stores and wanted to number each store first, second, third etc. Therefore he suggested calling the company THE 1, which then became THE One.

Building a brand new ONE

"When the first store opened I had this crazy idea that people would flock to the shop." Thomas soon realised that you can't build a brand overnight. With over 6,000 sq metres to fill with products that had been personally sourced, the first five containers unloaded barely filled the shelves. ***"I think I slept about two hours a night during the launch phase***." After working hard to create a feel that was distinctly different to the IKEA trademark look, Thomas recalls that in the end they actually did a 360 degree turnabout and ended up looking like IKEA. Even their first brochure produced screamed IKEA.

The second store opened in Dubai in April 1997. ***"I made a bet with Shakir and Rashid that we would sell AED 100,000 on opening day, sadly I lost. We actually sold only AED 4,000."*** A firm believer that success feeds success, Thomas had learned from his previous experiences.

"When visiting companies, I had never found it encouraging to see all the best car parking spaces allocated for senior management right outside the front door. I made sure that our staff parked their cars at the back of our stores."

His thought process evolved however. There were few customers initially, but Thomas worked out that if cars were seen in the car park, regardless of whom they belonged to, this would generate greater interest. His marketing ploy worked.

Another smart marketing tactic stemmed from Thomas' other passion. ***"I love food and I love to cook."*** To encourage customers and to enhance the theatrical experience, THE One houses a successful restaurant. This has grown from humble beginnings; an espresso bar in the Abu Dhabi branch, to a gourmet café-style dining outlet, which in 2009 was voted as 'What's On Abu Dhabi Favourite Independent Restaurant/Café.

His original start-up 'cast' were all recruited by Thomas and were already known to him from his time with IKEA in Kuwait and Saudi, along with other new recruits made in Dubai. From start-up in 1984 to date, 12 of them have stayed on with Thomas. He calls each and every one of his entire workforce 'his family', and has an annual event, nicknamed 'kickoff' which

incorporates training with fun. The first one saw him take his top eight staff (in other words: everyone) to the desert. In 2006, with THE One approaching its tenth anniversary, Thomas marked the occasion with something different. He was the first ever home fashion retailer to sponsor a rock concert which saw Robbie Williams play in the grounds of the once Nad Al Sheba racecourse for what is to date probably one of the best organised concerts Dubai has ever seen.

THE One aims to have a meaningful place in society and play a more active role than selling products that people don't have a need for. As well as eco friendly and ethical sourcing, THE One is making a difference by hiring challenged young adults; each store also participating in local volunteering initiatives. In 2008, Thomas launched THE Onederworld, a massive ongoing sustainable village community programme fully funded by THE One. It reaches out to neglected regions where his employees come from, or where his manufacturers are based, and work with villagers to promote development of education, healthcare, income projects and sanitation. It's a plan towards self-sufficiency and Thomas is hugely excited about giving back to the wider community.

"I am glad that I was somewhat naive and perhaps a little stupid, if I knew how much time it would take, how painful, or how many sacrifices would have to be made, no one would run their own business."

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. Perhaps it is just as well that, ultimately, good outcomes are remembered as it keeps budding entrepreneurs doing it over and over again. The journey is never complete, no matter what you have to look back on as your achievements.


Number
5
PRIMARY
ENGLISH

Divine Next Steps

Thomas' Visionology (a dream with a plan) is to become global, running 99 stores by 2020. As each store is completed they will in turn support one village around the world, continuing his highly successful THE Onederworld programme.

One thing is for certain, there is no way you can ever tell Thomas that he can't achieve his dreams because he will go out and prove you wrong. That includes the Oscar that he has promised Ewa and their three daughters. He believes anything is possible and, to make sure he is ready, he has already written his acceptance speech.



Be aware that there are no bankruptcy laws in the Middle East. If you fail, you go straight to jail without passing Go or collecting your 200 Monopoly Dirhams. But hey, can there be a stronger motivation to succeed than that?

Banks will give you a free umbrella when the sun is shining, but the moment it starts to rain, they'll want the umbrella back

Always remember that it's the customer who pays your salary

What comes from the heart goes to the heart

Everything we do, every moment of each day, is in some way a service to somebody

theoneplanet.com




wet
fish trading L.L.C.



Mark Allan
46
Jacky Allan
45
British

To me, the word successful means… respect and recognition from your peers and the love of your family. (Mark)

My friends describe me as… passionate and scary. (Mark)

My least glamorous job… is a 'fishmonger' glamorous…if not…a fishmonger? (Jacky)

One thing that would surprise you… If I did a whole day without shouting. (Mark)

I'd like to spend… my retirement whale watching, travelling to an orbiting space station and sailing round the world. (Mark)

"As a holiday destination we loved Dubai, we saw it had potential for so much more and decided to make it our home."

Mark and Jacky Allan, childhood sweethearts and successful business owners , met when they were just 13 years old – 33 years and three children later, they relocated en masse to Dubai and now own a multi-million dirham business, tripling their sales within the first two years of operation.

Mark's greatest passion was football and he achieved considerable success as a junior professional. At 17 years old, a scout for Wimbledon (a 4th Division English Football Club) approached him to turn professional and offered him the princely sum of just £19 a week. (How different could his story be if he had been signed in today's times?) ***"I decided that I could earn more working on a building site."*** Instead, Mark headed to university in 1982 to study French and English. Graduating in 1985, he spent the following year in France teaching English to 11-15 year-olds.

Jacky and Allan married in 1987 and during that year he joined his brother's business. As suppliers of fresh fish to top restaurants in London such as The Ivy and Gordon Ramsay, they provided the same service to 'Bank', his brother's signature fish brasserie. It was a roller coaster ride that taught him a lot. As the Managing Director, Mark's role was to organise the business**,** which in 2002 proved to be so profitable that it floated on the alternative investment stock market. Now a PLC, fresh challenges emerged as the business forced them into the limelight. As the business progressed, he discovered a keen asset: his flourishing distribution network, developed through hard work supplying quality produce to numerous clients. This was his life line, as those established relationships flourished whilst the other side of the business - his brother's personal investment in the Bank restaurants and brassieres - went into liquidation and subsequently closed.

Jacky joined her husband in the business in mid 2003, to focus on credit control and deliveries. ***"My day began at 2am, I would deliver fish to Heathrow Airport and then make the return drive of two hours home arriving just in time to pick up the kids who were waiting to be dropped off at school."*** Within a year she took on a sales role and proved her worth by bidding and winning lucrative contracts. With their strengths identified, it became evident that their partnership extended far outside their marriage. ***"We have been friends since childhood, we understood each other inside out and this would serve us well to run a business together successfully.***"



Home from home

In 1998 the Allan's took their first family holiday to Dubai. ***"The minute we arrived we fell in love with the place and everything it offered. There was an instant and invigorating buzz about the city, the sun shone every day and above all, as a key driver for families, it was safe and the kids loved it."*** Dubai's growth was in its infancy and the family made twice yearly return visits. With each trip, the family saw the city landscape take shape: the construction of the world's first all suites hotel, The Burj Al Arab, and the iconic Emirates Towers rising above a rapidly changing skyline, ***"It was all just so exciting."*** In a passing comment made by Jacky on one of their frequent trips, she pointed towards the skyline and the Burj Al Arab saying, ***"One day we will supply that hotel."*** It was not until the family returned to the UK from an extended six week holiday in Australia in 2003 - and when faced with the abnormally cold January weather - that they knew the time had come for change. Enough was enough. ***"We felt that we couldn't handle the climate any longer, the UK didn't excite us any more."*** Both had always harboured a dream to live overseas. However, it was Mark who first declared his interest to make the lifestyle change and chose Dubai as their new home and the perfect location in which to set up a fish trading company. ***"I had the opportunity to sell my stake in the company in the UK and everything fell into place."***

Having made the momentous decision to uproot the family, Jacky made the initial research trip in May 2004. ***"I had to find out what business opportunities***

existed, what schooling would be available for the children and where to live." It was apparent that top chefs in Dubai knew exactly what they wanted to put on their menus and serve on their plates; however what they were getting was definitely not what they expected and they had neither quality, choice nor service.

"I knew we could meet their needs and that we were onto something special."

After returning a month later with her husband to get the final seal of approval to their life change, the broader task of checking the logistics and legalities to set up their own business began in earnest. On their last day in Dubai, before they were due to return to the UK, they found themselves in the worst position possible. With their plane due to depart that evening, they still had not worked out how to obtain the crucial trade licence. Mulling over their dilemma at their hotel they were joined by a 'friend of a friend', who referred them to a company called Links Group, which specialised in the establishment of foreign-owned, non free zone companies in the UAE. Links Group could facilitate opportunities that allowed newly formed companies, and those under formation, to concentrate on their own business plan whilst they dealt with licenses, visas, work permits and other related services that come with a new start-up company on foreign soil. In the nick of time, Jacky and Mark were able to meet with Links Group and that evening they found themselves on the plane home with a detailed pack of information and costs to support this service. Finally, they knew exactly where they stood and what they had to do.

Using the profits of the sale of their house and Mark's share in the business, the Allans arrived in Dubai seven weeks later. It was August end 2004 and this time their arrival was for good. ***"We stayed with Steve Barritt, a close friend, there were five of us in one bedroom for five weeks. It was testing time, and I can't thank him enough for helping us so much in the early days."*** Mark and Jacky had estimated that it would take three months to establish everything - both business and family wise. They had underestimated how difficult it would be… On the home front, finding a school for the children proved to be even more problematic than first imagined. Further testing times lay ahead, especially when locating a suitable factory from which to run their operation. ***"Instead of taking three months to set everything up, it took three months just to find a suitable location and a premises within our budget. Everything was far more expensive than we imagined."***

Fishing for business

Assessing their cash flow, and because they had already tied up AED 50,000 in a security bond with a Limited Liability Company (LLC), Mark and Jacky had to make a calculated decision.

"Do you burn the rest of your capital or get a loan from the bank?"

Business loans were either scarce or extremely difficult to secure, even more so by today's standards, but their philosophy was ***"If you don't ask you don't get."*** So, they approached Lloyds TSB Bank for a business loan of AED 700,000. The services of the Links Group entrepreneurs proved to be a crucial part in the design of the fledgling company. Julie Irving, Chief Financial Officer, produced a detailed business plan on Mark and Jacky's behalf and Wet Fish was spawned, proving to be a strong swimmer in the vast sea of new business ventures. With a carefully prepared detailed analysis of how Wet Fish would operate, there were three distinct streams that would flow through the core of their business. First came the home delivery service, this would build up the immediate need for cash flow, swiftly followed by supply to hotels which would establish their reputation for quality and timely produce and finally the target market, in-flight catering bulk supply and generation of volume revenue. Such was their success that they never needed to establish the home delivery service as the workload overtook their original business plan.

Despite a consistent theme that they were asking the impossible, Mark and Jacky were confident that they would be able to secure the necessary loan required to float the business. Their conviction was rewarded. Lloyds TSB did agree but there was an unexpected blow, as Mark recalls ***"The downside was that we had to put up AED 35 for every AED 70 that Lloyds TSB invested."*** This now meant that they had to invest a proportion of their capital upfront, which they had hoped to avoid.

With the loan secured and the paperwork agreed and signed, they were able to finally embark on remodelling their premises. Whilst the location was perfect, the premises needed considerable adjustments if they were to operate their fish business from it. ***"It was an exciting time, instead of looking at Dubai's desert growth we were able to see our own little piece of Dubai sand become our large, airy and shiny new warehouse".*** With construction nearing completion, they began in earnest the task of employing staff able to complement the one (and only) original team member, Steve Machon who had been brought in from the UK. Those chosen would work alongside Steve and would be trained to become highly skilled in the art of preparing

the catch of the day to perfection; by the time it reached the kitchens of the best restaurants in Dubai, it would be of the highest quality and prepared better than any chef could do. ***"That is key to what we offer our clients – otherwise what's the point?"*** The factory building was completed on February 22, 2005, ***"We were ready to rock and roll."*** The team consisted their General Manager Sami, a taxi driver who they met when they first arrived in Dubai and whose positive attitude and professional appearance impressed them all; two Nepalese boys; and a local fish-cutter Bashir who joined them six months later when Steve returned to the UK.

Netting their first client was attributed to a cold call made to *Nad Al Sheba Racecourse that hosts the world's annual richest racing event, The Dubai World Cup. It was March 2005 and their first order amounted to the grand total of AED 8,500, ***"We thought we were rolling in it"***. The worst possible disaster that could happen to a start-up enterprise was yet to happen - on the day of the World Cup, the imported fish order failed to arrive. ***"We hadn't been able to do a test run from the distributors, which in this case were in the UK".*** Their precious cargo, which was to be sent out of Heathrow Airport, was still in transit causing Jacky and Mark more than a few teething problems. With no alternative but to come clean, a highly embarrassed Jacky made the personal trip to Nad Al Sheba to face the fireworks. Having apologised and waiting for the account to be pulled, Jacky found that the business world could still produce some strange results. The authorities at Nad Al Sheba were equally surprised and amazed that Jacky had taken accountability for the non delivery.

"By being accountable, providing a high level of customer service and supplying the highest quality of fish gives us our reputation".

Mark firmly believes that without the enviable list of references that are associated with his time spent in his UK operation, securing a new network of clients in Dubai through the age old route of cold calling would have been a lot tougher. After Nad Al Sheba, came a raft of elite clients, contracts with the Jumeirah Group, Wagamama's, Frankies and Gordon Ramsay's to name a few. Wet Fish has a unique position as it has the ability to source anything from fresh wild salmon to basket ball-sized Foie Gras. Invoice orders grew steadily from an initial AED 8,500 in their first month, to a healthy AED 50,000 within six months. Today, Wet Fish enjoys a steady profit stream and is now responsible for supplying premium products to over 40 five-star hotels and restaurants located in Dubai.

**Nad Al Sheba Racecourse is now officially known as 'Meydan'.*

Sweet smell of success

Wet Fish had only been in operation for 18 months when it received a call from its sponsorship company, Links Group, suggesting that it enter the Lloyds TSB Small Business Awards. This was a new incentive in the region which was designed to recognise and reward SMEs in areas such as entrepreneurship, creativity, growth and customer service. Mark's initial reaction to this was, ***"Who would want to listen to the tales of a fishmonger?"*** Despite his initial misgivings, Mark and Jacky entered Wet Fish and found to their great surprise that they were shortlisted. One of the requirements of the finalists was that, prior to the awards ceremony, each company had to make a presentation to the judging panel; this would form part of the winning criteria.

"We were so nervous. Last to present, we were sure that the judges were already growing tired of listening to nominees pitching their presentation".

As they turned on the laptop the unthinkable happened, or in Jacky's words ***"nothing happened, the laptop failed us big time."*** One of the qualities that makes them so determined to succeed is that Jacky prepares for every eventuality. So, never one to be deterred, Jacky pulled from her bag a previously photocopied copy of the presentation which she handed to the group. Mark's passionate and inspirational story, and the slightly offbeat approach to their presentation, created fresh interest in the tired gathering.

Despite their initial hesitation in participating in the awards, the announcement of the award winners was eagerly awaited by the entire Allan family. Wet Fish had been shortlisted in the Entrepreneurial Start-Up category and they waited with anticipation for the winner to be announced. ***"My mouth was so dry, I couldn't even swallow"***, recalls Mark. As the awards were read out, one by one Wet Fish failed to receive an award. Feeling slightly dejected whilst at the same time enormously proud of their achievements of having come so far in such a short space of time, the family decided to make the most out of their invitation. And so they tucked into the hearty breakfast offered unaware that the final overall Lloyds TSB Small Business of the Year award, with a prize of AED 50,000 had yet to be declared. Mark had just taken a bite of his croissant when he heard that the over all winner was Wet Fish. ***"You can't describe the feeling of euphoria, it was such a defining moment – it's a bit like winning an Oscar, only a little less glamorous, after all we are fishmongers.***"

The award generated considerable publicity both in the Middle East and in the UK and Bloomberg made a documentary about their business. This all contributed to catapulting their enterprise to achieve even greater success.

"Companies who had been procrastinating about engaging us as their supplier signed up hook, line and sinker."

Company turnover in the first year, 2006, was AED 6,000,000; in 2007 and following the award it grew to AED 12,000,000. The couple used their prize money to throw a party thanking all of those around them who had helped them get this far. It was perhaps not quite like the Oscars' after party but the intention was the same, to celebrate success.

It has certainly not been plain sailing for the dynamic duo. People they have met along the course of their business dealings often comment, ***"you're so daring to have contemplated your approach to setting up this business, how did you know you would succeed?"*** The plain truth was, they didn't, but had no choice. ***"Once we had sold everything in the UK, our children were settled in schools, going home was never an option – you HAVE to get with it".***

The first quarter of 2009 will demonstrate that Wet Fish are firmly anchored to Dubai. They have a unique insight to their profession and how to apply their practical experience and knowledge. ***"Surprisingly, fish prices are cheaper now than they were five years ago and as long as you pass the savings onto the client, you gain their respect. They will appreciate that you are not trying to make a quick buck."*** In good times, Mark's philosophy is that people will focus on ***"quality then service then price last."*** With an economic downturn however, people's philosophy changes and the focus shifts to price first, then quality, followed by service. Mark hopes that the hotels will also reflect these changes and offer attractive room rates so that more people will continue to come to Dubai. ***"If you can supply the customer with the same quality of product but do it cheaper, they will eat in your restaurant, instead of going else where."*** He believes that by maintaining the quality, you will never be questioned, and will remain competitive. By doing so, you will succeed. Wet Fish is testament to that rationale.

Divine Next Steps

"Take more holidays". After dedicating five years to the setting up of Wet Fish, the family are taking their first family holiday since coming to Dubai.

Their recent venture has been to secure a new airline contract and, more recently, the contract to supply fish feed to the Aquarium in Dubai Mall and Atlantis. With many new hotels still opening in Dubai, there is plenty of new business to fish for. However, for the first time, they are in the position that they can take time to decide on what that will be. It is an enviable outcome and something many companies can only dream of.

They have not ruled out the thought that one day they may wish to sell the business but still retain a home in Dubai. They are all very happy here in the desert, a strange place to find a fishmonger so at home…

Be brave

Think before everything but follow your instincts

Avoid talking in clichés

Enjoy what you do or do something else

Take holidays

wetfishuae.com





ZAIN MUSTAFA



Zain Mustafa
38
Pakistani

To me, the word successful means... to be true to ones own passion.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was… broke, yet really excited about being in Dubai.

I relax... at home, listening to jazz music, a Montechristo and a glass of Malbec.

My catchword is… experience.

My friends describe me as... picky – I have an eye for detail.

I'd like to spend… my last years in NZ teaching and playing the cello.

"Inspiration is the best form of motivation."

Zain was born in the middle of a civil war; his father, a fighter pilot for the Pakistan Army, was shot down when Zain was just two months old. It was left to his mother Shabina, then a young 20 year old, to raise their son. She dedicated her life to ensure that Zain had the best upbringing and quality of education. From an early age, she was 'his inspiration'. Shabina worked hard to find enough money for the basics, which were supplemented by the meagre government support following the death of her husband. ***"I had a very simple upbringing, it was however rich in values."*** Much of childhood was spent playing with Zain's Lego, building fascinating designs. In his formative years, Zain always knew that he wanted to be an architect.

Zain attended the Karachi Grammar School until he was 13 when his mother made a decision to further his education and enrolled her son at Haileybury, one of England's leading private boarding schools. The choice of school for Zain was to prove pivotal for his future years; they encouraged a wide range of intellectual and cultural activities and had high expectations of pupils, inspiring them to reach their maximum potential.

The funding for this next chapter of Zain's educational development was all made possible by shrewd forward planning by his mother who was gifted a plot of land for the martyrdom of his father's death by the Pakistan Government. It took her 22 years to sell the land however. It would be resources she needed to cover Zain's school fees. Haileybury proved to be an intense educational experience. ***"Looking back, I am where I am today because of the high standard of education, everyday I was pushed to my ultimate limits."***

Zain was quick to excel as he was creatively well advanced for his years. Cambridge University asked to display some of his early art work, which was then showcased for over a year. Such was the calibre of his work that, as he reached the age of 18, Zain knew that he wanted to pursue more extensive academia. Once his schooling was finished, he left the UK, bound for the US and enrolled at the Parsons School for Design (NYC). Securing a part scholarship, Zain began his studies and gained a degree in Architecture and Environmental Design, culminating in a Masters in Architecture and New Technologies from Columbia University (NYC) when he was 23 years old.

His subsequent career path saw him dabble in everything and his creative flair allowed him the flexibility to explore many avenues, from modelling to working in a Japanese boutique; all because he loved fashion and clothes. However, at the back of his mind was a desire to build on his cultural



experiences, with a keenness to develop a deeper understanding of how these affected the wider world. In 1995, he decided to leave New York and head home to Pakistan.

Zain had been overseas for ten years and returning to Pakistan had its own set of challenges. Everything that had been readily available to him in New York was less available to him in his home country.

"I struggled to find any clothes that fitted me or suited my lifestyle. This inspired me to design my own label."

Spending the next five years as a fashion designer, with his own label and menswear store, he became heavily integrated into the Karachi community. Zain was involved creatively at concept level for designing magazine covers, styled photo shoots and even returned to his roots by teaching architecture. He had not taken long to form his own very strong set of values and was passionate about being able to share some of his good fortune with the local community. Such was the success of his support and generosity to those that

crossed his path, that by the late 90s he found himself being listed as one of the 50 most influential people in Pakistan.

By 2000, Zain left Karachi and returned once again to New York. This time, his stay in the US as a graphic designer was brief. The tragic events of 9/11 unfolded, and Zain realised that New York was no longer the place for him. Not sure about where to move next, he arrived in Dubai in May 2003.

Designing a new path

"I had no idea what I would do." After spending a couple of months in Dubai with family who had been living in the city for some time, Zain secured a job in public relations for Jumbo Electronics. He decided to leave six months later to pursue his passion for fashion and architecture that took over again. Making Dubai his official home, he was now finally ready to follow his heart.

"Dubai is a great location geographically, a perfect location from which to travel the world and to be able to keep in touch with family."

Things were about to change for Zain as he created the concept design for Cin Cin, a wine bar located at the prestigious Fairmont on Sheikh Zayed Road. ***"It was my entire concept; the company umbrella I worked under allowed me scope into the project to the very highest spec. Such was the feedback on the finish that I received, from hotel management to housekeeping, that it gave me the confidence in my own ability and I realised that I was capable of running my own projects."***

His first job going solo was for International Holdings Group (IHG) to design their office space. ***"Winning the contract for the design gave me a sense of purpose and self belief."*** It didn't take long for Zain to make his mark, and very soon an old supplier approached him to design a chain of Chinese takeaways; it was to be called Jasmine Moon, a name that Zain came up with. ***"It is far better to start on something small which in turn will give the confidence to move on to bigger things."*** Recognition and reputation of his work steadily grew and Zain was asked to participate in many more ventures which led to his first hotel project, the Mövenpick.

His specific goal is ***"to work with imaginative and ambitious clients who are willing to do just about anything to make their environment a comprehensive***

expression of themselves, whether individual or corporation." The time was now ripe for Zain to test the waters and explore the logistics of setting up his own legal consultancy licence that would allow him to expand his one man operation further. With sufficient funds from savings to obtain a licence from the Ajman Free Zone, Zain started with zero start-up capital. The licence would enable him to sit with his clients in their offices and act as an official consultant without him having to worry about the associated legalities. His clients would remain responsible for the project - it was a win-win situation for him at that point. After four years working under 'UNTITLED' though, Zain realised it was time to evolve.

"I was being continually told that I was the face of the company and it was high time that I developed my own brand."

Zain realised that developing a brand was an important part of his future development - and so he did exactly that. He contacted a prospective sponsor and after overcoming several challenges - the paperwork needed to set up his business in Dubai was extremely lengthy - Zain Mustafa Interiors eventually came about. ***"It is imperative you have the right sponsor who is willing to assist you,"*** which he believes can prove to be a major stumbling block for many individuals who wish to establish new businesses in the UAE. In addition, making sure that the rented office space is approved by the Dubai Municipality as a commercial environment is essential. As a growing 'new' city, laws change every year and he found that nothing was simple and that he very often lacked clarity about just what to do next. There was limited access to proper documentation, a lack of instructions to follow, and there was certainly nothing available online to assist Zain. ***"Everyone I encountered during the set-up was very helpful, but no one ever really knew what exactly was needed to complete the registration process. Did I need two forms or 20?"*** He quickly realised that there was little point getting troubled about slow-moving progress as it would all happen in good time. He had to be patient.

Even more complicated than getting his paperwork right was finding the right people to join his team. To supplement his work-force, Zain considered employing two interns and taking staff onto his payroll. He found to his surprise that there was plenty of quantity but rarely the quality that he aspired to for both himself and his clients. It left him slightly baffled as to what students were being taught at University. He believes that interns could prove to be a valuable source of fresh initiative for a business, but only if it forms an

intrinsic part of their education, which evidence suggested to him was sorely lacking. Whilst keen to provide such opportunities for budding talent, Zain found that he was not allowed to teach interior design as he is only qualified in architecture. Even owning a successful interior design company did not seem to suffice. Despite these restrictions, Zain Mustafa Interiors opens its office door every Thursday afternoon between 2pm and 6pm for any fashion, art or architectural students who are looking for some assistance; even random strangers have walked through the office doors.

"I love teaching and have had a blessed life. I want to be in a position to give something back to the community or individuals too."

Developing a 'Zain' brand

Zain Mustafa Interiors employed its first employee, Amena Tinwalla, in 2005 and the team now consists of a junior and senior designer as well as three different external contractors. Their combined experience means that they can manage up to five projects at a time. In addition to this, Zain and his design team showcase custom furniture in-house, and can access international sourcing free of pre-set alliances. This myriad of eclectic expertise enables Zain and his team to reach a wide audience giving them the ability to design all kind of interior spaces. ***"My inspiration comes from everywhere, from a shaft of light filtering through a window, to the notes I hear in a piece of music, film and fashion magazines. There are no creative restrictions as far as I am concerned with my work."***

Zain admits to never micromanaging and prefers to coax individuals into making their own decisions. ***"That way you do not damage anyone's design confidence. A team should always have a sense of ownership in the company, taking this approach that they are fully engaged and driven for ultimate success."*** He is also adamant to refuse any commission offered by suppliers, leaving him with carte blanche to choose from any supplier and not be beholden to anyone. He adamantly refuses any commission offered by suppliers, which leaves him with *carte blanche* to choose from any supplier and not be beholden to anyone; this gives him the creative freedom to design whatever he wants. Zain's fees are then simply charged by time and effort.

Zain strongly believes there is no better time than now in which to set up a

business. ***"Dig wells when there is no water."*** Although Dubai is a new city still full of new opportunities, Zain likens working in the Emirate to be a bit like swimming upstream. ***"From paperwork, to completing your daily list of 'to do's', sometimes it feels that you never reach your goal…"***

With a sound philosophy, both he and his team are more than just decorators. ***"We are all about redefining space."*** Zain and his team constantly think outside the box, their creative work is not just unique and it remains functional and awe inspiring.

"When you feel like you have arrived, you have lost yourself and the innocence has gone. One should always have room to grow."

Divine Next Steps

Zain's new goal is to work on 'Dubai's centric style'; and develop a signature interior design look that absorbs everything he believes signifies Dubai's essence: the melting pot of a metropolitan city with easy access to continents and cultures. His aim is to build a brand based on finely balanced, harmonious-styled interiors.

Aside from working on developing this signature interiors brand, Zain's next design plans concentrate on super yachts and private planes, proving the point that there are no boundaries to creativity.



ZAIN MUSTAFA

The most successful businesses will come naturally to you

Empower your employees

Don't micro manage

Communication is key

Travel A LOT

zainmustafa.com



nurai

BY ZAYA

Nadia Zaal
29
Emirati



When I was little I wanted to be… a ballerina.

On the day I decided to set up my business, I was… very emotional.

My catchphrase/word is… feel the heat and do it anyway.

My friends describe me as… a workaholic, extremist and passionate.

The defining moment in my life… Nurai's launch.

I relax… with yoga.

"I was always adamant that I would never leave my employment with the Government. However, with a long and successful family history in real estate, I guess it was only a matter of time, it was after all in my blood."

Vivacious and ambitious are but a couple of the adjectives to describe Nadia Zaal, who is the Chief Executive Officer and co-founder of Zaya. A proud Emirati yet to reach her 30th birthday, Nadia has already paved the way to a flourishing career in the real estate industry and has built a name synonymous with visionary leadership and entrepreneurial spirit. Born in Cambridge in 1980, Nadia spent her childhood in Dubai, before heading back to London in 1999 to study Government Economics at The University of London. Although not related to what she is currently engaged in today, her thesis concentrated on privatisation. At that time the only authority competing in this area within the Gulf region was the Abu Dhabi Water and Electricity Board. Important contacts made during her university studies quickly opened doors and she secured her first job in 2003 for the Abu Dhabi Government as a Financial Analyst; little over a year later, Nadia was running the entire department. ***"I was thrown in at the deep end, at the age of 23. It was certainly challenging, but what I was entrusted to manage in terms of scope and remit was hugely stimulating and rewarding."***

Responsible for negotiating multi-billion dollar financing, Nadia often found herself making contributions at boardroom meetings with men whom she has looked up to throughout her educational years. On one occasion, she found herself entering the HSBC building in London's Canary Wharf for yet another important meeting. Heading to the top floor to join a video conference with top level executives, a momentary element of self doubt prevailed; enough for her to question her capabilities. She did a swift about turn and, walking out the building, she called her father. It was a defining moment for her and she has never forgotten his response. ***"Everyone you are about to meet are all human, the level of your success is determined by your interaction with them. Just be yourself and they will love you. You are my daughter and I know that you will be one step ahead of them at every turn, go get them."*** It was the ultimate confidence booster that has since lifted Nadia's spirits when faced with adversity.

Building the foundations

"My grandfather was one of Dubai's first landlords back in the 1950s and 60s, he owned a building in Deira and my father followed suit." In 2004, Nadia's father, Zaal Mohammed Zaal, was considering purchasing a sizeable piece of land in Dubai which he would later turn into the much celebrated Al Barari project, an initiative aimed at encouraging sustainable development in the UAE. As a close knit entrepreneurial family, they would sit down at meal times and have healthy discussions ranging from the complex requirements around the necessary funding of this purchase, to the everyday chat about 'what's for dinner'?

The more Nadia participated in these family chats, the more she thought of creating something spectacular and meaningful from an empty, barren piece of land. So, when the design phase started, Nadia realised that she wanted to become a part of her father's project. Despite her early misgivings about not wishing to leave her job with the Abu Dhabi Government, she resigned in November 2006 and worked on the family project until the following summer.

Once construction started, and after having ensured that the solid foundations and executive team were in place, Nadia decided to scale back on her involvement in Al Barari and establish her own company, which focuses on the high end sector. By putting up private capital, Nadia launched a new real estate enterprise in private sector luxury development, which focuses on a market without any precedent. Within 18 months, she had established a joint-venture and launched Abu Dhabi's first luxury real estate offering.

On choosing the name "Zaya", Nadia commented:

"The trend at that time in construction and development companies was to use a name that had an Arabic meaning which related to building. I didn't want to follow this route and more importantly, I also wanted to operate internationally."



Since the letter 'Z' kept surfacing as a powerful and dominant letter associated with the partners of her 50/50 joint venture, Nadia and her team creatively amalgamated other letters together and the name 'Zaya' emerged. The feedback she received was that it sounded Arabic; it was succinct to remember and, above all, feminine enough to represent her personal brand.

Zaya's first project started during the construction phase in August 2008, with a luxury residential and hotel development situated on a natural island off the coast line of Abu Dhabi.

"I was keen for development to occur in Abu Dhabi. Following the Dubai real estate boom, Abu Dhabi remained an immature property market and it seemed like a natural progression."

Abu Dhabi is at the pinnacle of a major investment drive with a massive commitment to key cultural attractions which are under development. The completion of the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, the Louvre Abu Dhabi and a performing arts centre, together with shopping and entertainment complexes, it will make for an appealing

city mix, whether to live and or invest in. Nadia was resolute that she didn't want to be all things to all people; a fast commercial project was not on her cards.

"There are so many islands in Abu Dhabi with investment opportunities that many people are not aware about. Whilst you can quite easily jet off to the Maldives, there are no residential properties for sale there."

Nurai Island is one of three prime locations identified for luxury development in a thorough survey of Abu Dhabi real estate. With Nurai Island as the company's inaugural undertaking, the project was put on extreme fast-track. Within eight months, the Zaya team assembled by Nadia was able to conceive a master plan, create the architectural design, and secure government approvals and building permits.

Nadia has a very strong rapport with clients. Without even seeing the site and the plans unseen, Nadia's first client bought two properties over the phone, as they trusted her enthusiastic and descriptive narrative of the planned build and were immediately sold on her visionary flair. Ultimately, developing a high-end product that will have a niche market does not necessarily mean that everyone understands why so much could be spent on a particular line in tiles, or why there is a requirement to have a lavish launch party. Whether it was banks, investors or individuals, it was imperative that everyone involved in the project understood why luxury and quality was pivotal to this development.

Regardless of their role and level of experience, everyone who works for Zaya knows a small amount about each part of the business. ***"Accounts attend important design meetings, creative will come to our important cash flow meetings."*** The result; everyone; knows what they are responsible for, where we are in the process, and this leads to an increased sense of belonging and interaction across the business. Nadia is quick to note that with a team of 40 people, it is still easy to do this. "***I was always specific with our positioning and how our projects should look."***

In-depth research, and the team's experience to date, informs all of

Zaya's decisions, resulting in distinctive real estate that exceeds the lifestyle expectations of future buyers and offers promising investment returns. Accurate research is a key component of Nadia's success; consequently she was able to sit with potential clients capable of affording one of the 67 villas with a price point of 7 to 10 million dollars. By careful and detailed questioning of her clients' needs, she created a developers' wishlist, with concepts for their ideal resort, which resulted in a precise brief for the management team to work with. The result was Nurai, a 3.3 million square foot private island, with limited edition beachfront estates, water villas and one boutique luxury retreat.

All homes on Nurai offer unrivalled space and privacy. Seaside beachfront estates will have a build area of approximately 13,131 square feet/1,220 square meters on lots between 3,000 – 6,050 square metres, while Shoreline beachfront estates will have a build area of approximately 12,960 square feet/1,205 square meters on lots between roughly 2,800 – 5,100 square metres. Water villas are situated over the crystal clear waters surrounding the island and include three bedrooms and four bathrooms occupying 5,936 square feet/551 square meters.

Scheduled for completion in 2010, Nurai residents will have access to luxury amenities provided by the boutique resort. In addition to the facilities of the contemporary hotel, there is a private helipad and marina with spa and fitness centre. No cars allowed on the island, and all guests will be chauffeured around in an electrically powered vehicle, minimising both air and noise pollution, making the island pedestrian and carbon footprint friendly.

Light at the end of a sand dune

In May 2008, Zaya officially launched Nurai which derives from the Arabic word 'nour' meaning light. A beautiful island in the Arabian Gulf, Nurai is the ultimate haven offering secluded accessibility to an influential and growing business centre and emerging cultural and entertainment hotspot. Designed to blend seamlessly with the surroundings, Nurai is unique for its 'green carpet' concept which covers the buildings and gives the effect of space and an unspoilt island. The 'green carpet' concept provides the utmost level of privacy and gives the feeling that you are integrated in the island's lush greenery.

The glass suspended villas have a 360 degree view, blurring the line between interior and exterior. Over 300 VIPS were flown to the island to enjoy the interactive sales experience. Lionel Richie was invited to entertain and the evening cumulated in an extraordinary fireworks display. ***"It was an amazing night but probably the happiest person that evening was my father."*** Zaya booked over a AED 1 billion that night. Despite relatively high margins, the

investment into building the luxury brand definitely balances out the margins. ***"People were telling me that I didn't need to go through so much trouble and expense, everyone was buying and selling, but my vision was for to this to be the most exclusive resort in the world."***

Even though currently property prices in the UAE have dropped, Nurai has retained its value. Nadia agrees that whilst there is a slowdown, her clients are high-end users. **"They haven't purchased it to flip it in six months. Properties were bought as either a primary home or weekend retreat, therefore they remain emotionally attached."** Her father's advice not to worry about money rings true and to date Zaya only has a mere 40 percent of properties remaining for sale, with homes already being successfully delivered.

Divine Next Steps

Whilst the construction moves in full force on Nurai, with the completion of its first home actually accelerated, Nadia has decided to establish a hospitality arm under the Zaya umbrella: 'Zaya Retreats' which would bring unique retreat and wellness experiences to each and every project Zaya undertakes. As an avid traveller to boutique style hotels, she has her eye firmly fixed on creating a hospitality offering which truly embodies superior service, differentiated experiences and the highest quality.
Her aim is to develop a Zaya signature look that will make every Zaya retreat instantly recognisable, still maintaining and celebrating the individuality of a property, whether it is an exotic beach location or quirky urban development. One thing for sure is that there will be no compromise on quality or price. "What we offer will always be more expensive than what is offered on the market currently because we believe that there is currently no competition for the level of luxury and superior quality we intend to create."

nurai

BY zaya

Don't take yourself too seriously

Listen to your gut – it is right

Choose the right people; empower them but be upfront about your expectations.

Try to keep it simple – it's all about human interaction

Do yoga

zaya.com

Somebody special always said that
everything that I undertake is a
"stepping stone to the next big thing."

Thank you for your continual support mum;
that quote has got me to where I am today.



Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information in the 'Success in the City'.
Neither the author nor Global Village Publishing FZ LLC takes any responsibility for errors or omissions.



"The idea came to me in a dream; an angel said that I needed to save the world from IKEA."

Thomas Lundgren, Founder and CEO of THE One

"I have always wanted to own my own restaurant, having starved myself for years – it has to be every jockey's dream?"

Frankie Dettori, Champion Godolphin Jockey and owner of Frankie's Restaurant

"Being out of work is the best time to start up your own business – it's a great motivator!"

Scott Feasey, Founder and Managing Director of Expression

Take a glimpse at how 20 entrepreneurs have transformed their dreams into viable business concepts. Get inspired by this new wave of talent, learning from their mistakes and seeing the world from their eyes. From retail, product design and selling wholesale fish; to e-commerce, real estate development and gift experiences; these enterprising Dubaian's reveal their secrets in a series of refreshing no-nonsense profiles that aim to amuse and, if possible, also to inspire.

www.successinthecitydubai.com

ISBN 978-1-61584-145-5
90000>
9 781615 841455