

Louise Curtis can spend up to \$250,000 on chocolate in a single day. Working from a tiny office crammed with pink files in her factory in the Canberra suburb of Fyshwick, the founder of Lollypotz, a rapidly growing internet and retail chocolate bouquet business, buys stock for 38 outlets around the nation. Curtis and her 37 franchisees in Australia (and three in New Zealand) are now working furiously, assembling bouquets of chocolate, champagne and wine for corporate and personal gifts.

There are 10 permanent shopfronts, brightly coloured gift stores that look for all the world like florists, and in the weeks before Christmas franchisees are setting up another 28 pop-up stalls in shopping centres. "This Christmas we will prepare 100,000 chocolate bouquets," says the 39-year-old Curtis, who founded her first business, called Hamperesque, from her Canberra home eight years ago.

The mother of two boys established Lollypotz at the beginning of 2009 as an extra line for Hamperesque (which still sells 50,000 hampers a year).

"We're an accidental success story," says Curtis, her voice hoarse from dealing with some increasingly tense franchisees preparing for the festive season, chocolate suppliers in Australia and overseas, and her China-based packaging suppliers. Her iPhone buzzes regularly as messages pour in. "It has grown to be this massive company. That's why I have grey hairs."

Lollypotz is one of the fastest-growing

franchises in the country. The business turned over \$2 million in its first six months of business in 2009. This year it is expected to turn over \$10 million.

Curtis, who chose to drop out of law school because she was bored, is the middle child between two super-smart siblings, both with PhDs. Her sister is an adviser on immigration and international affairs to Prime Minister Julia Gillard; her brother runs a school for children with disabilities. She is the unashamed capitalist between two idealists.

Curtis worked as a mortgage broker in Sydney before moving to Canberra 10 years ago. When she had difficulty finding quality gifts for the clients of her employer, she decided to make her own gift hampers at home.

Corporate clients embraced her and in 2008 she won Telstra's small business award for the ACT. She used the funds from that to start Lollypotz, which she decided would be franchised.

"I wanted it to be like a florist chain, where you can go into a shop in one city and order a gift for someone in another city and have it delivered the same day. People are so incredibly time-poor. They want an easy solution for a gift. We offer a well-priced, convenient choice."

Curtis priced her products cheaper than most florists – starting from \$19.95 and with most below \$50. She's pleased that her franchisees are not only in the capital cities, but also in regional towns such as Newcastle, Orange, the Sunshine Coast, Nowra, Cairns and Traralgon in

Gippsland, Victoria, which has proved to be particularly successful. "Our regional stores are actually on par, in terms of sales, with our metropolitan stores. They have done incredibly well."

Curtis has a staff of 25, most based in Canberra, where she also operates a call centre for telephone orders. She has 15 people approved for new franchises in Australia, but won't have time to train them until next year. She plans to have 70 franchises nationally, an operation she expects to eventually reach an annual turnover of about \$20 million.

The business name came out of discussions with her husband, Matthew. Searching for a single-word name, she thought of Lollypots. He thought that was crazy – but came back later saying: "It has to be Lollypotz with a 'z'."

Curtis has trademarked the name and has ambitious offshore plans. Already in New Zealand, she will expand into Singapore in January. If that works, the franchisees can take it to Malaysia. She's also keen on Canada and Brazil – which has a strong franchising tradition as well as a love of chocolate – and, in time, the US.

In Australia, Curtis recently expanded into her own brand of chocolates, made in Melbourne, which she sells to other gift-hamper operations. And she plans to diversify into clothing and cosmetics, aware that Lollypotz's combination of bright pink livery and chocolate appeals to the teenage girl market. ■

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LOUISE CURTIS KNEW SHE HAD IT RIGHT AS SOON AS SHE THREW CHOCOLATE INTO THE POTTING MIX. **GLENDA KORPORAAL** REPORTS.

Lots of lolly

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