

is Business Blooming



Louise Curtis has seen her chocolate bouquet business, Lollypotz, become one of the fastest growing franchises in Australia. She talks to Helen Rosing about the sweet taste of success.

Q. Tell us a bit about yourself. What drives you?

A. I live in Canberra with my husband, Matthew, and two young boys aged four and seven. I'm 41 years old. I'm a very ambitious and driven person who thrives on the success of my franchised operations. I love nothing more than hearing of a success story of one of our franchise owners.

Q. What were you doing before you commenced Lollypotz?

A. I have another business, Hamperesque, which I started in 2002. This business was where the Lollypotz concept started. Hamperesque has grown to be one of the largest gift hamper companies in Australia, and is quite different from Lollypotz in that it is a corporate-style business, rather than a retail business.

Q. How did the decision to start the business come about?

A. I purchased a local chocolate bouquet business in 2008. I bought the business to add another style of product to the Hamperesque business. I changed the total style and look of the bouquets to be more contemporary and stylish. The new style bouquets began to sell and then I outsell the Hamperesque products. It was my hope to be able to deliver Australia-wide from local outlets, so I decided to franchise the business. I

based the franchised business on the Interflora concept where, for example, you could walk into a Sydney store and order something to be delivered in Perth the same day. I set out to establish 70 franchises across Australia.

Q. What type and how much research did you undertake before starting the business?

A. The only research I carried out was to see if there was another company that was nationwide and in regional areas selling the same type of product. I knew from the massive sales of product within my own business that the product had huge appeal.

Q. Tell us about the growth of Lollypotz from inception to your position today.

A. The business grew very fast, with nine franchises taking up the business in the first six months. That was a manic time, as we had no systems in place, we didn't even have an operations manual – we were just flying by the seat of our pants and making up the rules as we went along. Since that time, we have seen steady growth and we have 40 franchised operations in Australia, and three in New Zealand. We have spent significant funds on technology, we have a fully-integrated ordering/franchise owners management system. We now run a call centre, too,

which takes all the phone orders. We even have our own Lollypotz app.

We were recently listed in the BRW as the fourth fastest-growing franchise in terms of financial growth, and the second fastest in terms of outlets. We now have five senior management staff, including myself, and a team of 12 altogether supporting the business.

Q. What were the early days like in the business? While no doubt you were confident about the potential success of the business, there must also have been times of doubt.

A. The biggest mistake I made in the early days was selling franchises to the wrong people. I have never had doubts about the success of the product – our product is beautiful, well priced and we offer a service second to none. What I didn't realise was that everybody who purchased a franchise wouldn't have the same business values and work ethics as I do. I didn't realise that they wouldn't work as hard as I do.

The only doubts I have had have been in the poor selection of some franchise owners. We have learnt a lot and our selection criteria now are far more stringent, and I'm pleased to say that we now have great franchise owners.

Q. What was your biggest challenge when starting the business?

A. Cashflow! This continues to be a challenge. Starting a business, employing staff and developing systems takes significant capital, and whilst we had constant injections of funds from the sale of franchises, it has never seemed enough. Building

infrastructure for a company with this type of growth drains the finances. We had to spend the money on marketing and support to keep those early franchise owners happy with their investment.

Q. What were the considerations in franchising the business rather than having company-owned stores? Why did you choose to franchise?

A. I choose to franchise because I had a baby and a three-year-old. It was virtually impossible for me to manage staff interstate. The overall cost of setting up company-owned stores would have far outweighed the cash available, so franchising seemed to be the best option.

With the benefit of hindsight, there has been many a day where I wished I had opened company stores – however, franchising gave me the immediate growth, market share and injection of funds to make Lollypotz a huge success in a short time. We have the greatest coverage of any internet gift business in Australia.

Q. Both yourself and your franchisees have had some great success appearing in the media. What has been your PR strategy? Do you do your own PR or do you outsource to an agency?

A. When Lollypotz first started, we employed the services of a PR consultant. I recall it costing us a fortune and when we were seeing what they were doing for us, we thought we could do it ourselves.

We have no real PR strategy, other than to put



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yourself out there whenever you can. We consistently send out press releases about everything and nothing – but we share all our successes with anybody who wants to listen. As part of our training, we encourage franchise owners to actively promote themselves to local media – to become an active member of their community and to drive their own PR.

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Q. As the business has grown, how have you needed to grow personally?

A. Personally, I had to become very tough. I had to really have a thorough understanding of franchising – which I did not have to begin with. I had to stop giving in to franchise owners and I had to be a leader who sent a strong message. I found this very difficult at first but in time I have realised the stronger I am, the more respect I gain from my franchise owners.

Q. Were there times when it all felt too hard? How did you overcome these feelings to keep going?

A. There have been more than a few days where I could have walked away. There has been many a day where I have sat at my desk and just cried, due to the enormity of what I had bitten off. Managing my two businesses, as well as the Lollypotz franchising business and being a mum with two young kids has at times been impossible.

I have a desire to succeed and when times are tough, I just need to remind myself of what's important. I have surrounded myself with a great team of like-minded women who prop me up when things are tough. I'm really lucky to have such wonderful women working for me.

Q. What are you most proud of in your achievements to date?

A. Without doubt, creating two businesses from nothing to be the success they are. Winning the Telstra Business Awards was a huge achievement and winning tenders for the country's largest gift hamper programmes have all been highlights. Doing all of this with some normality in my children's lives is probably the greatest achievement, though. I hope that my children will grow up knowing and understanding strong work ethics and values, and understand that you have to work hard to be a success; that nothing comes easy.

Q. What else would you like to achieve in business?

A. I would love for Lollypotz to continue to grow both in Australia and internationally – and surround myself with franchise owners who are as passionate about this business as I am. I love nothing more than to see them succeed. It gives you a great sense of pride to see a business that you have created be replicated time and time again.

Q. What advice do you have for other women starting out in business?

A. Be careful for what you wish for! Be prepared to lose money and back yourself. Running your own business is a tough gig. I don't believe you need to be a genius or have any formal qualifications – but if you have a great idea, passion, commitment and drive, go for it! **em**