

Women in business

These smart and proactive female entrepreneurs are making their dreams come true

writes Mark Andrews

No sooner have women freed themselves from the kitchen sink now some are chaining themselves to it in the name of business - or so it would seem judging from female expat entrepreneurs in Shanghai. Many of the businesses are food related, but there are also companies such as ecoBibi who are busy building a factory in Kunshan. Food businesses such as Strictly Cookies started after a hankering for a taste from back home. "I couldn't find a cookie in Shanghai that stood up to the taste and standards I had grown accustomed to in America" says Lexie Comstock who is now one of the partners in The Pantry. This cooperative provides a larder to satiate the cravings of homesick expats. A common factor with many entrepreneurs is that they had always wanted to start their own business. Brigitte Elie of ecoBibi talks of "The right place at the right moment and access to the financial and human resources." However, it's also about spotting a gap in the market. For Dominica Darrington of Trendy Little Citizens it was the realization with her brood of youngsters that children's clothes were limited in style "bright funky styles for babies and kids are few and far between". Martina Klotz started BeFit Shanghai with plenty of experience in the industry and having already had a similar business in Bangkok. But for many,

Shanghai sees the birth of their very first business. Darrington is typical in having prior corporate experience, in her case with the PR and Communications sectors.

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

Obviously factors such as the language and culture can create obstacles to doing business in China but equally many entrepreneurs talk of how quickly things can be done here. "Living in Shanghai is like living in a fast paced bubble" says Klotz. Elie adds "I think my business would not be where it is today if I was in any other country. China has allowed me to maximize my creativity; I can think of an idea for a new product in the morning and the prototype is done before noon!"

Flexibility, though, is crucial when running a business in China as Comstock found out this summer. Running out of chocolate she contacted her supplier to be told they weren't sure when they would have anymore. The reason turned out to be that they wouldn't ship it because it was so hot. With cookies waiting she had strictly no alternative but to find a new supplier.

The Shanghai expat community provides for most businesses the mainstay of their customers and a ready and willing source of support for startups. This is sufficient to help entrepreneurs looking

to gain as Darrington puts it a "nice ying yang of work life balance" to ones with dreams of starting full blown international businesses.

Heather Kaye and Itee Soni of FINCH met while working for fashion multinationals in Shanghai. Like many of the entrepreneurs in Shanghai they are taking an eco-friendly direction with their business. "We decided we wanted to start something using only organic and sustainable fabrics and keep it local in Asia" explains Kaye. "We had for so many years seen so much waste and fast fashion." The result was a range of clothes based on the ideas of "sustainable fashion" with an emphasis on durable, timeless pieces, produced from organic or recycled materials produced in an environmentally and worker friendly manner.

"We came to China as corporate women, not as trailing spouses," says Kaye. "My husband came over here with me. This is a very female empowered scene. You can get just about anything here so any idea you have, now is the time to put it in motion".

Klotz whose BeFit Shanghai aims to keep expats fit and healthy adds "People love new products and services and new things catch on very quickly. Word of mouth is the best marketing tool. If you have a great business idea that you think might work, test it out on a few

Martina Klotz warns that administering a business can be tough, but not impossible

Picture:David Jumpa

Picture: Mark Andrews



Lexie Comstock's chocolate chip cookies are a Shanghai favorite

people, and then go for it". Shanghai sometimes throws up strange situations in business. Two weeks after the birth of Kaye's second child, Matilda, they met their first client. During the presentation of their collection, Matilda was sitting on the table in a car seat. "Try and picture that happening in New York or London, it's not going to happen! But Trina, the owner of Nest, just acted as if it was so normal," laughs Kaye.

HAVE ENOUGH CASH FOR TWO YEARS

When starting a business "you need to plan to have enough money to last two years. That's the time it takes to establish a brand here" says Kaye. Soni adds that "It is becoming significantly more expensive to do so with the exchange rate and inflation".

For both FINCH and BeFit Shanghai one of the main reasons for registering a company was that they were self-employed and there was no other way of staying in China. It also allows them to issue official fapiaos (receipts) which broadens the scope of potential clients. Additionally many advertising companies will only work with registered companies.

Responsibilities are par for the course with wholly foreign owned enterprise (WFOE). Klotz warns "The administrative side that comes with running a business is difficult for me as I don't speak any Chinese. This means that you need great assistants, accountants, and lawyers to help you with the daily challenges."

"It is only worth going through if you are going to be making a decent amount of money in Renminbi" cautions Kaye "but without it your business will hit a glass ceiling because you can't issue fapiaos,"

"Whilst there is a lot of noise and red tape on the surface if you have a team who knows what they are doing they can cut you right through that" says Kaye adding that she has no regrets with starting a WFOE in China.



Brigitte Elie of ecoBibi says, "China has allowed me to maximize my creativity".

Picture: Courtesy ecoBibi

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Women  Business

2012 FOURTH ANNUAL LEADERSHIP AWARDS



Faces of Leadership

Shanghai
Thursday, 29 March 2012
13:00 - 21:00

www.women-in-business.net

registration code : LW2619