

SAGA

Recession? What recession? Older entrepreneurs buck the trend

A year after the UK economy was described as officially in recession, *Dymphna Byrne* visits four new businesses which launched just as the financial storm clouds were gathering

Starting a new business just before a recession could be foolhardy, canny or just bad timing. But older people who set out to create a business have an advantage. Maturity gives them the experience and the self-confidence to let instinct and intuition play a part in their most crucial decisions.



The following business people, whose radical career changes in their 50s coincided with the end of the boom and the beginning of near bust, knew that they needed to do things differently. They wanted the freedom to work hard at something they enjoyed and were good at. They trusted their judgement and had the courage and determination to pursue their dream. And they proved that if you believe passionately in what you are doing, not even the worst economic conditions in 80 years can hold you back.

Susi Lennox and Sarah Brooks, co-founders of Yes Pure Intimacy, manufacturers of organic health and personal care products. The company launched in late 2006

Susi Lennox was in her late 50s leading a successful life as a management consultant working in the petrochemicals industry when she reached a point when she felt she needed to re-invent herself. Her business partner, Sarah Brooks, whom she had known as a colleague and friend for years, also wanted a change. Sarah, a chemistry graduate who became a star sales woman and global high-flyer initially with Exxon Chemicals in Southampton, and then as an adviser to some of the world's biggest pharmaceutical corporations, felt 'burned out in mind and body'.



"We were drained by corporate life and wanted to go into business on our own in a positive way that made use of our backgrounds and our attitude to life", says Susi.

"The idea that came out of the blue, to make and market our own range of internal personal care products, was perfect. It fitted our backgrounds and our passionate belief that pure products needed pure ingredients."

Their company, Yes Pure Intimacy, makes the world's only range of organically-approved lubricants and moisturizers for women. Water or oil-based and using only plant extracts the product was launched in late 2006 and is now sold in 44 countries including the USA and Japan and is available in 200 stores in Australia and New Zealand.

The women acknowledge that their work in developing 'intimate' lubricants sometimes provokes childish sniggers. But given that the market is worth an estimated \$1.3billion per annum and that nearly 50% of the world's population are potential customers, they are likely to have the last laugh. And having fun is clearly an important part of their business philosophy – after all, with tongues firmly in cheek, they chose to name their website yesyesyes.org

However, it had taken over three years of intensive work and research before the product was ready to be sold. "The analysis of competitors' products revealed many concerning chemical ingredients, insensitive packaging and demeaning language," Susi says. "We set out to create high-performing alternatives that, based on sound science would deliver benefits. Purity and discretion were key, combined with elegant 'blush-free' packaging and language."

They had to find a suitable formula, conform to the trade descriptions act, create original product branding, set up a web site and a mail order business, investigate recycling, and more. To fund this major capital outlay they sold their houses.

"They were difficult times but we were determined not to compromise," said Susi. "It took 92 trials, all meticulously logged, before we had the correct formula. Once this was tested by an outside source we asked friends and family to try the product." The feedback was positive. They were in business.

Initially, the company sold in Britain only from the website. But in late 2008 Susi and Sarah made the decision to expand into High Street retail stockists and their products were put into health food stores and independent pharmacists across the UK.

Again, they took a risk – taking on the added costs of increased production, marketing and distribution at a time when consumer spending was hitting rock bottom. But they were unperturbed.

"Our sales were completely bucking the trend then as now," Susi recalls. Sarah nods assent, pointing to a textbook example of a perfect graph on the wall, with the all important line rising inexorably upwards.

"As you see, sales have grown by more than 7% month on month since the launch. We now employ nine people and need bigger premises. It's been hard work but I'm glad we followed our instincts and stuck to our principles."

The icing on the cake was when the company won the 2009 Triodos Bank Ethical Small Business of the Year Award, sponsored by Ecover, in association with The Times.

So, recession or not, Susi and Sarah are certainly having the last laugh – possibly all the way to the bank.

(Yes Pure Intimacy Ltd. 08456 448813, www.yesyesyes.org)