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Bras, Like Lipstick, Still Sell Well

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Sue Whyte's Intimo Lingerie is in an enviable position, as bras, like lipstick continue to sell well in the current economic climate. Here she talks with Mike Watson about how entrepreneurs can identify the right niche and properly fulfil their customers wishes.

The shopping scenario for woman seeking bras in larger cup sizes can sometimes be daunting. She visits the lingerie section of a flash department store but can't find anything above a certain size, ending up instead in the 'nanna' department.

Sue Whyte, Intimo Lingerie

"I was hearing about these awkward shopping experiences women were having, like not being able to find bras that were both fashionable and available in larger cup sizes", says entrepreneur Sue Whyte, founder and director of Intimo Lingerie. "I also understood what it was like first-hand: by the time I was 16 I was already a D-cup myself".



Intimo is a direct-selling company with a team of consultants around Australia and New Zealand who sell fashionable lingerie in extended sizes. The products are presented in-home by these self-employed consultants using a classic party plan model. Creating such a comfortable environment for buying underwear means customers can avoid the sometimes confronting situations they find themselves in when visiting department stores. Whyte's innovative solution to reaching this niche market has been a fantastic success.

Building a Good Team

Whyte has worked in the fashion industry since the 1970s and launched Intimo in 1995, driven not only by her discovery of a niche but also by her belief in empowering women with business opportunities. While she faced some hurdles as a woman starting a business in the mid-90s, the bigger challenge was learning to delegate.

"I didn't recognise at first that I had to concentrate on my strengths and leave the areas that I wasn't that good at to the experts, like finance for example. I learnt that I couldn't do everything myself!".

Intimo finds itself in an enviable position in lean economic times.

"The direct selling industry is absolutely perfect for women who are perhaps looking for a bit of extra income but still want to spend time looking after their kids or fulfilling other commitments", she explains. "Their husbands may have had their hours cut back, or part time work for these women is not as readily available."

From a customer selling viewpoint the news for Intimo is equally good. Whyte says they are very fortunate that their product is always in demand regardless of the economic times. She believes underwear is part of the 'lipstick syndrome': women will give up most things but they won't give up their lipstick or bras.

"It's an opportunity for them to still be able to feel really good, because they're wearing something gorgeous, without the financial outlay they would have to make on a completely new outfit."

Innovation Really Means 'Having a Go'

Whyte finds the business culture in Australia encouraging for innovative business people. "I think we have a fantastic culture here in Australia of getting up and having a go. We do suffer a bit from the tall poppy syndrome but I think that Aussies really support people who want to succeed in business. We love a winner."

Whyte's philosophy for successfully dealing with other businesses big and small is simple: it's all about relationships. That's a natural approach for someone whose company is in the business of relationship selling.

"I build relationships with absolutely everybody, whether it be the manufacturers in China, or Australia Post, or the person who supplies cardboard boxes" she enthuses. "This approach has put me in good stead throughout my entire career. Face to face meetings initially are important, possibly in your premises so they can see what you do. Then you just keep at it. We always make a point with all our strategic relationship partners to meet them in person at least twice a year, and

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What the boss mades

ONE CEO took home \$717 million last year, with plenty more earning big bucks despite the recession.

at that meeting we may not even talk specific business".

Do women do the relationship thing better than men? "Absolutely", she replies. "I think women are all about building relationships. Look at the way they network with each other. At Intimo we're all about making people feel good, whether they're wearing our product or just doing business with our company".

Sue Whyte's 4 steps to a successful start-up

1. **Have confidence** – Only if you believe in yourself will you really be able to truly give it a go. Be positive and don't be afraid to try things differently.
2. **Be adaptable** – If something doesn't work, don't get negative, no matter how much you're in love with an idea. Look at what went wrong and keep going.
3. **Understand your strengths** – It's okay not being able to do everything, learn to delegate and make sure those areas outside your expertise are covered by good people.
4. **Research, research, research** – You really need to know what it is you want to try and achieve. Put yourself in the customer's position and research a similar product or service first hand – what is done well, what could be done better?

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