

MINDING YOUR SMALL BUSINESS

Every good business starts with a great idea. LEESA MAHER meets three inspiring women who turned their lofty vision into profitable realities through meticulous research, careful planning and sheer hard work.

Annie Gribbin

■ 40s ■ Distributor and retailer, Make Up For Ever

A shop selling lipsticks, eyeshadows and blushes? Hardly groundbreaking now, with stores like Space NK, MAC and Face Stockholm but, for recession-plagued Dublin in the late 1980s, it was unheard of. "Everyone thought I was crazy," recalls Annie Gribbin, make-up artist and Irish distributor of French cosmetics brand Make Up For Ever and Face 2 – her own make-up line designed for Irish skin.

But, when she opened that first shop in the Westbury Mall in 1989, Gribbin cornered the boutique beauty market in Dublin and foreshadowed the luxury beauty emporiums to follow. Make Up For Ever's professional-grade cosmetics, in a feast of shades, were the precursor to monster brands like MAC. "Even 20 years ago, we had every conceivable shade of lipstick and eyeshadow. Had it been an American company, it would have been bigger. Americans are better at marketing," Gribbin insists. "[The French] got confused. They set it up as a professional line; the public was the least of their concerns. But it caught on and people kept coming into the shop in Paris, asking for products. In a sense, Make Up

For Ever was dragged into the market kicking and screaming."

Gribbin trained with Make Up For Ever in Paris in 1984 before scoring the Irish distribution five years later. In 1992, she moved to her current Clarendon Street premises (reminiscent of a Hollywood sound stage) and followed up with concessions in Roches Stores nationwide, including a new 400 square foot site in the Henry Street store – the biggest Make Up For Ever space in any department store in the world. There is also talk of Face 2, her other brand, launching in chemists.

"It's been a slow progression but, in the last few years, since I turned 40 in fact, it has taken a big leap," Gribbin says. "Make Up For Ever is not as recognised as many commercial brands but it has substance, and a following. People are loyal to it, and nothing can make them buy the 'in thing'."

In the beginning, Gribbin knew nothing about distribution, had never even done a business course.

"I was naive, but had a great sense of wanting to do something. Maybe being naïve was a good thing because, if I had understood all the implications, I might not have gone there. Even going to a bank for money, I had no help. I sold the concept to my bank man-

ager, almost like that television show, *The Apprentice*, where they have to pitch an idea. It still was not easy, but I started off very small and got into a niche market.

"As the business grew, I gathered the right people around me – superb financial advisers and administrators. That's so important, for any business."

Teaching has always been a major component, with Gribbin's team of make-up artists running classes in her newly-expanded studio in Clarendon Street, around the country and for corporations. Gribbin has never advertised, hardly necessary, she says, with hundreds constantly on her waiting list – businesswomen, trainee professional make-up artists, debutantes and homemakers.

"But, no matter who they are, I train at the same level. I'm very conscious of that, and the same goes for product – I'd never sell a lesser brush to a non-make-up artist. All I did was shorten the handle so brushes would fit into an ordinary cosmetic purse," she explains.

And what about the growing number of rival beauty stores? Bring them on, she challenges. "I always say competition is very healthy – it's improved our business by bringing awareness. I think that, after all these years, Make Up For Ever has finally become hip."



MARIE CONDRENSUS/IZMAY FRIBUNE



JOANNE MURPHY



ENTREPRENEURS

Helen Clarke

■ 30s ■ Owner, Solo Fitness Health and Medical Clinic

A one-stop-shop for health and fitness, Helen Clarke's Solo represents a new breed of medical clinic in Ireland. At Solo headquarters, a five-storey Georgian townhouse in Fitzwilliam Place, Clarke heads up a battalion of top health professionals – from GPs, nutritionists and naturopaths to massage therapists, physiologists, chiropractors and acupuncturists. Their goal? To pool their knowledge and resources to treat everything from back and neck pain, recurring headaches and post-operative rehabilitation to cellulite, fatigue, acne, wrinkles, excess weight or lack of muscle tone.

In the medical world, this is termed a multi-disciplinary approach – something Clarke witnessed firsthand while working in Australia, and wanted to bring home to Ireland. "It's like going out to build a house – you wouldn't do it without experts," she explains. "There are so many people with aches and pains, going to the gym and not getting results because they are not talking to the right people."

Clarke, herself an osteopath, physiotherapist and acupuncturist who has worked in Australia, India, Hawaii, Sri Lanka and

the US, operates the clinic – every day, 7am to 9pm – with business partner Tom Nolan, a sports physiologist, personal trainer and ex-international athlete.

This is a bustling place, with round-the-clock treatments to accommodate the lives of busy people. In the state-of-the-art gym, you may find Nolan helping a model hone her arms, see him massage the joints of an obese person to minimise the risk of injury, or hear him advise a diabetes sufferer on weight loss. In the treatment rooms, massage therapists (either a qualified physiotherapist or nurse) give deep tissue massage and perform Endermologie treatments for cellulite; GPs do medical screening and Botox injections to erase wrinkles; nurses give glycolic peels or microdermabrasion for acne, sun damage or simply to freshen up the complexion; and Clarke treats patients for all sorts of aches and pains.

Want to lose weight, and fast? Solo can help with that too. One of its most successful campaigns is a 14-day boot camp (€800, including all food and personal training), with a team of nutritionists, physiologists and naturopaths to help you trim up to eight per cent body fat or twelve pounds. You simply arrive each day for your workout, counselling and to collect your

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gourmet, calorie-controlled food – what could be easier?

Perhaps this multi-disciplinary approach, so popular in other countries, is what the busy Irish woman has been waiting for – a clinic that takes the worry out of weight, health, fitness and skin issues. No more wondering who to see for what complaint, or seeing the wrong person altogether. You simply arrive, and are relayed to the right person or people. However, Clarke is quick to mention that a more serious problem will be referred elsewhere. “Some people I send straight to a GP. One chap arrived with what he thought was a pinched nerve, but turned out to be a stroke,” she remembers.

In the average day, Clarke says 80 per cent of her patients are women, under 40, with neck or back issues – most likely because they do not exercise. “We’re supposed to be more mobile,” she explains. “We sit hunched over desks, hunched in cars. We’re supposed to be having babies and men are supposed to be swinging from trees – that’s what we’re designed to do, and we’re just not doing it.”

Often, the treatment is specific exercise and/or deep tissue massage – both of which were in short supply before Solo

opened, according to Clarke. “I was working in a clinic in Shankill and, if I had patients with a back problem, I’d sort out their back, then set them exercise and rehabilitation to strengthen their muscles and improve their posture. I was sending them to the gym, and it was like sending them into oblivion. Before long, they’d be back with the same problem. In the gym, there were no physiologists with knowledge similar to mine so I’d have them down on the floor in my office, doing exercises.”

In other cases, she wanted to send patients for deep tissue massage but could find nowhere with trained physiotherapists that was open from early until late. “Everything here was very beauty-oriented or else there was your GP. I felt there had to be something in between.”

Clarke is big on massage, has had one every week since she was 18 and is loud in her praise for the health benefits. “One deep tissue massage is considered the equivalent of 21 hours’ sleep. I could pick out people in a crowd who have regular massage – their circulation is so much better. Their eyes, skin and hair are brighter, they have a buzz to them. Even if you are not eating properly or exercising, with massage, you can look and feel better.”

Here, skincare is taken seriously too – you’ll find foot massage and therapy, done by a chiropodist, but no shiny nail polish; skin treatments are pampering, yes, but more medical in nature – glycolic acid peels, Botox and microdermabrasion by a nurse or GP. “Everyone is more thorough,” insists Clarke.

Having invested much time, energy and money in hiring the right people, Clarke did the same sourcing the latest medical equipment. The star of the show? A mad-looking machine called a Huber, invented in France and perhaps the most advanced piece of equipment in the world of sports science and rehabilitation. The French rugby team won’t go anywhere without it.

“In France, they have a saying: capital santé. It means that, in life, you start with 100 per cent resource. You are completely healthy, tip-top in every way but, as life goes on, due to work, stress, hormones, having babies, and diet, it’s downhill. We’re here to top up that percentage, to help you feel as healthy and vital as you can – to be the best you can be.”

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Joanna Gardiner, ■ 30s ■ Managing director, Ovelle Pharmaceuticals

Dundalk may not automatically spring to mind when listing the top names in skincare but Ovelle Pharmaceuticals, a family-owned company has changed all that with popular skincare brands Emulave, for dry skin, and Emulave Junior, a version for little ones. Number one in the Irish dry



skin market since June 2004, Emulave has overtaken rivals E45 and Boots Healthcare. Since 2001, its market share has grown by 133 per cent, exports have increased by 121 per cent, and independent research shows that the product is being recommended to patients by just about all Irish dermatologists.

And the person behind this runaway success? Joanna Gardiner, the granddaughter of Ovelle founder, Joseph Gardiner. A travelling salesman, Joseph started the company in 1934, making apothecary creams, lotions and ointments, like Silcock’s Base and calamine lotion. Joseph’s son, Sean, a pharmacist, managed the business from 1973 when it became a fully licensed pharmaceutical company and exporter, manufacturing products for other companies, along with Joseph’s original products.

But it was Joanna, Sean’s daughter and Ovelle managing director, who oversaw the restructuring of the company in 2000 and launched the Emulave brands. Why?

“To bring Ovelle Pharmaceuticals into 21st-century retailing and to maintain competitiveness in ever-growing markets,” explains Joanna, “the company needed to invest in research and development.”

Her research showed that dry, itchy skin, eczema and dermatitis were on the rise, and there was a greater need for “safe skincare”. “In the 1950s, three per cent of children

were affected with eczema; today, it’s one in five and numbers are rising.”

And why the increase in cases? According to Joanna, modern living is to blame – chemical exposure to everything from baby wipes and bubble bath to central heating and deep pile carpets.

Research indicates we need a more careful use of skincare products and regimes that promote the integrity of the skin – not the reverse.”

Enter Emulave, with no perfume, dyes or harsh ingredients, just purified water and minuscule amounts of chemicals to stop bacteria. In supermarkets and chemists, the range includes wash and shower products, shampoo and intensive cream, lotion and oil.

And, as the impressive sales figures show, the products have found an audience – and Joanna has earned much of the credit, nominated at last year’s Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Awards.

Joanna puts her success down to constant research and understanding her market, analysing competitors, investing in and believing in the brand.

“I feel such satisfaction when a man tells me that, after using Emulave, his hands haven’t been as soft since he got married. The same applies when I hear from a mother that, after using Emulave Junior, her three-year-old son has stopped scratching his skin until it bleeds and now sleeps through the night.” ■