

It's all thanks to chocolate

Louise Curtis took the GFC in her stride, coming up with a gift idea that has just 'gone nuts'...

MARK EGGLETON

IT'S one thing to win a Telstra Business Award. Quite another to take your prize money and parlay it into an even more exciting business, but that's exactly what Louise Curtis has done since winning the 2008 Telstra ACT Micro-Business Award (category for businesses with five or fewer employees).

After winning in 2008, she launched Lollypotz, and it has become one of the fastest growing franchises in Australian franchise history.

Lollypotz, which grew from her award-winning corporate gift hamper business, Hamperesque, has in two years grown to 40 franchises across Australia and New Zealand and will expand further into Singapore within the next couple of months.

What's especially novel about the Lollypotz story is Ms Curtis' extraordinarily successful new venture grew from winning her first Telstra Business Award.

"I didn't know what to do with the \$20,000 in prize money, but thought to myself that rather than paying off a loan I should do something innovative with it," she says. "It was the beginning of the GFC, and Hamperesque, which was pitched primarily at the corporate market, was slowing down, so I thought I

should attack the retail market and the growth has been phenomenal."

Lollypotz is a natural extension of the Hamperesque business specialising in gifts that are quite simply everything chocolate.

"It was just a small idea, but it has gone nuts and it has totally transformed my life, as I've grown from six staff in a small factory to 30 staff very rapidly," Ms Curtis adds.

"What's more, Hamperesque is now going along very strongly as well and I've had to employ a full-time operations manager to run its day-to-day operations."

Keen to promote women in business, Ms Curtis has tailored the business to make it female-friendly, especially to those with young children. "Around 95 per cent of the franchises are owned by women and 90 per cent of those are women with young children," she says.

There are eight Lollypotz storefronts around the country at present, but it is primarily an internet business. Ms Curtis has also negotiated with large shopping centre operators such as Westfield to open pop-up kiosks around peak gift giving times such as Valentine's Day, Mothers Day and Christmas. "It's an unusual and innovative business model, but heading into shopping centres is a great marketing exercise



Louise Curtis: Tailoring her business to make it attractive to women, especially those with young children

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"We're a nimble operation and we can just go into a shopping centre for a week at a time and make our money."

As for the Telstra Business Awards,

it's no surprise that Ms Curtis is positive about the experience of entering. "Telstra have been very helpful," she says. "I think what I like about the awards is the process of entering, which is very stringent. I've entered some awards where you fill out a one-page questionnaire and that's it. The Telstra process really makes you study your business. You're able to look at your business as an outsider looking in.

"It's the best experience I've had in business, because the entry process was a chance to really investigate how I operate. What's more, the awards have catapulted me into the limelight

in the business world."

And the kudos didn't stop with one award back in 2008, as Ms Curtis also picked-up the Nokia Business Innovation Award in the Telstra Business Women's Awards.

"It has been an extremely busy two years involving a lot of hard work, and it's now full steam ahead for the next 12 months, with more franchises opening in Australia and our expansion into Asia," Ms Curtis says.

"We're already discovering with our soon-to-open Singapore store that there's huge potential there, because (like here) everyone loves chocolate."