



Small Business Beat The Recession

We beat the odds to defy downturn

Kate Lockyer meets some of the people who have launched successful enterprises since the slump started to take its toll

YOU may think it madness to launch a company in the midst of a recession but many experts say it is an ideal time because it teaches you disciplines that will ensure your business can survive tough times and be ready to capitalise when good times return.

Here we celebrate those brave men and women who have launched their businesses since the onset of the economic downturn three years ago.

Yee Kwan Chan

Yee Kwan ice creams and sorbets

BEING made redundant gave Yee Kwan Chan the push and opportunity she needed to follow her heart at last.

A self-confessed food lover with a sweet tooth, she found desserts in oriental restaurants disappointing, which gave her the idea to fill what she felt was a gap in the market.

After 10 months she now sells her handcrafted ice creams and sorbets in more than 26 outlets and her Sheffield-based business is expanding rapidly.

Initially she was helped by Business Link Yorkshire and was told about the Rural Development Fund, which granted her 40 per cent of her start-up costs. Having been refused by the bank as an unviable business it was just the help she needed. However, it takes more than money to make a business successful in a recession.

A great believer in the selling power of a unique product, she said: "To be successful you must believe in your product. It's vital to build relationships with customers. We offer something over and above our competitors. We go the extra mile."

At last week's deliciouslyyorkshire awards, she won the dairy category with her black sesame seed ice cream and the innovation award.

● www.yeekwan.com

Tom Higgins

Gold-i

GROWTH has been huge for Tom Higgins, chief executive of Surrey-based Gold-i, which made £100,000 profit in its first year and is set to be even higher this year. Mr Higgins started in November 2008 as a result of the economic downturn.

"There were few jobs around and I'd always wanted to start my own business," he said.

"I started slowly, got consultancy work and from there found my first client."

He maintains that the secret of success in this climate is to find a niche product. Gold-i is a software system that offloads risk for brokers while trading in foreign exchange. Mr Higgins says his is the only company offering this kind of product and believes this augmented success during a hard time.

"Businesses that want this service must come to us. We offer expertise that can't be found anywhere else."

Being self-funded, Mr Higgins agrees, may have helped to keep cash flow positive during the past two years.

He said: "We moved to a smaller house to keep outgoings low and I used our savings to pay myself so I didn't draw a salary."

Mr Higgins says starting a business in good or bad times requires excellent customer service.

"You must meet your customers' demands all the time. You can't work nine-to-five."

● www.gold-i.com

Geraldine Brooks

Sugargroup

BUSINESSWOMEN are flocking to sugargroup's meetings and you can't blame them. Where else can you learn about tax

GOLD-PLATED IDEA: Tom Higgins says excellent customer service is key

Make a date

- Global Entrepreneurship Week runs until Sunday. Visit www.gew.org.uk
- Business Startup 2010 is at Earls Court 2, London, Nov 30-Dec 1. www.bstartup.com



COOL CUSTOMERS: Ice-cream maker Yee Kwan Chan with, inset, David Hyams of real-print.com and Geraldine Brooks of sugargroup

and watch a burlesque show at the same time? When Ms Brooks became a mum she knew she had to rethink her high-flying career with the Virgin Group and started doing what she loves best: making connections and networking.

She said: "Seeing it take off is what success means to me. I can work flexibly around my children but still ensure sugargroup's success."

Sugargroup has more than 500 members since its inception last year and despite the recession Ms Brooks has plans to expand beyond the South-east.

"I used my network of clients, roping them in to support sugargroup. And word of mouth has been invaluable along with social networking."

David Hyams

real-print.com

DAVID Hyams' first step when he started his direct mailing business in July was to get Direct Marketing

Association accreditation. He says it's essential to build a business customers can see is totally bona fide.

"I'm old-fashioned," he said. "I wanted to create a business using old-fashioned means to connect sellers to customers."

Email marketing is fast getting a bad name. This ensures businesses get literature read."

On www.real-print.com, businesses can design, write and order leaflets or letters to be sent directly to targeted recipients. This has proved to be a successful strategy in the economic climate.

"I identified that the SME market just didn't have anywhere to make small printing orders. We are filling that gap."

● www.real-print.com

Guy Levine

Return On Digital

WHEN Guy Levine envisaged his start-up idea in 2008 he had a simple plan. He was not going

LET'S GET DIGITAL: Guy Levine says stick to your business plan

to get a bank loan and he wasn't going to use his overdraft. Despite the recession he's stuck to that.

"I'm from a world where if you wanted to start a business you either saved up or created a self-funding entity," he said.

He started Manchester-based Return On Digital with just £1,000. It now enjoys a healthy turnover and employs 10 staff, crucial for keeping quality high.

He said: "I could see things would get tougher and felt it was vital to have cash in the bank you can draw on without incurring interest. My bank manager hates me."

With a background in web design, Mr Levine wanted to be able to show clients how his service affected their bottom line.

Return On Digital, an online marketing agency, provides search engine optimisation and uses social media to engage with potential clients. It develops and manages paid search campaigns to make your website more effective.

Mr Levine says the secret of his success is simple: "Focus and stick to your business model. If you have a dream, go for it."

● www.returnondigital.com

