**Condiments, Body Jewellery and Airbnb**

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**Condiments (sold), body jewellery (gold tattoos) and property rental**

CG: Please can you give me an overview of your businesses? I know about the AirBnB, but I think there are others?

XX; Yes there are two other business that I started, one I sold a while ago but it’s still going and another that I am in the process of closing down now. I am closing because the demand for it is slowing and I don’t have the time to manage the stock.

So TB I started in 2014 in Dubai. They were possible the first of their kind in Dubai, not in the world of course because there was this singer that started the craze. We designed the range ourselves; well it was me and another lady that helped me with bits and pieces. They were then sold in a very high end boutique, the equivalent of Net-a-Porter here and in Emirates and the high end Dubai hotels. They sold really well for a couple of years. I also did a special pack for lulu-lemon, the Canadian US version of a Sweaty Betty (yoga and active wear) but much bigger distribution, including the Middle East.

Then I moved back to the UK from Dubai and still had some unsold stock. Obviously the weather is different here, colder and therefore it’s not the same for body jewellery as there is not the same body exposure. However there is the festival market. So I sold the remaining stock through Not On The High Street and Amazon. It actually did amazingly well and was one of the best sellers on Amazon for a while. So we decided to vary the offering. In Dubai we only sold it in packs of 3 in one of these fairly upmarket packaged sheets – Tiffany blue, with gold embellishments, thick card etc. then for Amazon we split up the sheets and sold in translucent plastic (much cheaper) wrapping.

So I am just completing final accounts for them as I don’t have the time to look after it.

CG: Is that a combination of lower demand, meaning it’s not worth your time?

XX: We travelled in 2016 for my husband’s sabbatical for 6 weeks over a summer. During that summer holiday there was a sudden surge in demand on Amazon and I need a significant restock. When we got back I had to sort the kids back into school and I just didn’t get onto it quickly enough. The Amazon algorithm is such that it rewards traders who keep products in stock to meet immediate demand and I couldn’t do that, so I lost my positioning. We had another big surge at Christmas and I should have been on that one, but had so many home things to do that I decided I couldn’t really continue with it, it felt slightly flogging a dead horse on that one.

So I stopped Not On The High Street this Christmas, it was very profitable for me but sales were low. The Amazon did really good volumes and turning good money, but I just didn’t have the time to keep servicing it. I think Amazon is an amazing market place and I am desperate to find and do some other products on there. I just haven’t had the chance to find the right products.

CG: What about your first business; Le M?

XX: I started this with a chef friend in 2008/9, this is still going but I sold out of it when we went to Dubai. Well no, I sold out about 2 years after moving to Dubai because I carried on for a bit but it became almost impossible because it was very much a UK based, locally sourced food company. We went through the taste and test process at Waitrose and they were going to shelve us, then the buyer changed and we had to go back to square 1. Same old, same old really, although it is stocked at Ocado now. There was a very large procurement process for the London Olympics and we shortlisted on a number of the panels. After two meetings the guys said we you won’t hear form us for a three weeks, but the contract is yours. Then we didn’t hear anything, I didn’t think it was necessary for them to do that and I did consider out options at that point. It’s still going and doing well, it’s now Patrick and his wife. The branding was all to do with the pedigree of Patrick as a le Rou chef and the quality of the ingredients.

CG: So did you start the business as a partnership?

XX: Yes, I mean it was a company, but yes we were a team. P was the chef, so the product and I was the business side. I had just stopped working at that point; C1 was 2 and C2 was 4. The hours just weren’t compatible with family life.

CG: So you were working full time in London and you had young children. You went back to work but eventually just couldn’t make that suit?

XX: Yes I went back to work full time after both of them. I was offered a 4 days week, but I didn’t come down on my days – a 4 day week does not exist. I had a very flexible female partner, she didn’t have children herself, but she was an enabler and she recognised as long as the work was done well, it’s didn’t matter where or how. I left work at 5.30, so the nanny would leave at 7 and I could bath and bed the children. Then I would start work again at from about 8, I could do the calls and email etc till around 11. But I would have been doing those hours anyway, under a lot more stress if I ahd accept the 4 day week.

CG: When you left work, how would you describe that leaving?

XX: I would say it was very much my decision. I could have stayed on very happily. My husband was doing the same role and me and we were under a lot of pressure, especially at weekends. The children would get passed between us to facilitate work. We came to point recognising we have chosen to have children, one of us needs to be more focused on them. I thought that he would be far more successful in the job in the long run, I just felt he was much better at the job than I was. So I was perfectly happy to stop working, but the transition from senior board rooms and advising government at a very senior level, to being the mother of two young girls in an expat environment, where women are really meant to be doing much, was very tricky. It took me a good 5 years to stop saying to people “I am a laywer, I can achieve”. That was my insecurities; so much of my identity was tied up with being at work. It’s you confidence. In any event I had started with Le M before we had left.

It was always something I wanted to do. I enjoy very much the start up process.

CG: So would you say having gone though that transition, you were looking for a new opportunity out in Dubai?

XX: I am quite a lateral thinker and I love solving problems and issues. There is always a way to find the solution, to look at it in a different way and get there. I love the challenge of solving a problem. I’m not a foodie and so the Le M venture was driving by the opportunity to do something with Patrick and learn the whole process.

CG: Was this an opportunity where you felt you could bring something new, something different?

XX: It was about the quality of the food, the integrity of the production process (it was all handmade for the first 3 years) and the provenance. This was, not quite at the very beginning of the local food movement, but it was in the early days. Certainly people were starting to turn away from the high sugar, high salt. I love the creativity of designing the branding, I taught myself all the graphic design packages. So it wasn’t particularly “food” it was the challenge of learning new things. I loved making the sale, sadly nothing more exciting than making a sale.

CG: So you moved to Dubai and that made it very difficult. In what way?

XX: Day to day interaction with a business partner is essential. Then the sales were relatively concentrated in the south of England. We had a big contract with Lakeland then. You need to be seeing people on the ground, in person. I could set up the meetings and complete all the background issues, but it needed me there.

I remember 3 days after the birth of my 3rd child being on the phone to a large US retailer and discussing the drop test. Your packaging has to be strong enough to prevent any breakages, however and wherever is it dropped. I was trying to work it all out on the phone whilst trying to feed him. Just not workable.

CG: Do you think if you had been in the UK, you would have been able to make it work. Around the children?

XX: Yes, it never easy, you do things at midnight, at 5am in the morning. You never feel like you have enough time and you never feel like you finish anything. However I now realise, as I have got older that is life, nothing is ever done.

CG: So then for TB, what did you start that business, how did that come about?

XX: Both spotting a gap in the market and finding a new challenge, opportunity. I stopped Le Mes in 2011 and started TB in 2012. I was still settling into the new baby and Dubai and so I took my time to find the next thing.

CG: So how did you find these?

XX: We were staying in East Hampton with some friends and the girls came back asking to buy some temporary tattoos. They said they were metallic and really cool and $25 a packet, which seemed extortionate to me. I went in and asked me lots of questions, they couldn’t keep up with the demand. I have some images online still, I loved all the photoshoot and styling it all, and the YouTube demonstrations for a subscriptions service (beauty box) which once included the product. It is fun and temporary and can look really stylish.

I looked at the principle of what they were doing. I didn’t like their end product but I thought the idea was brilliant and replicable with my designs. So within days, I was goggling how to manufacture them and creating my designs I wanted (I used my grandmother’s jewellery and some classic Indian patterns). I then had discussions with manufacturers in China and they had all the right equipment at the best prices, there are 10 a penny there. I chose to do 2 ranges; photographing the jewellery, transposing onto the computer and using design software to finish. 18 different designs over a period of two years. There was a girl who worked for a luxury branding agency in Dubai and she really liked the idea of it, so she offered up her graphic designer to help for free to design to logo. It’s tiffany colour blue and the logo is designed to loo jewel like. I high end and we called it temporary jewellery. We had a website too.

So I did everything on this product.

CG: So was you biggest market Dubai?

XX: Initially yes and then UK became quite big. I was looking for a product that would succeed where I was based. I think you have to be where you customers are.

We did get some exports of the chutneys to Dubai and around the Middle East. However transporting glass products is so expensive on a small value items and the complexities of food standards being so different, it’s a nightmare. It turned out to not be very profitable. We did get some grant funding from the government for European exports investigation, to export to Europe. We did gain business Dublin and Scandinavian, where they went insane for it for a while. I know I sold out because of geography and timing, but actually for me it’s too niche a market. The margins were OK, because we were at the higher end but then the volumes will always be small. If you did get the volumes up with a supermarket contract, the margins would fall.

So I have several ideas bubbling under.

CG: Are you looking for another project.

XX: Well I need to finish this house, then I have another project coming up in Switzerland which will need managing, a knock down and rebuild. I will run it as a business when we are not using it. AirBnB is a bit new there and the tax structure will need planning.

CG; So the AirBnb here, how have you found that in comparison to your last two businesses?

XX: Much easier, partly because I am on site, partly because if you get the basics right, it can be self sustaining and self generating. It’s all the listing set up, knowing your target market and adapting when you find something is not working.

I have always treated the family home as a business. So we have been through 10-12 properties and traded up the capital at each point.

CG: In terms of your household context, how supportive have you found you husband to be in all your ventures?

XX: Purely in the context of AirBnB, initially he was very resistant but not because of the “business” aspect of it, but because we were essentially exploiting an asset which was his home. Coming home after the stress work, he doesn’t want stranger around; a privacy thing. But then he is very happy with the returns it generates.

A lot of the time he will ask me “why are you doing it like that?”, I’ll just say “just leave me to it, I know what it is I a trying to achieve”. He has learned over the years that I do get it.

CG: So with the AirBnB, when you met his resistance, did you feel it was important to still push it through? What made you the driving force behind it?

XX: It was a combination of things. I knew I needed to do something that was revenue generated and a business. I knew we had this house which could support itself. So it was also a family thing, security.

CG; When you say you want to do something business driven is that because it is important to you?

XX: I didn’t come into this world as a mother. I don’t know ….it;s a funny thing isn’t it? There are more than one string to our bows, and its about finding out which is the higher pitch and which the lower really. The creativity and the intellectual challenges of solving the problem, using your brina. Whether it is a product, or a service or even a property you are delivering at the end of it, to have something tangible at the end, that people say “ah I get it now”. Nothing comes about unless there is human endeavour behind it. That’s what I am after, it’s not business with a capital B, it’s the business of creativity and having an impact. I would love to understand that secret ingredient that means one business is worth billions and the other tens of thousands. Then you start a couple of businesses and you start to learn the differences.

CG; Do you find, because you have those successful businesses under your belt, he has increasing confidence in you.

XX: Yes definitely plus it also combined with the fact he has less time to be involved, so he needs to just let me get on with it. He’s never been involved in any of my businesses; in fact he’s not a very creative person. For the tattoos, he struggled with the connection between making the product and it’s intrinsic value. He doesn’t necessarily get my ideas or what the use is for them, but he very quickly see when I show him the bottom line then he gets it.

CG: So he is more of a numbers person, what’s it going to deliver?

XX: Yes exactly, he finds problem solving in that context quite stressful, he’s not a natural lateral thinker, but he’s great at logic. So there have been times when I have been struggling and he’ll say well it’s obvious, it’s this. So he is a very good touchstone, on that sense.

CG; Do you think that touchstone has made a difference in your businesses?

XX: I don’t know…..a lot of the time I don’t talk to him about my business because the early stuff he just won’t get.

CG: Is that fine for you? Would you like to be able to share, or is there somebody else you supports your ideas etc.?

XX: I do have a number of girl friends that I chat to about things. The first (chutneys) one was a good family friend, that was personal but also tricky; you didn’t want it to ruin a friendship. The second one, he was keenly aware I stepped back from a senior job in the city, so he is sensitive to that. There has also been a parity for us, we sat next to each other the first day at law school. So he understands and supports me. He will say, “I don’t want you to do that” or “I don’t think you have the time to do it”, so he’ll try and pull me back from these things but if I want to do it, I will make the time to do it.

CG: So he is the realist and you are the dreamer?

XX: and I am immensely practical. But yes I look for the potential and not the barriers.

CG: If you look back at your business, was there something that could have made it easier?

XX: A real business education would have been fabulous. I can look back and see things I should have done differently. So stupid things like bookkeeping and accounts, I don’t understand how it works in real life. When all you want to be doing in making the product and selling it, there is just so much paperwork behind it. I still don’t understand the financing and that is despite have access to all the information. That is my blind spot. But then if I had though a full round of fundraising I would see it through and then know.

I have never been at that expansion stage. When you have to go out and raise the equity investment. It’s done all over the world so it’s clearly just a regular process. I suppose I would love to know how to gear up a business and I think it is that next stage. You know when I set up my next one, that’s what I want to focus on much more. You see it is relatively to set up and small business and get it to a particular point (based on bits of foil on sticky paper). Because I don’t see why I would be any less capable of running a big business, that I am at running a small one.

I haven’t had the right business yet to do it with, but when I do I think it will become obvious. But in my mind that is the glass ceiling for me at the moment.

Also I do think there, you know you can have one or two business and more before you find the one. I did used to think, well then you just can’t be very good at it if you need so many goes. But there are so many moving parts, you are juggling all of them and you also have the family expecting food on the table etc, so yes not enough time. Carving out the time and being disciplined about it.

The trouble is I have an idea now, but it is just far too big. Then of course with a big idea comes big money investment and that is when it gets very real, the test of whether you are a proper entrepreneurs. All my other business were small with no borrowing., the worst thing to happen is that you have a few pieces of paper left if you don’t sell the stock.

**Personal Details**

Age: ~~16-29 30-39~~ 40-49 ~~50-59 60+~~

Nationality: British (white)

Country of origin: UK

Mode of working: ~~Full Time~~: Part time:

Children: (1) ~~0-2 3-4 5-1~~1 12-18

Children: (2) ~~0-2 3-4 5-11~~ 12-18

Children: (3) ~~0-2 3-4~~ 5-11 ~~12-18~~

Highest educational qualification: Law qualification

Location of business: Rural Hampshire

Home working: Yes

Last position held in employment: Partner LLP

Husband Occupation: Law partner

Husband highest educational qualification: degree

Household income: ~~Dual~~ Single (Both income not required.)

Add 2 Questions

Success : Obviously profit does play a part because that indicates how you achieved the value you want from your ideas. If you can’t make a profit then you surely can’t call yourself an entrepreneur. Otherwise what is the point of it. Creating something people will pay for. But equally for me it’s about having my children and husband take pride in what I do. I had a very sceptical husband for my first two businesses and it really felt important to me when he saw my success and saw me in a new light. When we are out socialising and he proudly describes what I do, there is a such a sense of achievement in that for me. It’s the same for my children, they do like that fact that I go off and do something, they tell their friends what I do and friends think it is cool. Yes that is equally important to me. I have a standing and a role that I have built from scratch, no infrastructure, no rule book, nothing on a plate…just by myself and I succeeded.

Identity : I worked as a successful lawyer and that was a happy role for me. I was successful at it. Then I had children and eventually gave up work. That was the toughest point for me. I gave up a role that I could manage and be good at for chaos. Children can’t be managed as such, they aren’t rational, they do things you least expect. I found it REALLY hard. Setting up a business was like an escape back to what I knew.

BUT the key was being lawyer you do one thing. I had always thought I enjoyed other skills, such a creativity, but they were really used in my job. Becoming a mother challenged me and made me see I have lots of other skills; some that I gain a great deal of satisfaction from. Becoming a mother and giving up work gave me the space to explore other skills, firstly because you have to and secondly because I started to build up my confidence to deal with issues outside my comfort zone. I found I could do things I didn’t before and I had the time to develop ideas that could use those skills (creativity) that I enjoyed most.

So I didn’t find it a challenge to become an entrepreneur, I found it a challenge to become a mother and then a relief to operating as a business owner … it was back to clear objectives, commercials deals that were logical and issues that could be managed. In complete contrast to my children!