**Art Sales**

**23.05.2018**

Online Just prints, no frames so don’t have to worry about glass and weight for transportation and takes up very little space to store at home. Already well packaged and sent by the auction house / dealer so not issues there, just pass on.

**CG**: Please can you give me an overview of how you came to set up the company and what you were doing before.

XX: Before the setting up the art business, well my husband works full time and I primarily run the business. We deal in second hand art, basically contemporary prints. So prior to all of that, which I have been working on for about 6 years now, I worked for 18 years in industry. I worked in marketing, straight after finishing university. I got my first job in marketing and worked my way up the ladder, initially for a parcel delivery company. I did my diploma in marketing with the Institute whilst I was with them. I them moved to another company in the same industry, where I spent a further 13 years; business to business mail and parcel delivery.

I had my first child in 2004, my daughter and I had to go back full time initially, as they weren’t flexible and wouldn’t allow me to work full time. Then things changed a couple of years down the line and I went part time, still managing to maintain my level and benefits. Then my son was born in 2009 and obviously by that point I was part time, so I managed to juggle things with childcare and school and with the help of my parents to make it work in the holidays and everything. But when my son was about two, they made me redundant. I had survived well, that was the 4th round of consultations that I had been through over 3 or 4 years. That was in 2012.

So basically I had been working for a long time in marketing for somebody and I had one child in primary school and one very young child, at the level that I had achieved and what I was earning, I couldn’t find anything to replace it, at a part time level. It was very important to me to have that balance and that time with my children. I had missed out a little bit when my daughter was young and I didn’t want go back to full time again. I had to make a decision about what I was going to do. Also with the cost of childcare, if I had gone and taken a part time job at a lower level and hence lower salary, which I think I would have had to do in the end, it just would not have made financial sense in terms of the cost of the childcare.

So I took a few months off to think and decide, I was lucky that I wasn’t under financial pressure then, to have to replace my salary. I decided to get involved in my husband’s hobby, art dealing. He has always been really keen on art, he’s an artist himself and we have collected a bit of art for ourselves in our house over the years and he started to look at buying things on Ebay. Back then it was starting to emerge as a big thing. I was quite familiar with ebay, having bought and sold children’s clothes and toys on it. So I started to take an interest in the art side and thought, how about we make this into a proper business? I could try and give it a go and make it work around the children and make it work me. So that’s how it all came about.

CG: So was a case of spotting a good opportunity that could flexibly use your available time and skills?

XX: Yes, I didn’t have the art knowledge that my husband had, because he’s studied it and had always taken a keen interest in art and I hadn’t. But I had the commercial skills, marketing skills that were different from him. When you are setting up a business, you know you are effectively setting up online retail; well I had those skills from all my years in marketing. I knew about websites and how to reach customers and how to write good communication, and copy etc. It was just a bit of a learning curve for me in terms of picking up the art side of things.

It took time to learn about the art we buy, we buy from auctions and then we sell on. You can read a book on it, you just have to learn and get a feel for what’s a good deal and what isn’t, what people will like and you make mistakes inevitably and get things wrong, but over time you build that confidence and expertise. I gradually built that up and now I’m quite confident with what I am buying and I run things with much less input from my husband. He has a very busy job which takes him away from home a lot as well.

It has worked rally well. It has given me what I need in terms of continuing to use my brain and my skills in a different, creative way without having to deal with all the corporate issues. There is freedom when you are working for yourself and it’s given me an income, not as big as when I was employed. Because obviously apart from the revenue point of view, you don’t get the sick pay, the pension, the holiday pay etc all the benefits of being employed. But yeah, it works really well around the children and it’s meant that I haven’t missed out on them growing up. It’s been a success.

CG: So would you say you haven’t regretted not finding an alternative corporate job?

XX: No, sometime I feel that I miss it because having been in a corporate environment for so long, especially as marketing is a very sociable role and I was always in a team. It’s good to bounce ideas off people and it’s creative role too and I do miss that banter. That side of things I do miss, that social aspect of going to work and being part of a team. You have to have a lot of self motivation when you work on your own and work from home, to actually work. That’s one thing I do miss, but to compensate for that I get involved with my son’s primary school, in the PTA and I do their marketing for them as well, obviously that is voluntary but it gives me a social side to my marketing projects because I am working with a team of people, bouncing ideas of people. That is important to me and that has really helped counter the isolation you can sometime feel when you work for yourself at home.

CG; When you were working full time did you share domestic responsibilities with your husband? How do you find you status changed when you started working from home?

XX: It has all fallen mostly on me because he has always had a job that involved long hours or lots of overseas travel. Also we live very locally to my parents and they did a lot of childcare for me, with my daughter before it became too difficult for them. They were also on my route to and from work, so that really helped. I did everything for the children really. It hasn’t changed as he now works away even more than he used to.

CG; Do you find that works with your business, or can that sometimes be a constraint on your business?

XX: It’s up to me I find, because of the nature of what I do. Ebay is one of my main sales channels and then I also set up a website a few years ago so that we had a separate independent site for the business, our own presence on the internet. That added to my workload quite a lot and it is quite a challenge managing to 2, but it’s up to me to manage how much I do or don’t do. I am lucky in that I don’t have the financial pressure to meet numbers every month. So if I have to not do anything for 2 weeks because of school holidays then that is fine. It doesn’t matter because I am not letting anybody else down. It’s the nature of what I do people are not necessarily expecting new items on the site all the time. It works really well.

CG: Sometimes I have noticed women who leave high powered corporate roles, to work in a small business at home can lose some confidence, that feeling of credibility.

XX: I do sometimes feel that everything is on my shoulders. I am juggling a lot of plates I suppose. I don’t think it has affected my confidence, because I am in control of the business side of things. If I think about going back into employment again then yes I probably would feel quite anxious about that, you know I haven’t done this for a long time and I’m not sure. Can I be as good as I used to be? But I’m not in that situation and I feel quite confident about what I am doing. I think what I find quite overwhelming sometimes, with a husband who is away typically Mon-Thurs most weeks, so I am doing the kids in the morning then working a full day on the business, having to fit in household things around that (shopping and cleaning etc) and then I have children home with homework, tea and bed and maybe catch up business stuff after they have gone to bed. It’s very full on. If I don’t have time to do something for the business, then I just don’t do it. That is how I have to make it work really. I can’t do everything. I try and structure my days as best I can.

CG: Do you think given how the business flexes around your family, would you ever want to go back to a corporate role?

XX: I would never say never but I would wait until the children were 18 plus and able to get themselves around. Even then I wouldn’t actively seek it out, just if something came up that I was really interested in, I wouldn’t say no because it was corporate. I did really enjoy working in the corporate world and it has advantages compared to working for yourself. It’s hard working for yourself, running a business with all the skills that requires. It’s not just the sales and the marketing that I know and enjoy; it’s also the accounting side which was a skill I had to pick up. But I am happy with how things are now because the children are happy and that’s my priority.

CG; So I suppose the business is a pragmatic solution for you, matching your skills to a solution to childcare.

XX: I do really enjoy it and it is always very varied and you are always learning something new. I would see that my husband’s ideal scenario is for him to retire as soon as he can before he’s 65, so that he can take over the business. He really has the passion for the art and it would be his dream to actually do what I am doing, but we can’t afford for him to do that because we need his income. So I could see him taking over. It’s whether or not that would work for both of us. I do really enjoy it to, but my core is marketing and that’s a skill that can be used in any industry.

CG: So when you set the business up, what would you say your aspirations were for the business and have they changed?

XX: I think we really got something out of sourcing limited edition art at great prices, by being clever about where we sourced them from and being able to find good homes for those pieces, potentially anywhere around the world and making it as affordable and attractive to those people who may not have been able to afford it otherwise. That was definitely one key element; having a great range of art and changing our selection to keep people interested, at affordable prices. Obviously to make it financially worthwhile too, to cover the amount of time I have to spend on it.

We never had formal revenue targets, but obviously we were hoping it would generate a decent income. It is a tricky business because there are different ways to source the art and supplies change, I have also noticed differences in people’s taste. It’s also harder to maintain the momentum we had earlier than it was a couple of years ago definitely. I’m not just focused on beating numbers each month; I can take a longer term perspective. It doesn’t worry me too much at the moment.

CG; Would you consider different sources of revenue streams or different products. How would you react to a deep recession for instance?

XX: I think a lot of our business comes down to very careful sourcing and not overpaying for things. My husband is much more of a risk taker than I am and he’s much more ambitious for the business than I am. We are partners in the business, but I run it day to day because he is full on with his job. If he was here, he would be a lot pushier about taking risks.

So at the moment I don’t buy anything more than £500. Depending on the artist prints can go for anything from thousands for a Damien Hirst or a David Hockney print for example, that’s not the sort of market that I focus on. I’m more of a £300 average and often much less than that, so it’s a higher volume, lower margin but less risk business model. I am comfortable at that level. Whereas he would look to take a risk and see what happens, at the moment I am running it and we stay at low risk.

The big change we made was to build our own website and not be dependent on Ebay. So that was my baby in terms of managing launch, keeping it up to date, email marketing, reaching out to people.

CG; Would you describe it as a step change in the business?

XX: Yes definitely because it gave us credibility, so we are seen as a business and not just as an ebayer. We don’t have a gallery or premises or anything like that so it’s our shop window. I think it’s really important to have that web presence. In terms of what else we might do it’s actually quite difficult, because everyone is moving away from high street galleries, they are closing them down and moving online. So we are doing the right thing. But without taking risks with our customers, the ones that repeat buy from us because we are sourcing the things they like. If we started going down the route of paintings etc, that’s very different from what we currently do. It’s a very different market for a different audience and I’m not sure that would work for us. We would be going out to potentially very different people.

At the moment we are just focusing on our core. They is so much supply out there if you take the time to really focus on it and know where to look. It’s a constantly changing scene in terms of the stock that we can source, so it’s not like we are selling the same things every week, it’s always different and so we don’t have that problem yet.

CG; Apart from the start up and the website, have there been any other milestones that you feel have been important for the business?

XX: As I have had more time to be involved in the business it has certainly grown. It’s a function of what you put in really. (23.10)

XX: Yes definitely; it has given us credibility, not just as an ebayer as we were before. WE don’t have a gallery or anything, so it’s not like anybody will see us. So I think it has been really important for us to have that web presence. In terms of what else me might do, it’s really difficult because everyone is moving away from the galleries, they closing down to switch to an online presence. So we are moving with the industry directions….

Nothing particularly, I mean as I have had increasingly more time for the business it has started to grow. It’s a business that what you out in reflects on what comes out; more sourced stock, more sales. The website was 2015 and since then we have been able to build customer loyalty and good supplier contacts to build our presence in the market. The website has really helped in that respect because we were able to build an email database of people who wanted to hear from us, that is not something you can do through ebay. There you are just reliant on someone spotting your product in an listing in amongst thousands and thousands of others. So by starting the with a simple marketing plan; one was simply adding compliment slips into every sale we sent out from ebay that directs them to our website and asks them to register for previews and newsletters. It’s a slow build but you get really good quality contacts that are genuinely interested in your products and much likely to buy. That really was significant in enabling us to have a direct dialogue with our customers, to say more about who we are, rather than just short adverts on Ebay.

CG: Have you built a network of business contacts around what you do? Or have you ever made contact with a women in business type of network?

XX: No, I don’t attend nothing like that. I’m on Linkedin and I subscribe to our peoples newsletters that are relevant to the business, so we can keep up to date. That’s mostly auction houses, so I can see when the next sales are coming out and what’s in them, and all the dealers websites, so we can keep tabs on prices and trends and changes in the market.

CG: I suppose that you are in a specialist, niche market online and that you don’t need the local area contacts ….

XX: No I am purely online and I feel very self sufficient, I pretty much do everything myself. The only support I have is from an accountant and an IT guy for the website when I need it. And that’s the beauty of it, it’s a very simple model. Oh actually I suppose the only other part is the business is the couriers, who are a major part of the business. Because we are buying things from anywhere in the country you have to have reliable transport to collect, that can be a bit hit and miss, but they are the only other external suppliers we rely on, on a more regular basis.

CG; So it’s super efficient, in that you don’t have to leave the house. Do you find all your stock online?

XX: I go online to the live auctions, so you can see or hear the auctioneer making the sales. You do all your research beforehand online, so I know the price history for each artist and type of print, you now what price will give you an expected margin. You live bid, which can be a real adrenaline rush. It's all done from my kitchen table, my kitchen is the centre of the operation! The only time you have to leave the house is if I have to post things.

CG: If the business is really busy and your child is unexpected sick, how do you manage around that? Do you pull in friends to still push through the business, or is your business so flexible you can put it on hold for a while? How do you mange that balance?

XX: I probably out the business on hold to manage, I can do that, it works around me. If I need to go out in the day or take a break for coffee with friends I can. Once you have put something on ebay, it’s on for 10 days and I decide when that clock starts ticking and so I can plan the deadlines. For those listed on a buy it now format, sales could potentially close at any time. Often they will send you an offer and you never quite know when they will come in. So it can be quite exciting from that point of view, I’m never switched off from it because it’s on my mobile phone. If any buyer sends me a message, I can see it instantly and I can respond no matter where I am. They don’t know if I’m at the school gates, in the supermarket, that I am not behind at desk. So it’s great from that point of view. I think Ebay have done a really good job of making the platform really mobile and really easy to access. Even when we are on holiday, I still have product listed and if it sells I just ping them an email from wherever we are to warn them there will be a slight delay in delivery. It’s never been a problem and it means I can run the business for 365 days a year, wherever I am because the world is mobile now.

CG: Looking back establishing your business and then trying to grow it, was has been the most rewarding elements and what has been the biggest challenge?

XX: Most rewarding is definitely see the benefit of my marketing skills and creativity in how we approach things having an impact. Primarily though the impact of how we can connect with our customer base but also how I market things on ebay as well. The biggest challenge has definitely been juggling the different roles of running a business, running a house and being a mum. I will always prioritise the children over the business. I’ve never had ambitions to be at the top and just want to do really well at what I am doing, whilst being there for my children.

CG; So by setting up the business you’ve been able to do all the things you wanted to do for your children and still develop your skills and challenge yourself? Given your aspirations, would you say that has given you the best of both worlds?

XX: Yes definitely, having worked for 18 years in industry it’s quite a shock when you first step put of that world, especially when it’s not your decision. I was left thinking what I am going to do now. You’ve had two hats on; employee and as a mum and it’s quite daunting. The business gave me that new focus and I like to think that if I did ever want to step back into that corporate world again, I have added a completely different side to my skill set and to my CV. When you run your own business and set things up, with accountants and finance and profit and VAT returns and all that kind of thing, it makes you very grounded I think. That’s really important as a marketeer because it’s great experience. Having stepped out of corporate life for so long, I don’t see it as a backward step. It might have been in terms of my income, well not massively but you know if you consider all the additional benefits of being employed and the safety net, you are worse off, it’s a risky situation to be in, but it has definitely given me the incites into what makes a business work, what a business needs to be successful. If I did decide to do something else I feel I have learned a lot of very valuable incite.

CG: So in a way you have become much more commercial.

XX; Yes I think so. I am much more focused on costs as well. It’s easy when it’s not your money, when you are working for somebody else and you are making decisions on expenditure which you do as a marketeer, it’s much easier to spend that money. But when it’s your business and you have to kind of really seriously consider, is that good value, do we need to do it, can it be spent better elsewhere, that’s the way that you think. I think that’s really important.

CG: Looking back to you setting up the business, you took a risk because you could have gone back to a part time corporate role, albeit a lower paying one but with all the benefits. Instead you chose to build this and invest in stock.

XX: It was a risk, I suppose it was up to us how much of a risk we took. There is a lot you can research on ebay and the internet to see if it had potential. So in a way we had nothing to lose. It would have been impossible to find a part time job to pay the childcare costs, so I was lucky enough we didn’t need to income that meant I would have to work full time where I might have made a of of money.

CG; Thank you that is so useful. I am listening to many women with different business types and sizes and ages and trying to find the commonalities for of their experience in managing around the limitations of children.

XX: Yes I could have chosen to do nothing at all; just looked after the children and the house. But after working for so long I would have been bored. I’m pretty sure that my kids don’t think that I work. They know what I do because it’s all around us, but it’s Daddy who puts on the suit and goes out to work. It’s important that I keep reminding them, I do work you know. With the school mums there are some who are dressed formally and are off to work and then there is me in shorts and trainers and I think they must wonder if I just do coffees all day. So I do make sure that people know I do work, it’s important. I’m lucky enough to be able to manage it all.

**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 5-11 12-18

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

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

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

Highest educational qualification: Degree

Location of business: Winchester

Home working: Home

Last position held in employment: Marketing Executive

Husband Occupation:

Husband highest educational qualification: Degree

Household income: Dual Single

Success Question

I think for me success has been about two things... proving to myself that my years of marketing experience can be applied to a totally new business which I have grown, and done this to a timetable that works around my family which means I haven't missed out on anything that my children do at school or after school and I am there for them in the holidays.  Whilst financially it may not be as lucrative or as 'safe' as being employed, it has those other benefits and I don't think you can put a price on those!

hope that helps