



Building A Better Business By Doing Things Differently

Interview with Ela Good and Hannah Good
Ladytree Designs

Commissioned by



Let's look at those entrepreneurial business owners who combine their passion for what they are doing with a desire to find new ways to delight the customer which competitors are unaware of or cannot compete with because of their traditional approach.

This new breed is certainly doing things differently, and that positive disruption is unsettling time-honoured operational methods as well as product and service offerings in their sector.

A report commissioned by Hub chartered accountants, to be published by DECISION magazine, identifies business owners who are looking to build a robust business by doing something new or differently and as a result are 'breaking the mould'.

This is one of the papers to be included.

Taking a back to the future approach

“We can talk about a five-year plan but as a small business owner I have realised that what is real is the here and now. No matter how clear you might be about the future, you can get knocked off the path so easily. The thing is, the longer you wear all of the hats, the harder it becomes to let go of the reins, to delegate, and you then become constrained by your own business.”

Ela Good runs ethical jewellery makers Ladytree Designs with her mother, Hannah Good, and could be said to be taking a ‘back to the future’ approach to developing the business.

“It’s hard to get our brand sufficiently known online because there is so much competition, so we decided that first and foremost we needed to focus on building a customer base in our local community, which is helped by holding regular workshop classes and experience days for people to learn new skills,” she explains.



Hannah and Ela Good

“It’s a conscious decision for us to walk as lightly as possible on the planet, so we only work with metals that are recycled or traceable.

“It costs more but it’s about accountability, and the challenge is to make customers aware that they can avoid the dirty side of the jewellery industry. We also incorporate a variety of local

material in our work, such as fossils, which reduces our impact even further.

“That is another reason why it’s important for a craft business to have an education dimension, to ‘root’ in the local community rather than being on screen or just having a retail presence.”

Which is why Ladytree Designs hold regular silversmithing and pottery workshops “to show people how to develop craft skills, to learn something new, and build relationships, because that leads to sustainability.”

That inclusive thinking has led Ela and Hannah to another business opportunity, with the potential to disrupt the higher end market. Instead of a betrothed couple having rings made for them, Ladytree will create a design with them and then have them come into the workshop for a day and enable them to actually make each other’s rings.

It’s something the internet can facilitate (booking dates and times) but not emulate, although in any case, Ela hasn’t found ‘www’ to be particularly conducive to building the business.

She explains: “I’m not being defeatist. Etsy for example has a huge amount of jewellery online, but the sellers aren’t charging much more than the cost of materials because they’re hobbyists,

just making a few pieces from time to time. So we came off that platform because it wasn't viable for us and we didn't want to devalue our work or worth. We have our own website now but it's very hard to get it known.

But we sell best when we speak to the customer in person, because we can explain our ethos in a way which is more genuine than words on a web page.”

Her mother and now business partner was a therapist and jewellery maker for thirty years before joining Ladytree. She had come up with the name Ladytree for her various crafting activities from the memory of a willow and an ash tree intertwined by the river where she and her daughter used to feed the ducks – it was shaped like the wooden figurehead on the prow of boats in days of yore.

As Ela grew up she decided that she didn't want to be a struggling artist so she took a degree in computer studies. Interested in how people interact with technology, she worked for digital agencies on what she describes as big ticket brands. She hated it.

“I was sitting in front of a screen from nine in the morning to eight at night, stressed because I was putting all this work into promoting products which really didn't matter to me,” she recalls.



Examples of Ladytree Designs

“I wanted a sense of purpose and decided to take an evening class in jewellery making.”

Which resulted in her renting space in an industrial unit where she learnt silversmithing from one of the other occupants.

Ela was commercially savvy enough not to have chucked in the day job, although there are only so many hours in a day.

“I was working at the agency until the evening and then going to the workshop, so I said to the agency I couldn’t continue to do project management any more and asked if there was an option to go part-time,” she says. “They gave me a receptionist job.

“I had worked in IT for seven years with a good salary and a career ahead of me, but it wasn’t making me happy. I need to be inspired and fulfilled by what I am doing, although this was all a huge step for me.”

Her first creations she sold at craft markets, with Hannah helping at the stall. “I was just about making enough to cover my rent by doing a bar job as well as being a part-time receptionist at the agency, but I wasn’t getting to the studio until late evening,” Ela explains.

Barely treading water wasn’t what she had signed up for, so to reduce her overheads to as close to zero as possible she asked her grandmother (owner of a pottery studio and High Street shop in a nearby village) if she could move in with her.

“I thought I could have a workbench in her storeroom, but Nan said I could use the loft of an adjoining building she owned. I

imagined it was going to be like an attic but it was the perfect height and shape for a workshop.”

Meanwhile, Ela and Hannah opened a pop-up shop in 2019, and then decided to open a permanent store. Not that setting up a bricks and mortar presence provided the expected breakthrough. “We were going to open in 2020 but lockdown meant there was a five-month delay, and then we found ourselves in what was virtually a ghost town,” Ela explains. The second lockdown kiboshed them again. “Now we were at the end of our tether.”

Realising some difficult decisions had to be made for the survival of the business, Ela’s grandmother said she would invest in order to convert the downstairs of the workshop building, then a derelict garage, to be the public presence of Ladytree Designs.

“I think she wanted to see what her grand-daughter and daughter could achieve while she is alive,” explains Hannah. “Now three generations of women from the same immediate family are in business next door to each other.”

Except there was an unexpected but enforced hiatus while the building was being renovated. “I thought well, the builders will be working downstairs and we’d be upstairs, so we could carry on in the workshop,” explains Ela.



A bespoke Ladytree Design

“Then one week later the electricity was off, then the water, and it took eight months for the work to eventually be completed. But we have been given a fresh start with no rent to worry about.”

Having her mother join her as a partner in the business wasn't a given. “I was terrified by the thought of being responsible for more than just myself, but mum wanted to get away from working as a therapist because it was affecting her health,” Ela says.

“In a family business you will have difficult but open conversations. It's a failure to communicate which causes rows. Our ambition is to feel content and to enjoy life together. Most

successful businesses which started in our position built really strong foundations before having conversations about how to get to the next level.”

Bearing in mind Ela’s reasons for going into business, there’s potentially a bitter irony she would have to address in order to grow it.

“Already my ‘making’ time can be just 10% of my week and ultimately that’s not why I started this,” she explains. “I have to work out how to transition from having to do all of the daily tasks to being a designer and maker with mum and having a team of people taking on the work I’m wasted on.

“When you give someone else a task, rather than have the mindset they probably won’t do it as well as you, think instead that if they address it differently maybe they could do it even better.

“I’ve got ‘to do’ lists the length of my arm and if someone in my position continues to wear every hat, that can only stifle creativity. I never want to get to the point where I am no longer a designer and maker.”

www.ladytreedesigns.com

About Hub Chartered Accountants

A word from Founder Director Paul Stacey

“Our job is to help small business owners build a better business they can be proud of, and to manage their tax affairs so they retain the maximum rewards they’re entitled to from their hard work.

“We provide a 360-degree Financial Director outsource service with the real-world experience and know-how to help clients build a strategic plan with clear objectives and a programme to achieve them. As a result, helping their businesses to thrive – whatever their end game.

“In addition to a full compliance service, preparing accounts and submitting annual returns for HMRC, we provide easy and convenient access to techniques and tools to free up the time clients spend on bookkeeping and payroll administration. We help them to forecast and stay in control of their cashflow as well as being able to access the most affordable funding when they need it.”

Hub Chartered Accountants
1st Floor, 2a Highfield Road, Ringwood, BH24 1RG
01425 877700

Innovation House, Wincombe Lane, Shaftesbury SP7 8FG
01747 657900

flourish@hub.accountants
www.hub.accountants

About DECISION magazine

First published thirty-four years ago, the purpose of DECISION is to reflect the hopes and aspirations, the trials and tribulations of companies and their owners and directors in the south, to reveal the art of the possible through the words of those who share their thoughts about the journey.

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