**BAKING BUSINESS**

Website & Media Interviews

Cakes to order: standard, celebration and individual bakery items (brownies etc).

Cakes supplied weekly to 4 local retailers.

2010 started from a hobby after 3rd child meant XX gave up work in the City. With 4 children now, the cost of childcare and community meant it wasn’t worth working financially. Started as a Phoenix Trader selling the greeting cards etc and baked cakes as a welcome. It was the cakes and not cards/wrapping paper etc that were the big hit. Started B at a café in the local park in 2011 as a pop up every Tuesday, so popular decided to push ahead and launch a full business; start up costs were low, baked from home, cost of each cake can be pre-determined individually and therefore all priced to make decent margins.

Busy week: 50/60 loaf cakes, 60/70 individual and 5 commissioned cakes.

+ flexibility to be present for children, pride & satisfaction from providing a product associated with happiness.

-can be lonely working alone at home.

CG: Please can you give me an overview of what triggered you to leave your role in the City and first set up as a Phoenix trader and later B.

XX: Why I left the City? That was because I had my 3rd child and my eldest was just starting school. I just thought; how on earth I am going to do this, to manage it all. Some of it was of course financial because, I had a good job. I was assisting the COO in a German insurance company in the city. It was a nice job which was well paid for what it was, but after you deduct travel costs and tax and childcare costs plus the huge stress of trying to juggle a job around 3 children. I had already dropped down to 4 days a week, but it was all just too much. There was so much guilt for me. With 3 children there are obviously more chances of one being ill, phone call from school or day nursery saying can you come and pick up. Whilst my husband and I are definitely a team, I think naturally I felt like it fell to me to take on the looking after. Although he helped where he could, it came to the stage that his job that he just needed to give 100% to it and not have the risk that he might have to go home early to pick up a child. So we kind of came to the decision that was just wasn’t practical anymore, that I would give up work and take the full responsibility for home and children and he would focus completely on his job. I was talking about going back after the maternity leave for my third and I raised redundancy, it was all properly done through the right channels and they very kindly made me redundant.

CG: How did you feel about that at the time?

XX: I think I felt relieved. I mean financially it was very difficult; we had a significant mortgage based on two salaries, so of course overnight our income was almost halved and that was pretty scary. But I have to say the emotional side of things, it was so much easier. I mean the money side of things, well you get by, you find a way. But it did distress me, that I was not earning any money. That’s why I started Phoenix because I wanted to do something for myself. I found that after having a full career, it was really difficult to manage working with children. I was working from home a bit, but back then nobody did, so I felt more and more cut off from work and distant from what was happening there. At lot of my work was social, a lot of going out after work and I just didn’t feel part of that any more. Things were happening when I wasn’t there and I’d find out afterwards, so I just didn’t feel involved. By the same token I didn’t feel part of them mum scene at home because I was dipping in and out, ,I didn’t really know anyone and couldn’t commit to things. So I felt in limbo really and I found that quite upsetting. Then when I had my third child the juggling of course was worse and I did experience some post natal depression. Whether that was linked to giving up my job and career I had worked so hard for, for 20 years working my way up….I don’t know. I never thought about that at the time.

CG; For many women perhaps before children they build up a career that becomes part of who they are. Did you feel any loss of confidence?

XX: Yes, I mean I was losing that already, working and trying to juggle children and cutting down my working hours and all the disruption and disconnection. We were never a family that was going to get a full time nanny and carry on exactly as we did before children. We made a choice that we wanted to be as active in looking after our children as possible.

But yes, loosing identity is a really good way to put it. I wasn’t the same as I was before and I wasn’t looked at in the same way by the team, they treated me differently. I personally didn’t feel part of the team though nobody treated me badly, or rudely, it just changed. If I had to rush of for one of the children, then I went no problem, I couldn’t complain about how I was treated, but I felt differently. I felt I wasn’t part of it anymore and that was really hard.

CG: So in a way was setting up a business a way for you to re-establish yourself as separate from the children again?

XX: I think C4 was 6 months old when it started. I am just not that person who can sit around and just be a mum, I need more, I feel the need to do things that are just for me, carved out from the children. As I get older and the children grow up, I find that it is absolutely vital that I do this. To make time for yourself, because otherwise you go absolutely crazy and you can be subsumed by your children.

CG: Also a creative outlet that is separate channel for you as an individual?

XX: Absolutely that and I have to say another reason is that although my job was really interesting and challenging, it became less of value to me. It wasn’t humdrum and therefore it was difficult to leave that variety and stimulation behind. It just started to occur to me that this is all just money and nonsense and I lost interest in the insurance products we were designing; it changed for me. I always thought before children that I would be one of those career women that work in the City right the way through. But actually when children come along, I just felt differently and was probably a bit surprised. With the first one I did still want to work and I went back full time almost as if nothing had change, but it had. That need to go back to work lessened with each child I suppose, until with my third I didn’t want to.

I was talking to my daughter the other day, who is 16 and has her life in front of her and I said I now sometimes regret, whilst I don’t regret the decisions I made, not doing something more of value to people, helping people, I wish I had thought of it.

CG; When you set up the cake business, what drove that, was baking a passion for you? Was it about independence?

XX: As a Phoenix trader the cakes were popular, the problem Phoenix business it was high enough margin and too time consuming and I wanted a better return on my time and something i could build up. But it did show me how to run my own business and that was a valuable lesson. When I first set up B there were two of us (L who also had children), we started very low key, no big launch etc. There was a local shop setting up and I dropped by and they agreed to take our cakes too, so it was good to learn how to sell to a retailer as well as direct to the public. Then it was word of mouth and we did all the local summer fetes etc and advertising in the local magazine. Then we decided to add a community pop café every week too, just to drive different demand streams and it was slow to start and a hard slog but it eventually took off and became a lovely heart of the village. So it was really satisfying from a community perspective, but it didn’t make us enough money, although we did build a lot of brand loyalty by doing it and that have given us a lot of repeat custom to the current business and further expanded out word of mouth.

L left B 4 years ago because she picked up fixed hours at the local school. I just carried on, on my own.

CG; So you gave up the pop up and started a full time business at home. Was there are particular trigger for this?

XX: A friend of mine working in the local farm shop and called up one day to ask if I could supply some cakes as they had run out. Could I provide 20 cakes tomorrow? So I said yes I can and I ran to Sainsbury and worked late and supplied them and they loved them. They loved the fact there were no preservatives in the cakes and they were made in a local kitchen. Ever since then I have built on that. I now sell them about £500 of cakes a week and I have since picked up other retailers. Back then because I had such a big order from the farm shop and my local retailer I saw that I need to focus on bigger volumes. When you back for a café you have to bake one of each flavour and that is time consuming plus as a pop up I had the whole set up and shut down, it is much more efficient to bulk bake to large, known orders. That was the turning point, you have to restructure things and how you do it and be as efficient as possible.

So I approached someone local and she took up running the pop up, so all I had to do was supply cakes, and now they handle the baking too.

CG: So maybe step up more commercial structure?

XX: Yes I mean I am not a huge operation and I am constantly battling with the question, do I grow this? My youngest son is 10 years old and still in primary and I think that is the main thing that is holding me back at the moment. It’s really difficult because growing my business exponentially has such a huge impact on the family as well. I have to say, the main reason for me doing this is the flexibility it gives me with my family.

CG; So in a way you have your outlet and independence, but would you say you core tent pole is your children?

XX: Yes absolutely.

CG: As they grow you gain more freedom to grow your business, but they are the constraints? You wouldn’t expand beyond the requirements of your children?

XX: I think that’s the true, certainly while they are young. People often ask me if I’d like to open a café and of course I dream of that, but at the moment that would mean weekends and early starts etc and I’m not prepared to give that time up when my children are young because I want to spend time with them. I have 4, logistically it is a nightmare ferrying them all around, even though my husband helps too. It is a team thing.

CG; How your goals changed you? What makes you feel successful? Did you goals evolve?

XX: I take a lot of pride in my product. When I try new products at the farm shops, they say to me everyone will buy it because it has a B label on it, we have customers who will only buy your cakes. It is a lovely feeling. It’s a real boost. I meet people at some school event or whatever and the question comes up, what do you do? And I tell them I’m B and they have heard of me and they love my brownies or cakes or whatever and they have heard of me. Actually that is great, really nice, I do really enjoy that. I take great pride in that. I mean financially I don’t actually need to work, although it certainly makes our life a lot easier. I mean I tell my friends every pound I earn from baking a cake means so much more to me than the pounds I earned in the city. In the city it was just numbers, wholly about what salary I earned and climbing the ladder, but I didn’t the self satisfaction and pride that I do now. That feeling, at the end of each day of real and fulfilled contentment. I suppose one of the differences was I wasn’t producing something when I worked in the city, it was ongoing financial services whereas now I am producing something tangible that gives people pleasure. When people ring up and talk about a bespoke cake, we have a long conversation, where I have to fathom out how I can meet what they are asking for, then I delivery it to them and they often message me afterwards to let me know how much they loved to cake, just right for them. That gives me such a buzz, that you have created something out of nothing, a one off and people are really appreciating it and enjoying it. Cakes are lovely think, a treat, a celebration.

I have in the past, when the children are getting too much and my orders are flying in and I feel overwhelmed, thought about whether I should continue. But then I think about how flexible this is, how it works around my family so well and how I love what I do. It’s not to be sniffed at, if I worked for somebody it just would not be comparable, I would have to work to their rules, I have to be available at set times and probably work in the children’s school holidays. I get so much control and freedom with this.

CG; So pride and satisfaction and now freedom and control, how they do they rate?

XX: Freedom and control is absolutely massive for me. If a child is ill they can just be at home. The kids do sometimes get frustrated with it because there is cake everywhere and I am tied up when I am baking and my husband does get a bit frustrated with it, because the kitchen is overtaken with baking but it’s the balance. However stressed I sometimes may get when it’s really busy, my overriding emotion is one of contentment in so many ways. Content that I can fulfil these orders, that I can bring money in, that I can feel that pride and satisfaction from the buzz of customers feedback and that I can always be around for my children.

CG: Female business are often embedded in a household and therefore the business also needs to allow for the needs of the children too.

XX; Absolutely yes. I mean if I felt my family was suffering from this business, I would stop baking tomorrow. My business is centred on both my needs but probably more importantly the needs of my family. I would miss it like hell, but that would come second every time. They grow up so quickly and they change all the time and those relationships are central to me. At one point I had a baby, one in nursery and two in school, it was chaos and that has to be managed somehow.

CG; On reflection now, are you happy with your decision to give up work and set up the business? Has it met your expectations?

XX; 100% absolutely no question in my mind. My husband once asked well what if I was made redundant, would you go back to the City. No, I never would.

CG; Some say women are short changed by the hours the invest in their businesses for poor returns, how do you feel about that?

XX: Well yes I do work hard and I suppose I used earn far better returns in that sense, but I balance that with the satisfaction and balance. Like I said every pound I earn from my business means so much more to me than from pen pushing in the city.

I mean I have very recently stepped up my operations if you like. I bake one day a week in a commercial kitchen, I found this opportunity and thought this would be how I could take my business forward. So now I go to work on a Monday, away from the house and I bake with industrial scale equipment which means much bigger volumes for me.

CG; Would you like to step that up in the future.

XX; Well yes, but then every time I think about expanding my business in the future, there is a selfish part of me, if that’s the right way to describe it, that doesn’t want an all consuming business to completely take over my life. So I am always hesitant. Some weeks it is very full weeks for me and I am working all the time I get, but other times it isn’t and I enjoy knowing that I will get some flexibility, I will be able to catch a friend for lunch. There is also all the domestic responsibility I carry, I do all the cooking, cleaning and children. It’s how it has come to be, partly through choice because it works. Even if you are not working at a business, you are still working in the home, endless. If I had kept expanding where would I find time for me? So I definitely value the fact that I can, not every often, still meet a friend for a coffee I haven’t seen in a long time. I really value that. Just working all the time in the week and with weekends so full, I think I might start to resent it a little bit. That perhaps makes me seem quite selfish really?

CG; Well everyone needs some space for themselves….. and if it means most needs

XX; Plus of course it makes me happier, having that outlet and that does make everything easier and the family happier.

CG; I have heard many state that they are better mothers because they have their own businesses.

XX: Yes absolutely, I think if you asked my eldest girls (14 and 16), I think they are very proud of what I do. My eldest daughter, she works at one of the farm shops that sell my cakes on a Saturday. She always tells a customer who buys my cakes that I’m her mum. She recently changed school and one of her new teachers is a huge fan of my brownies. It makes them realise that there is another part to me, I’m not just their mum. I think it does them good as well because they can’t always rely on me to do everything for them. They have to step up sometimes. Some full time mums I know really are in control of their children’s lives. I joke I neglect them, which of course I don’t, but I’m not on top of their lives all the time. I do feel that quite keenly, you know, I tell them thay have to make their own packed lunch or whatever. But in the long run I think that’ll be really good for them, independence. A realisation that the world does not revolve around them and we all have to muck in.

Also they realise about priorities and focus. It may be a Saturday, but I have to bake this cake, I have an order. I’m really sorry but I have my word. So I will do this first and then of course I’ll come and play with you or do what they want. It’s not a bad lesson is it, rather than as soon as they click their fingers everybody runs. I feel it has done them some good.

CG: How do you feel about identifying yourself as a business owner? Do you introduce that when someone asks you want you do?

XX: Yes that is exactly what I say, when people ask me what I do, I say I run my own baking business. I feel very proud of it. I sometimes think, like I said to you, I worry about people thinking when I say that, that I am a bug business operating in a big way when I am actually mainly baking from home. I think I might explain how I keep a lid of growth for now because it really suits my family to be on this scale now. Maybe I pre-empt that in a way. Also there comes a next step, when you need to work with other people and I do have someone who bakes for me now, she’s a sub contractor. She bakes for me and I sell on under the B banner and that’s happened in the last year too. It’s a step move towards expansion, like the commercial premises. But I don’t want to employ someone as that is a huge commitment, even just the paperwork. I just don’t have those spare hours in the day, I mean I need to update the web-site but I just too busy baking.

So yes I do feel really proud to say I run a baking business. People often ask about volumes and when I tell just how many, they are always impressed, especially with 4 kids. It is hard work of course but I do still enjoy it. When I open that oven door and the perfect cake comes out, I really get a kick out of that.

CG; Some of the women I have interviewed have questioned their legitimacy as a business owner, or some customers or suppliers have treated them differently due to their gender. I think perhaps you are in a more traditional industry, baking cakes that actually you simply don’t experience that. Does that sound correct?

XX: I think because I am in a kitchen based role, a mum in the home, I completely conform. I have never had a problem with that, always just accepted, they blink an eye.

CG; Would you like to add anything.

XX; I think for me when I look back I am actually really surprised at how far I have come. I think because as a business you grow slowly around the children. When I have thought about it, I think it all comes down to confidence. I had been working in the City for 20 years and suddenly I was alone with the children at home; a huge change. Then when I started up the Phoenix Trading, it was on such a small scale, it gave me the confidence to start this business, the confidence for me as a person. You know now people say they have heard of me and they buy and love my cakes etc, it builds up my self-belief. Not the mum me but the separate me. That working me is really important. It grows the more I do and as the kids grow older they have less of a need for you and in a way you lose some of your connection to them. They still have emotional needs for you, but physically you have more time and freedom. It’s allowed me to develop who I am again, it’s given me an identity. If I did stop, I certainly not thinking of stopping, but you know if I did, what would I be? I followed my passion and built a business for me, around me….. and my family of course, but it remains mine as they grow away.

Now I feel confident enough to choose which work I take on. I know from experience which projects might be more trouble that they are worth, which again is confidence. In the early days you take anything, you say yes to everything. Now I know they are coming to me and I know what my time is worth.

There is a new café opening up and the owner rang me up, out of the blue and asked if I would supply them. That’s a new retailer I picked up based on reputation. Another mum with twin girls setting up. It’s a nice because you get a small community of business women. Also they are so much more understanding, if I say to one of them I’m really sorry I am behind on baking because my little girl has been sick they understand. But if you say that to a male company they just show their frustration at a late delivery and are not interested. It’s the not same. My family have to come first, that’s the foundation.

Occasionally I read about business women in the papers but it’s not something I see very regularly. To hear other women’s stories, it would certainly give them inspiration, if they don’t know how to start and where to go. Even for us who are already set up, to see those stories would give us a bit of a boost too. Although it is hard, but actually the positives really outweigh the negatives.

CG: I think also to show you can be small and successful.

XX; Absolutely that’s’ the point, you don’t have to be this multi million pound, dragons den, taking over the world operation. You can still get a awful lot of satisfaction from a small business.

CG; Yes and you can run it successfully around your children, which is equally as valid.

XX: Yes, yes, that is the point. The bit about I may not be making 1 million pounds but the time I can take picking my children up from school and all that is completely unquantifiable, in terms of an hourly rate. I just couldn’t tell you how much all that is worth, and that is why I gave up working in the city originally. You know money is just money, it’s balance that counts.