

real women

# MY PASSION *INSPIRED* MY BUSINESS

*It takes vision, drive and conviction to start up your own business. Here, Sarah Gooding talks to three women who have made it a success*



## “HARVEY NICS BOUGHT MY SWEETS”

*Sahar Hashemi, 40, is the founder of Skinny Candy\*. She lives in London with her art dealer husband James Faber, 43.*

“I’ve always had a sweet tooth, which stems from my childhood when my father would return from trips to the US laden with candy bars. But when I reached 30, I became more health-conscious and realised that sweets simply contained empty calories. Yet I couldn’t help thinking that there had to be a low-calorie alternative.

While I was travelling as an entrepreneurial speaker (about my previous enterprise, Coffee Republic), I frequently came across low-fat/low-sugar chocolates and sweets in Europe and the US, but never in the UK. Then, in May 2007, while out with my mother, I was looking in my bag for a low-calorie treat, when she said, ‘This is ridiculous! When you couldn’t get a decent cup of coffee in London, you set up your own café business – why don’t you just do the same with sweets?’ And so the idea for Skinny Candy was born.

First, I looked into sourcing sweets from abroad and discovered that the Dutch make great jelly sweets, while the Belgians produce delicious low-fat chocolate. I put together a business plan, highlighting the obvious





\*FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT SKINNYPASTRY.COM. SAHAR WEARS: SIKI DRESS, £79, ZARA. FLOWER RING, £12, DIVA AT MISS SEBRIDGE. KALY WEARS: LINEN DRESS, £149, IK BENNETT AT JOHN LEWIS. SUEDE HEELS, £60, BARRATT'S

gap in the market – and secured a £20,000 bank loan. I then persuaded Coffee Republic (which I'd sold several years earlier) to trial Skinny Candy in three stores, and when it proved a success the real work began.

My mother and I piled all the imported sweets into my spare room and printed off labels from my computer. Then, in December 2007, Harvey Nichols put in an order for 4,000 bags and I couldn't have been more thrilled! But I had just weeks to put together the order, so my friends and family had to help me. As the business expanded, I sold half of the shares to Glisten plc, a snack/confectionary manufacturer, so that we now share control of the company. We're in the process of relaunching the brand and securing supermarket deals, so it's very exciting!

I hope I've proved that if you feel passionately about something, you don't need a huge ad campaign. A real passion is the best insurance policy anyone in business can have."

• *Check out 'The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing by Al Ries and Jack Trout (HarperCollins, £8.99) for advice.*

## “I BELIEVE IN FLOWER POWER”

*Kally Ellis, 46, is married to journalist Damian, 48. They live in London with their children Freddie, 16, and Sophie, 14.*

“I was 29 when I walked into my parents' kitchen and announced that I was going to become a florist. They barely looked up from their newspapers as they muttered, ‘Yes, of course you are, darling.’

And who could blame them? For four years I'd worked (albeit unhappily) in a bank – and a career in floristry was the last thing on my mind. In fact, it was my mother who was the gardener. I'd loved flowers when I was a child, but that had faded as I reached my teens and became focused on school work.

After graduating in languages at university, I had no idea what I wanted to do, so I headed straight for the City. Then, one night, I dreamed that I owned a florist shop and it felt so real, so perfect. It was as if I'd had a calling – a realisation that this is what I *had* to do. At that point, everything seemed to be



going wrong in my life: it was September 1990 and the UK was in recession; my best friend had just died in the Lockerbie plane crash and I'd split up with my boyfriend of three years. It was clearly time for a new direction.

The following day, I took voluntary redundancy from my job, banked the paltry pay off and wrote letters to eminent florists, seeking work experience. Meanwhile, I visited flower markets and trade fairs and chatted to suppliers. It was at a fair that I met Paula Pryke, a top London florist. And just before Christmas, two months after I'd left my job, I spent three weeks working with her. I loved every second of it.

One evening, my ex-boyfriend Damian (who subsequently became my husband!) told me that the wife of a colleague had a florist shop in London that she was looking to sell. It felt like fate. I paid for it in two stages; an initial £14,000, then £10,000 a year later and took over with immediate effect. The tiny outlet on the fringes of the City had few customers and £20,000 ▷

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worth of debt – which I inherited. Friends were horrified, but I knew I had to give it a go or I'd regret it for the rest of my life. So in early January 1991 I opened my shop doors for the first time. There were just two customers that day and I thought, 'What *have* I done?' I'd kept on the two staff, which meant that money was extremely tight. And without any experience or qualifications, I had no choice but to trust my instinct. The first thing I did was create eye-grabbing window displays. I also nurtured the existing customers, knowing that I depended on their recommendations to survive.

### BUSINESS IS BLOOMING

For two years I really struggled. But every time I received an order for a bouquet over £50, it felt like a major triumph. At the end of the first year I just about broke even. And by the end of our second year, I was able to pay off all the loans, thanks to winning a contract with the designer brand Hermès – providing weekly floral displays for their London stores. That marked a real turning point, as other Bond Street stores followed suit, including Gucci.

In our third year, we actually made a profit of 10 per cent on a turnover of £350,000. I was working from 2.30am until 7pm, seven days a week, but I felt nothing but exhilaration.

Then, when the business was five years old, *Vanity Fair* magazine rang, needing flowers for one of their gala dinners, as they had been let down at the last minute. The guest of honour was Princess Diana. Afterwards, they called me, saying, 'Kally, you saved the day – and I'm not going to use anyone else but you ever again!' That was 13 years ago – and I've done every *Vanity Fair* party ever since.

I now employ 30 staff and my turnover last year was £2.75million. Earlier this year, I went to New York to do the opening party for the Tribeca Film Festival, hosted by Robert de Niro and *Vanity Fair*.

I may have discovered my vocation a little late, but it only goes to show that passions can be developed and nurtured at any time of your life."

• For more details on Kally's florist shop, visit [mcqueens.co.uk](http://mcqueens.co.uk).

## “OUR BOOT CAMP HAS OVER 1,000 CLIENTS A YEAR”

*Jacqui Cleaver, 29, (far right) lives in Dorset. A compulsive dieter since her teens, she started the New You Boot Camp with Sunny Moran, 29, (left) in May 2007.*

“I've battled with my weight for as long as I can remember. I was big as a child and, in my teens, my weight yo-yoed as I tried every fad diet going. When I went off to university in Canada to study international finance I soon found myself part of a serious beer drinking culture – and the more I weighed, the more I comfort ate. It was an awful, vicious circle.

In June 2003, with just a month to go before my graduation, I weighed 15st 7lb and knew that I had to lose weight fast. So I went to a boot camp. I couldn't believe how tough it was – exercising between 10 and 12 hours a day, plus hiking and mountain biking in the Rockies. But the results were staggering: not only did I lose 9lb in a *week*, but I dropped a dress size too, going from a size 16 to 14.

When I returned to the UK, I joined a gym so I could maintain my weight loss – and then embarked on setting up my own events company. Two years on, in 2005, my old schoolfriend Sunny, who was in PR, contacted me via Facebook. We'd lost touch over the years and arranged to meet up. It turned out that Sunny, just like me, had also lost weight at a boot camp and we joked that we should set up our own camp, as there was nothing like it in the UK.

What seemed like a crazy idea took hold fast. Intending it as a sideline, with just nine boot camps a year, little did we imagine that we'd run 49 camps in our first 12 months. The following day, we spoke to a friend who was a personal training instructor (PTI) in the RAF, who suggested we recruit ex-servicemen to help with the training, as that's how camps operate in Canada. Within two weeks, we had five ex-service PTIs and the following month was spent in meetings with fitness specialists, therapists and nutritionists.

Having initially taken £5,000 each out of our own companies, our



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first boot camp took place in the Brecon Beacons in December 2007. We had 19 clients, aged from 19 to 56, including students, graphic designers, doctors and even grandmothers. And by the end of a very tough week – they were up at 5.30am each day to begin exercising – they broke down in tears when we announced that every one of them had lost weight. In fact, between them, they'd lost an average of 13.2lb. Sleeping in bunk beds in dormitories, we had charged them £950 each.

Eighteen months on, we now have around 950 clients a year and we see a further 400 people on New You Boot Camp Military Fitness Days. That's a turnover of around £1.4million. Having given up our respective companies within weeks of our first boot camp, the company grew by 700 per cent more than we had estimated in our business plan.

Our boot camps came about because we felt passionate about long-term weight loss. We help people to be the very best that they can be – and what better motivation is there than that? **SHE**

• If you'd like more information, visit [newyoubootcamp.com](http://newyoubootcamp.com); 0871 223 0066.

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