

top 50

small business leaders



2021
edition

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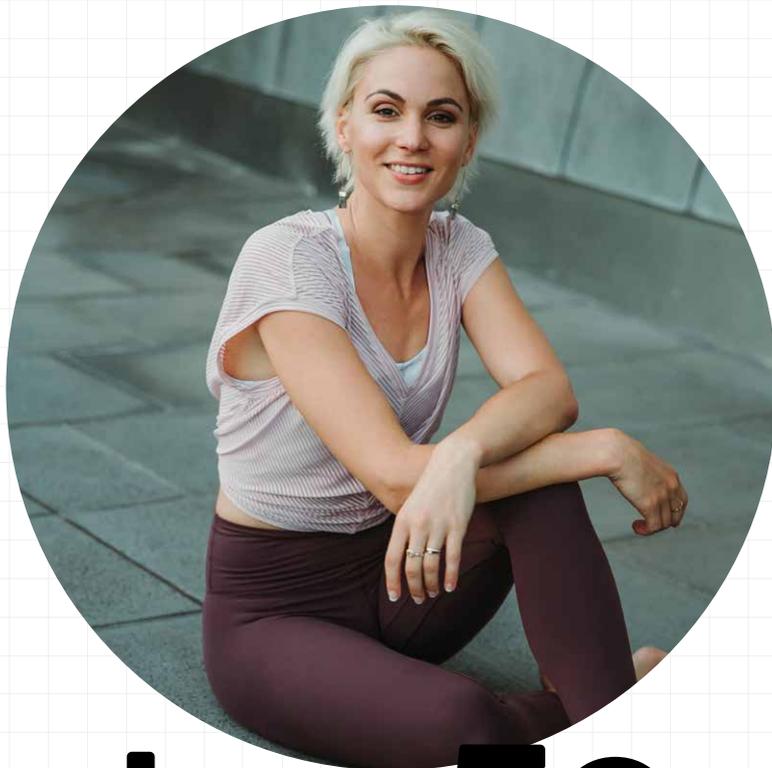
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top 50

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Fifty reasons to smile in the face of adversity

Tim Ladhams

Editor, *Inside Small Business*

Welcome to the 2021 Top 50 Report. This time last year I assumed the challenges of dealing with a global pandemic would be an “outlier” and that 12 months down the track we’d be celebrating businesses that are putting COVID behind them and benefitting from a resurgent global economy. Alas, that is far from the case – snap lockdowns are still with us – so it is even more remarkable that we had so many inspiring stories of small business leaders overcoming the challenges of the last 18 months to thrive from which to select this year’s Top 50.

As always, those who did make the final cut represent an enthralling cross section of small businesses from a huge range of different fields, all of whom have made outstanding contributions to their clients, the communities in which they live and work, and to society at large – sustainability is a recurring theme with everyone who made the cut this year.

From free-range egg farmer Julie Kos and gluten-free doggy treat producer Ben Whyatt to innovative manufacturer of water-saving devices Nicole Gibson and furniture design guru David Light, our winners have demonstrated resilience, innovation and agility to ride the waves of the pandemic and lead their businesses forward to a brighter future.

I’d like to thank our sponsor this year, SNAP, for their generous support and my colleague Karl Aguilar for his diligence in helping to create this report. I do hope you’ll be able to join us online on 25 August to meet some of this year’s Top 50 Business Leaders, and to celebrate the achievements of them all.



Transformation the key to small businesses surviving and thriving

Richard Thame

CEO, *Snap Franchising Limited*

Back in March 2020, as we realised the significance of the COVID virus, one thing was clear, if as businesses we were going to survive, then we had to become nimble with a willingness to change.

The pressure on small-business owners was immense, the strain of keeping their businesses viable and their employees in a job was something many had never faced before.

As a franchise business with over 130 small-business owners across the nation, we felt that same strain at Snap, with the arrival of the coronavirus creating an urgency and immediacy to deliver well-managed and well-planned change.

A large part of this was doing all we could as a management team to ease the pressure on our business owners and their staff, with a major focus on their mental health and wellbeing, all whilst helping them adapt to the changing world around them.

In addition to this support, we also invested heavily in technology, providing our Snap Centres with access to a new customer base through the launch of an eCommerce platform.

Snap Centre owners stepped up, adapting their businesses to the economic conditions and staying connected with, and supporting, small-business owners in their local communities.

With all Snap centres today thriving businesses, this sits as one of the proudest achievements of my business career and could not have been done without the support, work and dedication of our outstanding management team and centre owners.

Whilst as business owners we still face significant challenges ahead, it has been the ability of so many small-business owners to transform their businesses in the face of adversity that has played a critical role in the rebound of the Australian economy.

A rare positive during the pandemic has been the focus on the importance of small businesses to our nation, how a thriving local business community is critical to the success, mental health and wellbeing of us all.

To our small-business owners, I applaud your ingenuity and congratulate you on navigating your way through what has been the most difficult economic period since the Great Depression.



Meet our judges



Alix O'hara

Founder and CEO,
Mashblox

Alix is a self-made entrepreneur, opening an integrated market and health research category in infant self-feeding. In four years, she has brought the insights on infant feeding behaviour enabled by her award-winning invention to the TEDx stage, to international conferences, and to the attention of international governments. Her work has also merited a PhD placement offer, while earning international and national business awards in every category.

Alix believes that businesses are ultimately about solving problems, and that scalable solutions to threats to our health and way of life, therefore, represent the ultimate in entrepreneurship. She also believes that corporates have the greatest potential and, therefore, responsibility to drive social change. These values need to be integral to the business model and consequence of the work, not tacked on as an afterthought.



Hugh McGilligan

Founder,
Sprout Stack

Hugh is a Sydney-based independent strategy and communications consultant. Previously a consultant for large corporations in New York City, he now takes that multinational experience and applies it to SMEs in Australia.

Hugh is passionate about business as a tool for positive change. He is particularly interested in helping businesses and other bodies navigate ESG (Environmental, Social & Governance) concerns, designing and embedding initiatives to make businesses an engine for positive impact on the environment and communities in which they operate. Doing well by doing good.

Hugh was one of ISB's 50 Small Business Leaders last year as CEO of Sprout Stack, Australia's only commercial scale vertical farm. He proudly led a team of agronomists, technologists and engineers in a mission to revolutionise food production by providing nutritious, delicious, sustainable and locally produced salads to Sydney.

Hugh has an MBA from London Business School and is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.



Katie Martel

Founder,
Croft PR

Katie Martel is an award-winning PR and brand content strategist and mentor behind Croft PR and co-host of the Thriving in Business Podcast.

As founder and director of Croft PR, Katie and her team help passionate business leaders achieve incredible impact, results and growth through brand content and PR strategies, while giving them the confidence to focus on what they love – in business and life.

Katie's passionate about teaching entrepreneurs and marketers to master their own PR, influencer programs and content marketing without high costs and "overwhelm" through her Katie's PR School coaching program and her products.

And in the *Thriving in Business* podcast, Katie and Rachel Callan of Full Stop Social Media share tips and interviews with experts to inspire entrepreneurs in mastering PR, social and digital content marketing to thrive.

In 2020, Katie was announced as an Inside Small Business' Top 50 Australian Small Business leader.

Meet our judges



Kayla Mossuto
Co-founder and Managing Director,
Crema Joe

Kayla Mossuto is the co-founder of Crema Joe, Australia's first reusable coffee pod company, and a social enterprise at the forefront of true sustainability in the coffee capsule space.

In 2019, Kayla co-founded Precious Plastic Melbourne, a leading-edge initiative propelling community recycling and local manufacturing into the forefront of the war against waste, assisting recyclers across Australia to turn post-consumer plastic waste into new, sustainable products.

Kayla also recently authored and illustrated *My Planet Workbook*, an interactive printable full of sustainability-focused activities for children - the eco-warriors of the future.

Kayla's passion for making the circular economy accessible to everyone is driven by her desire to propel real, positive social change, and her mission to leave the world a greener place for future generations.



Richard Thame
CEO,
Snap Franchising Limited

Richard has worked with some of Australia's most successful franchise brands including McDonalds Australia, Greater Union Cinemas, Brambles and Thrifty Car Rental. As the Managing Director of Fastway Couriers Richard led the business to becoming the largest parcel delivery franchise in Australia.

Today, as Chief Executive Officer of Snap Franchising Ltd, one of the most successful franchise brands in the nation with over 130 Snap Centres nationwide, Richard is leading the digital transformation of the business, with the 2021 launch of the Snap eCommerce site.

Richard believes that the power of knowledge is in the sharing, which is why he works closely with the Franchise Council of Australia and gives his time to chair the FCA's Sydney Chief Executive Syndicate.

Understanding that success comes through empowering others, Richard dedicates his working life to building great teams and working with franchise owners to help them realise their professional and personal goals.



Tim Ladhams
Editor,
Inside Small Business

Tim is responsible for all the content on the Inside Small Business website and in the quarterly magazine. He has come into journalism after a long career – including management roles – in hospitality, insurance and credit management, giving him significant insights into the way business works. His experience as a credit manager offered a first-hand experience of dealing with the issue that small-business owners repeatedly cite as their biggest challenge to staying afloat and prospering – getting paid by those to whom they have provided goods or services!

Tim now combines this business experience with a particular passion for start-ups and small businesses, a sector he is now fully immersed in and for which he is a passionate advocate. The highlight of his journalism career has been the enthusiasm with which every year's *Inside Small Business Top 50 Small Business Leaders Report* has been received by the small-business communities around the country.

An uplifting journey for health snack start-up

An aussie entrepreneur embraces the opportunity to launch her prebiotic snacking brand in the Big Apple

Kara Landau, one of our 2019 Top 50 Small Business Leaders, founded the world's first dietitian-created functional prebiotic snacking brand with a mission to get prebiotics into more peoples' lives so that they can reap the abundance of benefits good gut health can provide. "In particular, I wanted people to experience the mood-supportive benefits associated with a healthy

gut/brain connection," Kara explains. "As a dietitian who specialised in the connection between food and mood, I could see that there was a growing need for a brand to take a stance with integrity in the gut health snacking space, particularly as more and more products were launched based on marketing claims, more so than true functionality and nutrition."

An experienced dietician, Kara develops all of Uplift Foods' products herself, offering a diverse blend of clinically-supported doses of gut healthy prebiotics, meaning her snacks can function as a meal and a supplement in one.

Investment from an industry leader
In 2018 very early into Uplifts life, the team from global snacking giant

“ Within 24 hours I was one a plane back to New York City to establish Uplift Food in the USA! ”

Mondelez International visited an accelerator Kara had been invited to be a part of in New York City.

At the time it was way too early in Kara's mind for Uplift to seek venture capital, however, the strategic value of the world's largest snacking company was very attractive. After speaking with the team who all showed great enthusiasm and belief in the vision Kara had for the brand, she pitched an incubator to them as they did not have any formal structure to work with start-ups at that stage.

“In the pitch I proposed that I share my dietician knowledge to support their R&D team, together with providing feedback to them as a start-up on what would be valuable to offer when trying to partner with early-stage brands,” Kara says. In return, she suggested that Mondelez's R&D team work with her on developing Uplift Foods first foray into snacking, Gut Happy Cookies.

Kara and Mondelez worked together, hands on, for a few months, and throughout this time their senior leadership established their venture arm, what is now called SnackFutures. Once this was confirmed, Kara requested the opportunity to fly to the head office in Chicago and pitch to their VP who was 2IC to their CEO to try and become their first investment. After much heavy legal back and forth, with Kara's entire Australian summer spent collecting and creating documents for due diligence, the initial investment was announced at a large Expo a few months later.

“Having the world's largest snacking company as a strategic investor has been incredible to be a part of,” Kara enthuses. “The depth of expertise in every pillar of manufacturing and beyond is more than one can imagine, and given Uplift Food acted as a guinea pig to

them when it comes to investments, I feel they have somewhat taken myself, and my brand, under their wing.”

Kara feels that so many of their staff members have been an extension of Uplift Food. As a solo founder, in another country, trying to build from scratch, it has been extremely comforting, both emotionally and operationally, for Kara to have people that understand the nuances to every layer of a food business at her side. There have been times that she was needed at the same time in two different states, such as in California to present on stage at a high level event, together with being at a production run at the co-manufacturer. And in these moments, they sent their staff to the production so that someone was there representing Uplift Food, allowing Kara to work to her strength and represent the brand at industry events.

“The investment has been so much more than the money they put in, the value that the personnel have offered goes above and beyond any cash figure, and the confidence it has given others in my capabilities as a leader and in the potential for the brand at such a young stage can also be felt,” Kara says.

Moving to the Big Apple

Kara grew up in Melbourne and went to New York initially on an exchange program that was part of her Masters studies a decade ago. In the years that followed, she had spent her time between the US and Australia, always thinking that she would launch Uplift Food in Australia – as it is a market that she deems to be more progressive in the understanding of gut health – and then take the brand to the US where the larger business opportunity ultimately lay.

The move back to New York at such an early stage of Uplift's life,

just two weeks into its launch, was a matter of seizing the opportunities that presented. “I had applied about 10 days after launching Uplift Food in Australia for an accelerator in NYC that specialised in food, and had thought I was applying for the next cohort starting six months later,” Kara says. To her surprise, she woke up the next morning to multiple emails, LinkedIn messages and missed calls saying that they had a space in their upcoming cohort for a functional food brand, and the program started four days later. “Within 24 hours I was on a plane back to New York City to establish Uplift Food in the USA!” Kara exclaims.

A bright future

Kara's vision is to see Uplift Food pushing out into the various retail channels in North America, as well as taking advantage of the many global opportunities that continue to be put in front of her on the back of the excitement around the brand and the unique nature of its products. Having now developed multiple product lines – such as Gut Happy Cookies, Prebiotic Puffs, Prebiotic Bliss Bites and the Daily Uplifter – the goal is to focus more on the front end of the business and begin marketing and growing sales channels.

“I am actively looking into how we can bring all of Uplifts snack range to Australia so that they can be benefited from in my home country, too,” Kara says. She envisages Uplift's grab-and-go snack ranges being available throughout retail, food service, co-branded products and in adjacent categories with relevant brand partners. Ultimately, Kara intends to grow the team, and hopefully at some point see the company take on a life of its own so that she can be more involved with setting the vision and being a leader, rather than a manager. ■



Adam Nobel

Founder/Principal, *Hugo Alexander Property Group, Qld*

Adam Nobel used to run an advertising agency but sold the business in order to pursue his dream of working in the real estate industry. Having established himself in the industry with a large firm in Brisbane, Adam founded his own real estate and property management company in 2018 and named it after his two sons.

The company, the Hugo Alexander Property Group, experienced exponential growth. And the pandemic did not stop Adam from pursuing growth for the business. "COVID gave us space and time to fully digitalise our backend infrastructure," he explains. "We expanded our team, invested heavily in business development, engaged

coaches and consultants to gear up for growth, launched a buyer's agency, and offer 360-degree real estate services for our clients to make it easier for them to buy, sell and invest in property."

Nobel also sought to help people in the community impacted by COVID-19. "We advertise jobs in our local Facebook community page for casual workers, especially parents and carers looking for flexible hours and those impacted by COVID," he says. "Whenever there is a major disaster, like the floods or fires, we purchase locally sourced products from impacted businesses. We are continuously looking for ways to support our local community."

Aimee Brown

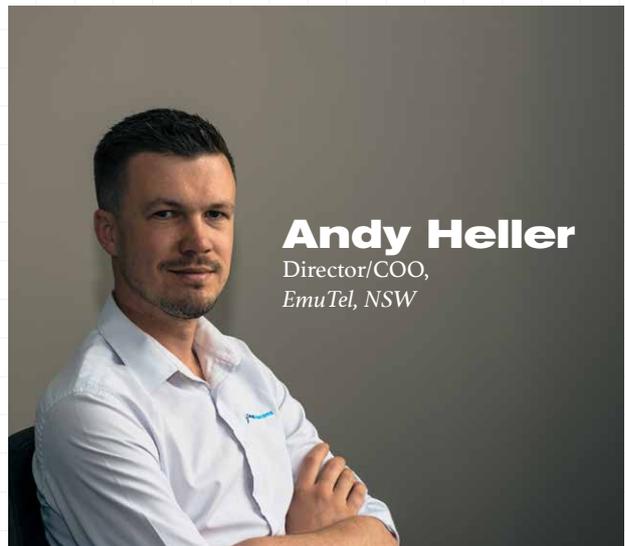
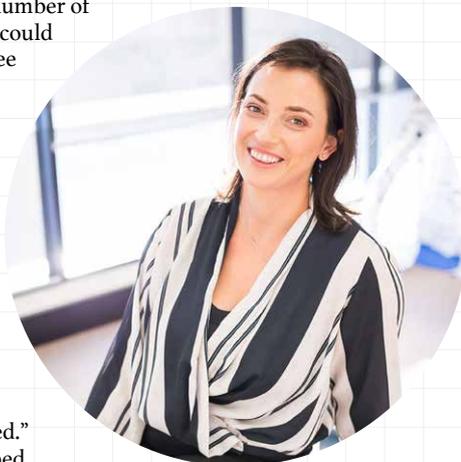
Owner/Principal Chiropractor
Bespoke Chiropractic Manning, WA

Bespoke Chiropractic Manning is a holistic chiropractic clinic which focuses on providing individually-tailored healthcare that goes beyond spinal adjustments, ranging from nutrition to mental health. "Our aim is to have clients doing all the simple things at home to support their health, which increases their health and function, and means they need to see us less as they have less dysfunction," Aimee Brown, the clinic's owner and principal chiropractor, says.

Since opening Bespoke Chiropractic Manning in 2010, Aimee set out to make health simple enough that the community could easily relate to it. She has organised events and workshops for the local community, and set up a Facebook group for women across Australia which deals with health and motherhood.

While the pandemic affected staffing and the number of people the clinic could see in a day, Aimee feels they were fortunate. "All in all, we were able to stay open and keep helping people with their health," she says. "People also reevaluated health and function, so business increased."

Aimee developed and launched a new product during the pandemic, while overseeing a 30 per cent growth in the business, parenting three young children and running a few ultra marathons! But the innovation she's most proud of are her "Weekly Wellness for You" cards that give her clients one simple health-related task to complete every seven days.



Andy Heller

Director/COO,
EmuTel, NSW

A business NBN and voice service provider, Andy Heller's company has been included among the top 50 fastest growing voice service providers in regional Australia for a number years. Established in 2016, the company – founded as Central Telecoms before its rebranding as EmuTel – has people located in every major regional area in the country.

This focus on regional customers has helped the business grow, even during the most challenging conditions of the past year. "I found that our business grew during the COVID period because of our unique ability to empower regional business to be able to continue to trade no matter what the restrictions," Andy says. "We had a couple of core service providers that let us down, and we had to quickly remodel, rebuild and migrate while continuing to provide industry leading products and services."

He overcame these challenges by investing in infrastructure and additional personnel, which although incredibly stressful made the business stronger and more able than before. "It has created a system that allows us to compete head-to-head with the major telcos, but also enabled regional businesses access to enterprise grade solutions and connectivity at small business pricing."

Andy continues to invest in local sporting and charitable groups, especially those linked to his staff, "so they see us investing in them in work and out of it, too," as he explains.



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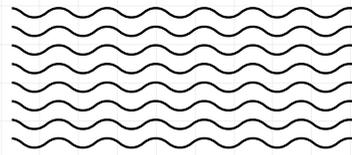
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STANDING BY YOU





Ben Whyatt

Founder, *Doggylicious*, Vic
 “The Dog Whisperer”

Ben Whyatt launched Doggylicious from his garage in the south-eastern Melbourne suburb of Elsternwick in May 2020. Designed to provide moments of happiness between dogs and their owners, the range of dog snacks is made up of five variants of grain-free, gluten-free cookies. As a sole trader Ben does everything – accounts and chasing invoices, stock management, couriering stock, social marketing, packing and quality checking – but is adamant that he has not had one moment when he didn’t think it was all worth the while. A year into his journey, Ben has quality-checked over 100,000 individual cookies, packed 13,000 packets by hand and driven over 2200 kilometres to save on courier fees – hard work that has been rewarded by generating sales of \$75,000. These achievements are all the more remarkable

given that Doggylicious is a side hustle, with Ben maintaining a full-time job while he gets his start-up going.

Launching at the peak of COVID, Ben knew he had to get his online store up and running straight away. “We saw the early growth in online penetration, so targeted online marketplaces straight away, while ensuring I didn’t take my eye off the bricks-and-mortar accounts,” he explains. “We also pushed our calming cookie more than other variants as we knew dogs would be sensing their humans’ anxiety – to date it is our top seller.” Alongside direct online sales, the range is stocked in over 200 retail stores including Catch.com.au and Pet Circle.

In just 12 months of operations, Doggylicious has become a leading player in the Australian pet-treat market, one that is regarded as niche but which is growing rapidly. “I am proud that

we took a different route to the competition and hope it pays off,” he says, adding that his best-seller – the calming cookie – is the first pet treat in Australia containing Nootropic L-Theanine, a substance that can help enhance cognitive function. Alongside the calming cookies and butter, the range includes both cookies and a butter that look after a dog’s hips, joints and coat; probiotic cookies; protein cookies; and Carob buttons to reward dogs when they’re being trained.

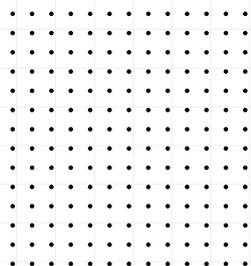
Ben has also been very innovative when it comes to his packaging. “When 99 per cent of the pet treat market is in non-recyclable packaging, Doggylicious changed the game by putting our full cookie range in recyclable cardboard packaging,” Ben relates proudly, adding that he will upgrade to biodegradable packaging as soon as a practical solution of

this genre is developed. The sleeve that protects the freshness and shelf life of the cookies is also 100 per cent

“ We pushed our calming cookie more than other variants as we knew dogs would be sensing their humans’ anxiety. ”

compostable, and Ben will continue to integrate sustainability into the operation of the business wherever he can.

Ben is determined to have a positive impact on his customers and the community, committing to make an end-of-financial-year contribution to the Rainbow Family Charity, having already put in place a scheme whereby sales of the Doggylicious Rainbow Cookie support that charity. “One of the key foundations that keeps Doggylicious growing is knowing that we will be able to help support any underdogs going through tough times, whether they are two- or four-legged,” Ben says. “We will do this by either paying it forward with a coffee on Doggylicious, providing treats to dogs in need or supporting individuals who are in need of help.”



Bianca Stawiarski

Managing Director, *Warida Wholistic Wellness Pty Ltd, SA*

Warida Wholistic Wellness is an Indigenous social enterprise its founder Bianca Stawiarski describes as “a sanctuary that provides the right tools for people to heal and thrive, and encourages change in the community one person at a time”. Starting out a sole trader in 2015, the South Australian business now employees three casuals – all indigenous and from trauma backgrounds – and provides services across the country and internationally.

Hit hard by COVID, with most of her usual income streams – empowerment through horse archery and the sale of archery equipment – put on hold, Bianca diversified her offering and skillset to focus on servicing NDIS clients and counselling

private clients, which helped the business expand considerably as people became more aware of the importance of mental health during lockdowns.

“I’ve developed successful online courses which enables me to expand my reach internationally to many more people that I would be able to reach individually,” Bianca says. “The feedback we have been getting is that these courses have been life changing for people.”

Bianca is a powerful advocate for small business. “I constantly refer people to other small businesses, I wear other small-businesses’ products access their services, and suggest them for contracts that I don’t have capacity to consider myself,” she explains.



Carley Johnson

Founder, *carleyjohnson.co, Vic*

Carley Johnson started her business - originally called Unzipped and rebranded in August 2021 as carleyjohnson.co - in 2019 as a fashion consultancy service, helping fashion start-ups gain a foothold and grow in the global eCommerce scene through fashion wholesale and sales strategies. But when the global pandemic turned the fashion industry on its head – factories and retail outlets shut down and transportation ground to a halt – Carley pivoted Unzipped in a different direction, helping brands market directly to their customers.

Carley launched an online course entitled *How To Launch A Fashion Brand Online* in July 2020, providing start-ups with a six-step step launch and growth process. “I don’t see myself as an academic, but a creative businesswoman that knows my industry well,” she explains. “I knew through my consulting business that I have a wealth of knowledge to share.” Collaboration is key to Carley, and she does lecturing work with La Salle University in Singapore and for Fashion Capital UK.

Sustainability is a major focus for Carley. “It’s essential for the fashion industry to reduce its negative effects on the health of the world, and this will only come from more and more brands doing their part,” she avers, putting the theory into practice by always looking to partner with brands that have sustainability through their veins.

Carmen Garcia

Founder/CEO, *Community Corporate, SA*

Carmen Garcia founded the social enterprise Community Corporate in 2016 with the aim of promoting inclusiveness and diversity in the workplace. These values are close to Carmen’s heart, being a second-generation Filipino migrant who witnessed the struggles her mother went through in finding work. “I have been driven to challenge conventional thinking and find innovative ways to ensure I could help provide dignity to others through work,” she says.

Given the social enterprise’s focus on the workforce, Community Corporate saw firsthand widespread unemployment caused by the global pandemic that shut down many businesses. Carmen sought to help affected workers as much as she could. “We expanded our resources and communication with our community through our online resource hub,” she says. “This initiative targets all job seekers, not only migrants and refugees, and is an information and advisory support service for job seekers wanting to prepare to return to the workforce.”

Carmen, who has volunteered in the community since the age of 16 and ensures that the business gives back through pro bono events – she established the South Australian Migrant Small Business Expo – has been recognised for her efforts through being awarded 2020 Social Enterprise Business of the Year and becoming the youngest recipient of the Governor’s Multicultural Award in South Australia for Individual Outstanding Achievement.





Carol Brunswick

Founder, *Belly Bands, Qld*

Carol Brunswick established Belly Bands in 2016 in response to the need for quality maternity and post-surgical abdominal compression garments. The business has grown exponentially since, allowing Carol to step back and have a trusted team manage the day-to-day operations of Belly Bands while she seeks new partnerships and growth opportunities for the sister brand she has established, Heal Better, an app that helps patients' recovery from abdominal surgery.

The app is the product of the first research ever done in this field. "It was developed with medical experts, and mobile app developers to ensure accuracy and an interactive experience," she says. "My hope is that it will achieve a better outcome for the patient, the surgeon and reduce the cost and resource on our healthcare system as well as for employers by reducing recovery time and readmissions to hospital."

Despite much of her effort now being devoted to Heal Better, Carol continues to oversee the operations of Belly Bands. The Sunshine Coast-based company has managed to see an increase in sales despite the pandemic, especially online, and remains on track to reach Carol's goal of two million in sales.

The recent performance has been bolstered by Carol's foresight in purchasing enough raw material to cover the demand for 12-14 months. The growth hasn't come without challenges, with overcrowding in her rented premises forcing Carol to hire containers to store product, but she has managed to accelerate the construction of her own purpose-built factory and expects to move into it in September this year.

Carol is looking to maintain the brand's growth through partnerships. "I constantly look at the market and see areas where our products can be beneficial and work to partner with organisations and other businesses," she says. "A holistic approach to healthcare is becoming the norm and we are building relationships to be part of this growth."

Carrie Kwan

Co-founder/Managing Director, *Mums & Co, NSW*

Carrie Kwan was pregnant at the time she launched Mums & Co in 2016, in so doing creating a safe online space where mums can realise their dreams of running a business alongside their other goals in life through networking and upskilling opportunities. She characterises Mums & Co as a "movement", one that helps mothers strike a balance in their careers, home lives, and well-being.

Carrie is no stranger in building ventures; she previously started and grew the popular digital lifestyle guide *Daily Addict*. "I was passionate about mentoring female business owners in the early days of their business journey," she explains. "I love that we're giving women a safe space to connect, grow and learn together."

Mums & Co addresses the unique challenges working mothers face in the business environment, never more so than now. "Working mothers have been disproportionately impacted by COVID, with women losing more hours and jobs, as they are overrepresented in the industries hardest hit, such as retail, hospitality, and in casual work," Carrie says. To address this, Mums & Co began offering flexible pay-as-you-go pricing to provide opportunities for struggling members access to a range of educational and community events online, as well as the resource library, discounts on essential business services, and expert guidance through online sessions.

The innovation Carrie is proudest of is Be MPowered, a hybrid conference designed to harmonise ambition, livelihood and wellbeing. "Due to our innovative modern online format, we've been able to create a new type of national gathering," she explains. "The online format allows the conference to be accessible to business-owning mums across Australia via satellite feed. This is particularly important for the 30 per cent of business-owning mums based in regional areas who are perhaps feeling further isolated."

Carrie has also established a number of community partnerships, including Spark Festival and Tech Ready Women, to increase support and advocacy for mums in business.





Christine Smith

Owner/Manager, *Great Ocean Stays, Vic*
“The disability advocate”

Christine Smith was diagnosed with a life-threatening brain tumour in 2013 that resulted in unintended permanent disabilities. Determined not to let this huge setback derail her, Christine channelled the experience to create a disability-specific arm of the tourism business, Great Ocean Stays, that she had founded on the Bellarine Peninsula in 2007. Christine made a sizeable investment designing and building accessible holiday accommodation, linking accessible services operated by like-minded entrepreneurs and, in so doing, leveraging their wisdom to help actualise her vision for inclusion.

Described as “an absolute trailblazer in accessible tourism with a passion for ensuring that destinations and experiences

are accessible for all that is infectious” by Brett Ince of Tourism Greater Geelong,

Christine has been instrumental in developing accessible tourism in her local region through her advocacy in securing funding for strategic mentoring programs for visitor economy-related businesses.

In 2019, Christine made what she says has proved to be “the single best decision of her career” by formally splitting Great Ocean Stays’ service delivery into two sectors – tourism and disability. She caters for people with access needs; those who have challenges with learning, communication, understanding and behaviour; people with a vision impairment;

and guests with a hearing impairment – however serious those conditions are.

In April 2020, with COVID-19 decimating the tourism industry across the country, she sought the help of expert sub-contractors to build DestinationAccessible.com.au, providing a safe service for disabled people. Proud of this innovation, Christine says, “Together, Great Ocean Stays and DestinationAccessible.com.au provide an innovative online and tangible resource for organisations to secure a full range of required disability responses through one business, improving people’s liveability and providing access to person-centred support.”

With banks tightening funding due to the pandemic, Christine privately funded upgrades to her offering through a custom-

sources – accommodation, travel, experiences, in-home services, mental health products and personal care,” she explains.

Christine couples her work on her own business with volunteer speaking roles, board positions and corporate networking with the aim of permanently disrupting the traditional tourism industry. During the pandemic she successfully advocated for people with disabilities to be given work in sectors ravaged by a shortage of workers with 457 visas and international students who usually fill those positions, and she mentors SMEs to help them expand their market, increase revenue and make a greater contribution to the local economy.

In further support for the community Christine gives away a percentage of her annual profit,

supporting the Disabled Surfers Association at Ocean Grove, and charities involved

with Muscular Dystrophy and Pancreatic Cancer amongst others. She also commits to a minimum of 30 hours of employer volunteer work each year.

Not content with just being so attentive to the needs of other people, Christine is also working hard to sustain the environment in which she lives and works. “We promise to advocate continuous environmental improvement by informing guests of the conservation of our beautiful Moonah trees and the hooded plover habitat,” Christine avers.

“ Christine has been instrumental in developing accessible tourism in her local region through her advocacy. ”

made caravan to provide sensory experiences for clients with anxiety and other mental illnesses and a van custom fitted with electronic ramp access for clients using wheelchairs.

By sub-letting traditional ‘holiday homes’ that were under lockdown, Christine not only retained clientele, but also contributed to the economy. This resulted in Christine tripling her revenue. “We were also able to prove that Great Ocean Stays is not a seasonal tourism business, but a sustainable business in a growth sector with the ability to derive revenue from several

Corina Vuvic

Director, FC Business Solutions, Vic

Corina Vuvic joined what was then known as Franchise Careers as a shareholder and director in 2008. With a vision of what the business could potentially achieve, the following year Corina bought out the founding partners and rebranded the business as FC Business Solutions. She took the company beyond its original scope to create a national franchise consultancy firm that provides franchisors and franchisees alike with resources or skillsets they need to grow their brands.

Corina recognised the need for the business to be flexible and adapt to the changing landscape. As a result, she pivoted the business towards virtual operations in 2019, which enabled it to save costs and communicate with clients during hours that suited them more. It also proved to be a prescient move when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the following year. “We were able to provide immediate help to desperate business owners – such as franchisors, franchisees, and micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses who were seeking practical and strategic guidance in these unprecedented times,” she says.

The virtual model has enabled Corina to champion sustainability, supporting carbon offset programs and always looking to minimise FC’s carbon footprint.

During the pandemic FC Business Solutions have increased their virtual engagements with business operators and launched a public educational platform called “Bytness” on their website, where they share their expertise, skills and experience with business owners in “bite-sized” videos, blogs and links. “We wanted to help all business operators survive during the COVID-crisis, and wanted to share our team’s collective experiences, skills and advice publicly – freely available to clients and non-clients alike,” Corina says.

Corina is proud of the values and the principles she and the business espouse over profits. “We choose to work with businesses that share like-minded ethics, morals and values,” she declares. “We will not accept engagements with any organisation that operates unethically in its pursuit of financial gain.”



Craig Rochat

CEO, Land of Plenty Food Co, NSW

Land of Plenty Food is a manufacturer and distributor of gourmet food products sold throughout Australia and internationally. Like so many other businesses, the 20-year-old company was severely affected by the pandemic, losing as much as 90 per cent of its custom during the enforced lockdowns. CEO Craig Rochat implemented what he called the “Doomsday Plan” that he drew up back in 2016.

“It was a plan to execute should the company suffer a sudden and significant drop in revenue,” he explains. It included measures such as rent-relief negotiations and refinancing short-term debt designed to dramatically reduce cash burn. “The plan had a staged roll out of 7-, 14-, 21-, 31- and 60-day outcomes but, given the significant impact of the lockdown, we rolled the entire plan out within 14 days,” Craig says.

The initiative has not only helped them navigate the challenges of the pandemic and emerge resilient, but will also help ensure their growth in the post-pandemic future through planning strategic acquisitions and a partnership on a new 6000 sqm kitchen.

In the last couple of years Land of Plenty has transitioned from importing seafood to sourcing it at home in Australia. He admits the policy itself was a difficult one to follow. “There are very few import restrictions in Australia for seafood caught or processed overseas,” he explains. Nevertheless, he has always championed manufacturing in Australia and proceeded to make the transition while ensuring competitiveness. “We signed an exclusive supply agreement, the first of its kind from what we have been told, with Lakes Entrance Fishing Cooperative [LEFCOL] for supply of Australian caught and processed seafood,” he enthuses.

Craig reinforces his commitment to the local cause through active involvement in charity work, most significantly a five-year involvement with Starlight Foundation through participation in, and a subsequent board role, with the Tour De Kids.

Danielle Storey

CEO, Eastern Innovation, Vic

Eastern Innovation was launched in 1999 initially as a not-for-profit small-business hub but evolved over the years, becoming an innovation hub in 2016 through the efforts of CEO Danielle Storey. Today, it supports businesses in sectors such as liquid yeast technology for craft brewers to COVID-19 vaccine delivery services in their innovative endeavours.

Having never relied on grants to sustain operations – funding its growth through client rentals and hire fees – the business was hit hard when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. “I didn’t perceive a situation where 100 per cent of income could cease,” Danielle reflects. Despite the challenges, the centre offered rental relief to its clients and transformed into a 100 per cent self-service operation to companies that were permitted to operate through the lockdowns.

In a move to offer further support to her clients, the majority of whom are small businesses, Danielle launched a Global Advisory Program. “We recruited advisors globally and conducted Advisory Boards,” Danielle explains. “Each Board of three advisors was tailored for participating businesses and included a facilitator and an executive coach.” This program helped contribute to Eastern Innovation breaking even last year, a situation Danielle deems as a remarkable achievement given the pandemic.

Sustainability is very important to Danielle, who is proud of the fact that the Centre’s new building, completed in 2015, is the region’s most environmentally-sustainable building, powered by solar energy and three recycled-water systems.

“We continue to strive to ensure our processes match the space,” Danielle enthuses. “From recycling to worms and compost – reintroduced post-COVID – I encourage our clients to match us and take care of our environment.”

Furthermore, Danielle is working on an economic impact report for Melbourne, to inform changemakers of the possibilities for manufacturing in the future. “I am in the middle of pitching for funds to connect innovation ecosystems across the State,” Danielle says. “It has high-level approval and will help people to connect and grow their innovations.”



David Ashton

Principal Consultant, Corporate Supremacy, WA

Corporate Supremacy is a multi-disciplinary business management and bespoke advisory firm, focused on managing and growing businesses through providing services such as business-management systems, governance and property management. The business was launched in 2014 and has grown considerably since; enabling its principal consultant, David Ashton, to build his experience and expertise in helping small businesses growing. “We provide a tailored, personal service by working closely with our clients to identify their needs and to develop and implement practical, cost effective, professionally managed solutions to help them achieve business success,” David explains, adding that collaboration is an important business development strategy – he collaborates with consultants to obtain work he would otherwise not win had he tendered on his own.

Despite the pandemic delaying project implementations with clients, the past 12 months have still been successful. “We engaged new clients, had repeat business from existing and past clients and were able to maintain a steady stream of work,” David says. “This was because we had the capacity to operate remotely.”

Corporate Supremacy added hosting webinars to its service offering as a means to attracting new clients and helping out SMEs. David’s five-webinar program focuses on helping SMEs with tender submissions and business grant applications to augment their cashflow in these challenging times. He’s also working with a disability service provider to help them to achieve NDIS certification and develop their Reconciliation Action Plan, alongside working with a local government to assist SMEs become more accessible to people with disability.

Alongside his commitment to the disability sector, David is passionate about Indigenous rights. He serves as a Director of the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (SWALSC) and has played a significant governance role in the recent signing of a multi-million-dollar settlement SWALSC has reached with the Western Australia State Government that recognises the Noongar people as the traditional owners of their land.



David Light

Co-founder/CEO, *Icon by Design*, NSW
“The Furniture Family”

David Light and his son, Adam, are the fourth and fifth generations in their family to work in the furniture industry, having launched their business Icon By Design in 2015 with the vision of creating a company whose focus was on providing timeless-design timber furniture and impeccable service at affordable prices. Icon By Design offers a unique model, whereby its customers have the choice of two prices. “Opt for the ‘Buy Now’ option and the goods will be shipped the next business day,” David explains. “Alternatively, a customer can choose to save 20 per cent by ‘pre-ordering’, with their furniture being delivered in the next available consignment.” Those that choose the latter option get the lower price as a result of David passing on the savings he makes on warehousing, handling and logistics.

Since its launch the company has grown to 18 full-time employees, structured for a direct-to-consumer business model supporting substantial IP in design, technology and supply chain processes. Although NSW-based – head office is in Edgecliff, with a showroom in Moore Park – they also have a Melbourne showroom, in Richmond, that they recently expanded to double the original floor space. On the back of their success David and Adam launched online in the US in February this year, and will then open stores over there in the locations that their online sales data identifies as having strong demand. “We have commenced planning for potential stores in LA, New York and Chicago,” David enthuses.

While the business was initially hit hard by COVID – their revenue dropped 30 per cent in April 2020 – they rapidly pivoted and were soon back on an upward curve. “We were able to reduce our break-even point over 30 per cent through renegotiating lease agreements and supply-chain contracts to

conserve cashflow and reduce expenses,” David says. “By mid-May [in 2020] we had seen a major improvement in revenues and we started adjusting our staffing levels, purchases and supply chain processes for a growth scenario.” As a result, the company’s revenue increased by 45 per cent in the period May 2020 to April 2021.

David has driven the enhancement, updating and replacement many of his systems over the last year: they now have a custom-designed Shopify store for the USA and improved order management, finance, customer care and logistics systems. The changes included catering for the new way of working forced upon so many businesses by repeated lockdowns due to the pandemic. “We have deployed collaboration tools to

“ We have commenced planning for potential stores in LA, New York and Chicago. ”

support work-from home, and implemented an HR system to manage our recruitment, on-boarding and staff

performance as well as support the legislative requirements of staff management during the COVID period,” David says.

On the service side of the business, the company is proud of the fact that its customer care team have been finalists for two awards – the Inside Retail Retailer Awards and “Best Customer Care Team” category at the Australian Retail Innovators.

Sustainability is a principle for David and Adam, who ensure their furniture is made from solid wood that has a clean manufacturing process and a life around 10 times longer than that of manufactured woods. “We only use real wood sourced from American forests that are sustainably harvested, restore the ecosystem, have replanting processes and respect the land rights of Indigenous peoples,” David explains. “We reject the trend to flat-pack, cheap, disposable veneer furniture – we use oak and walnut because it’s hardy and it lasts.”



Emily Bobis

Co-founder, *Compass IoT, NSW*

Emily Bobis is one of the co-founders of Compass IoT, a tech start-up that utilises connected vehicle data to improve transport mobility and road safety. Emily's day-to-day role is overseeing product design, brand identity, marketing and business strategy development.

Compass IoT has grown exponentially since its foundation in 2018, a challenge the young start-up has risen to by bringing things back to basics. "We didn't want growth to hamper our ability to be agile," Emily explains. "We ensure that we always ask ourselves about the core value we want to deliver, and the best way to deliver it without getting carried away."

While transport mobility took a heavy

hit during the pandemic, Compass IoT saw it as an opportunity to evolve. "It forced us to view challenges as opportunities to pivot our content and focus on reporting changing mobility behaviours to show we had value even during such an uncertain time," Emily says.

Despite the pandemic, Emily has had a busy 12 months. She was a member of the team that developed a new digital tool called Safepoint that maps vehicle g-force readings – helping identify roads and intersections where accidents are most likely to occur – and developed a podcast called Byte Size aimed at highlighting innovation within transport and city planning.

Fleur Madden

Co-founder/CEO, *Freelancing Gems, Qld*

Shunning the doubts about starting a business in the middle of the pandemic, Fleur Madden launched Freelancing Gems in August 2020 with co-founders Kirsty and Amanda.

"With \$1.5 million Australians out of work and women being hit disproportionately harder, there was no better or more necessary time to launch a jobs platform that champions women," Fleur says. "We are ahead of the game because we recognise that women currently have a unique set of challenges and we speak to those issues and support them through it."

In order to counter the competition from behemoths such as LinkedIn and Seek, Fleur has taken a bold approach to marketing the platform, and combined that with her cause of calling for greater gender pay equity. "We have had billboards and social media ads up saying 'Ladies, isn't it time you got paid what you are worth?'," Fleur explains, adding that one of the company's missions is to help women charge what they are worth.

The first digital jobs site in Australia dedicated to women in the gig economy, Freelancing Gems placed 150 women in contracts or full-time roles in their first six months of operations, and double down on their support for women by being closely aligned with women's charities Share The Dignity, Women's Legal Service and Safe Haven.



Grant Davidson

Managing Director, *Davidson Branding* and Principal, *Design2Thrive, Vic*

Since Grant Davidson founded Davidson Branding in 1991, the company has grown into a leading brand communication agency, helping businesses achieve profitability and sustainable growth. To date, it has worked with over 200 local and international organisations including 16 of the top global brands, and nine Fortune 500 companies.

Despite the success, Grant was not immune to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Having to contend with the challenge of inspiring their clients to seek growth in such a challenging environment, he provided research, case studies and empirical data that showed how companies who invest during a downturn accelerate fastest and grow market share post-downturn.

"I'm most proud of our team's pivot on digital marketing and lead generation," Grant says. "The knowledge led to a reach of over 20,000 prospects. It also helped a number of our clients achieve record sales through one of the most challenging business environments."

Alongside Davidson Branding, Grant also devotes his time as a principal at Design2Thrive, a program supported by the Victorian Government to help Victorian SMEs that has given participating companies an average revenue growth of 36 per cent in recent years. "The greatest pride, however, came from helping businesses through COVID," Grant says. "A number who were on the brink of closure finished the year in record profits."

Jane Wundersitz

Founder/Director, *WunderTraining, SA*

After a decade in a corporate career, Jane Wundersitz decided to set up her own venture that allowed her to train and educate others. Since founding WunderTraining in 2012, Jane has designed and presented over 40 workplace training programs, helping organisations with the development of their employees and workplace cultures.

Jane is proud of the fact that she has been able to grow her business without relying on paid marketing efforts. “I am reliant on word-of-mouth promotion – my philosophy is that if my service is good people will talk and refer others,” Jane explains. As a result, she has grown a large client base that include blue-chip companies including Microsoft, Qantas,

and IAG, and government agencies, educational institutions, SMEs and not-for-profit organisations.

While Jane traditionally held her workshops and training sessions in person, the pandemic forced her to pivot to online services. “I adapted my offer to a quality engaging virtual training offer. I am not tech-savvy, but I did my homework,” Jane explains. “I believe quality training must be accessible irrespective of your title, location or industry.”

At the height of the pandemic when Jane had no income and was on JobKeeper, she donated virtual training to clients at AFL and Flight Centre, and also ran virtual courses in support of National Safe Work Month.



Janine Leghissa

Owner, *Desiderate, SNW*

Having been diagnosed with a chronic illness in 2017 and needing to provide for her family as a solo parent, Janine Leghissa decided to launch an online jewellery store specialising in quality, original silver and gemstone designs.

Desiderate has taken off since its launch, managing to achieve 238 per cent growth in the past year despite the pandemic – thanks to Janine re-working her marketing and targeting advertising towards people employed in industries not affected by loss of employment. These strategies paid dividends, with Janine moving to a larger facility this year to keep up with the growing demand for her jewellery.

“There have been many challenges building Desiderate but they’re outweighed by (what) I’ve created, the example for my children and the impact we’ve had on customers,” Janine says “It’s more than selling jewellery; I help women feel beautiful, I empower my team, I encourage my children to live their dreams and I have proven to myself that I can do anything I set my mind to.”

As part of Thirroul Collective, Desiderate is one of a group of businesses providing people with local products. The business also sponsors many community events supporting The Leukaemia Foundation, breast cancer charities and Friends with Dignity. “We never say no to supporting community fundraising,” Janine says. “Across raffles and fundraisers over the years, we have given away over \$20k of vouchers for prizes.”

Jeni Wilcock

Owner/Director, *Sullivan Dewing Chartering Accountants & Business Builders, NSW*

While not an original partner of the accounting business Sullivan Dewing, Jeni Wilcock rose through the ranks after joining the company in 1998, eventually becoming a partner and owner of the business in 2007 upon the retirement of one of its founders.

As a leader, Wilcock is proud of having developed a streamlined method to assess clients’ eligibility for government stimulus grants, which has proven to be vital in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on so many businesses. “It was very difficult at the time for people to find organisations that understood and interpreted the fast-flowing information,” Jeni explains. “We were able to give clear, correct and up-to-date information on how to access the COVID stimulus packages, tailored to each different circumstance.”

Led by Jeni, Sullivan Dewing supports the wider community through events, sponsorship and professional contributions that have assisted its clients and small-business owners in their local Sutherland Shire. Through their International Women’s Day event, run for 12 consecutive years, the company has raised more than \$100,000 for local charities including Kookaburra Kids, Jacaranda Cottage, The Beauty Bank, Bay Babes and Orana Women’s Health Centre. Jeni is also the current president of the Parents & Citizens Association in Caringbah, treasurer of its AFL club and coach of its netball club.





Julie Kos

Founder & CEO, *The Smoked Egg Company*, Vic
“*The Egg Smoker*”

While working at Kossies, the free-range egg farm she co-founded, Julie Kos turned an inspiring idea into a gamechanger in 2015 when she purchased a smoker and began smoking eggs. Through trial and error, Julie discovered a non-thermal food preservation process and, with the help of two engineers, designed the world’s first chilled smoking technology. “It infuses raw eggs with an aromatic smoky flavour without cooking them, instead keeping them as fresh as the day they were laid,” Julie explains. CSIRO lab testing has shown that this natural chilled smoking food preservation technique extends an egg’s shelf life from six weeks to 35 weeks – the process kills Salmonella from the egg’s outer shell, retains its natural nutritional value and holds its form when whipped or whisked, a result that pasteurisation can’t achieve.

Julie founded The Smoked Egg Company in 2017 to commercialise her discovery and build a sustainability-focused business supporting the global initiative towards reducing food waste. In 2019 Julie was granted a worldwide patent for the process.

Prior to COVID Julie and her team – today she employs seven staff, two of whom are full time and five part time – were focused on growing the business, attending events to demonstrate the quality and longevity of the product. Local restaurants and cafes were beginning to place orders, they had won a contract with IGA and were in discussions with Coles, Woolworths and food service providers Dnata (food service supplier to airlines) and PFD Foods. The pandemic brought things to a shuddering halt. “Serving the hospitality sector, and having built strong relationships there, it was heartbreaking to see them challenged on a personal and business level,” Julie laments. “Overnight we saw them making difficult decisions to cancel

orders with us, lay off staff and dispose of food.” However, by selling their own eggs, and eggs they sourced from elsewhere, to retailers across the country who had empty shelves due to the pandemic-induced supply chain issues, Julie was able to keep the business on track and retain all her staff. She turned her focus to selling manufacturing and distributor licences for her smoked eggs overseas, gaining contracts with retailers Crisp in Denmark and Jumbo in the Netherlands early this year.

With the business in a strong position, Julie and her team worked tirelessly to develop new innovative product lines with sustainability in mind, including an egg liquid concentrate, a plain egg pulp and a smoky egg pulp. “Pulp is bacteria free, and its viscosity resembles whipped egg consistency,

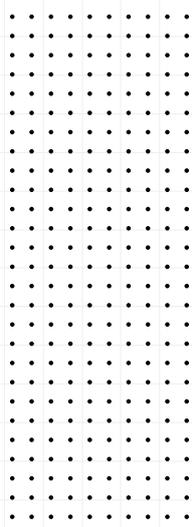
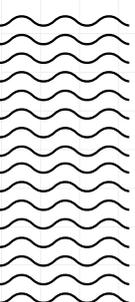
“ Julie and her team worked tirelessly to develop new innovative product lines with sustainability in mind. ”

so it’s thicker than pasteurised eggs and fruits no longer sink to the base in muffins,” Julie enthuses. “The product will be packed in sterile

containers or use gas flushing as opposed to the aseptic packaging currently used for pasteurised egg liquids, which is a safer and more environmentally friendly solution.” The team also developed condiments, including smoked mayonnaise and hollandaise sauce, in collaboration with a local Geelong Chef.

In support of her local community Julie assists restaurant and cafes owners by providing free product samples and helping them with their menu design. Along with her husband, Paul, she formed a farmers network and launched a new brand called Locally Grown Eggs. The couple deliver free eggs to shelters and donate eggs to local events to be used in fundraising.

Julie’s chickens are pasture-raised with mobile shedding and are not administered any steroids. “Even the farms that the chickens graze on are fed with non-chemical fertilisers,” she says proudly.





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Julie Ockerby

Creative Director/Principal, *Meli Studio Australia, NSW*

Meli Studio is an interior architecture firm that has made its mark as an industry leader in designing innovative and sophisticated aged care and senior living spaces. “We try to bring an environment into a community where people call it ‘home’ and it is a ‘place to come home to,’” Meli’s creative director and principal Julie Ockerby explains.

Meli Studio has continued working on a number of projects through the pandemic, with three having been completed in the past year. It also gained acclaim as the Design Firm of the Year by the Eldercare Innovation Awards in Asia, while Julie was awarded Most Innovative Woman of

the Year by the Women in Business Stevie Awards.

“All in all, it has been a year which has not worked out to plan,” Julie admits. “But I am proud that Meli Studio is now in a fresh chapter and maintains its presence in the industry.”

And the slowdown in the industry has enabled Julie to appraise how the business can be more sustainable from a green and cost point of view. “We took advantage of the Government’s LED light replacement initiative and replaced our lights,” Julie says. “We also changed energy providers and instigated a stricter recycling regime.”

Kat Davidson

Owner, *Earths Tribe, Vic*

Earths Tribe is a zero-waste eCommerce store that designs, ethically sources, and supplies eco-friendly and sustainable products for businesses and consumers. Having launched in 2018, it has experienced considerable growth over a short period with more people being at home during the pandemic driving an increase in online sales.

There have been challenges, particularly the tightening competition online. “The market was becoming highly competitive during COVID with many people creating new businesses from home in Earths Tribe’s niche,” the company’s owner Kat Davidson explains. To address this matter, Kat redesigned her websites and put a greater focus on marketing and branding as a way to strengthen relationships with existing B2B customers.

Kat has also transformed the business from an environmental perspective, achieving 100 per cent carbon neutral operations across the entire business this year. “Championing sustainability in the business is a continual ongoing process and I am always improving our standards to make sure they are in line with our values,” Kat says. The other innovation she most proud of is Earths Tribe’s reusable hemp makeup rounds, that have saved approximately 56,000 single use makeup rounds entering landfill in the last 12 months. “These reusable makeup rounds are now available with a unique bamboo holder which we are the only business in Australia to stock,” Kat enthuses.



Katrina McCarter

Founder, *Partnership Mastery, Vic*

Katrina McCarter decided to embark on her own business journey 10 years ago, spurred on by the pressure of a mortgage. Joining forces with another small business to run a competition,

Katrina’s community instantly grew by 7000, and ultimately hit 150K. “That was a game-changing revelation,” Katrina

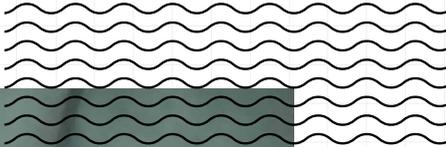
avers. “Since then, while running various businesses, I’ve learned partnerships are the fastest, most cost-effective way to success.”

The pandemic accelerated the demand from small-business owners to find partnerships to bolster their chances of surviving

tough times, prompting Katrina to launch her latest business, Partnership Mastery, in late 2020.

Katrina also runs longer-established business Marketing to Mums, a consultancy helping businesses to attract, engage, and build strong relationships and sales with mothers. “Allocating adequate time to Marketing to Mums while managing the increasing demand for partnership training required me to really scrutinise my time,” Katrina admits. She decided to focus more of her time towards Partnership Mastery, from creating course content to creating a website for the venture. “It has proven to be a very wise decision, with Partnership Mastery now representing the bulk of my total business revenue,” Katrina says.

Katrina believes that 2021 should be less about reinvention and more about collaboration. “Using partnerships in effect builds the sustainability of a business and by upskilling the partnership skills of small-business owners, I am helping them become more financially sustainable,” she explains.



Kaye Waterhouse

Founder, *Vital Beat*, WA
“The Yoga Queen”

Kaye Waterhouse’s business *Vital Beat* incorporates two hip-hop yoga and reformer Pilates studios in Perth. “We merge yoga and Pilates with sweet urban beats like Beyonce and Drake, to create classes that are uplifting, fun, and empowering,” Kaye says. In addition to general yoga and Pilates, *Vital Beat* also offers classes for kids and teens, pregnant women, mums and their babies, Chair Yoga, and Meditation.

“We offer a free creche six days a week and have wellness rooms on site that we lease to other

allied health businesses such as massage and naturopathy,” Kaye adds.

As the founder of the business, Kaye oversees all the operations, creates and facilitates our training – *Vital Beat* hosts workshops, retreats and an annual Yoga teacher-training course – recruit staffs, creates class playlists, and manages the business’s social media and financials. “I’ve designed all the studio spaces and I also teach some of the classes,” Kaye says.

As a fitness business *Vital Beat* had to close its doors when COVID struck, and Kaye lost 85 per cent of her revenue within 48 hours. Undeterred, she shunned sleep for the next couple of days and set about creating a digital platform, a social media marketing campaign, and a

website funnel. She immediately started filming 20 online classes a week, that were livestreamed and available on-demand to anyone who joined as a digital member. “Three-quarters of our members took up the digital offering, and we began to clock 1400 video views from just 240 members, every week,” Kaye enthuses. “Even though the revenue from online classes was significantly less, the most important thing was that it

“ Now the online classes are a permanent offering alongside our in-person classes, ready for each new lockdown. ”

could keep my staff employed.” As the majority of Kaye’s team are contractors, she wasn’t able to get them on the JobKeeper scheme, so she determined to continue to give them hours. “Every COVID lockdown affects fitness businesses significantly, but now the online classes are a permanent offering alongside our in-person classes, ready for each new lockdown,” she explains.

Kaye’s positivity about getting through is all the more commendable bearing in mind she had taken on a significant loan to purchase a number of Reformer Pilates machines and built a brand new Reformer Pilates room in early 2000 before the pandemic bit.

As the COVID situation improved in WA in early 2021 Kaye created a “relaunch”

membership waitlist, and canvassed those on the waitlist for feedback on a timetable, creche offering, building excitement about a return to physical classes with an email nurture sequence about her brand and what it stands for. When Kaye released the new memberships, they sold out before the new Reformer machines even arrived, and her revenue expanded almost 40 per cent within a month. A mother

of two young children, Kaye has managed the crisis and the relaunch while looking after them, with her

husband working away for six months of the year.

Community is at the heart of everything Kaye does, and that starts with her team. “I pay personal sick leave and superannuation to my contractors even though I’m not legally required to, and pay a filming bonus to staff when they produce online content for our platform,” she says.

Kaye gives some of her time to run charity hip-hop yoga classes for groups such as MSWA, Cat Haven, and mental health organisations, and gives thousands of dollars of classes away each year to community groups needing to fundraise for their raffles and quiz nights. Kaye also donates one per cent of all revenue – not profit – to climate change programs.



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Kerry Ridley

Owner, *My Little Bookshop, WA*

My Little Bookshop is a fleet of three mobile vans in vintage designs that stocks titles by local Western Australian authors and self-published authors whose works care not usually be found in traditional, franchised bookshops. “Western Australia has some amazing literary talent,” the business’s owner Kerry Ridley says. “My Little Bookshop comes to the fore as an excellent avenue to promote their books.”

Kerry was already gearing for the launch of an online store in March 2020, and the COVID-19 restrictions forced her into promoting it far more heavily than was originally planned. “I engaged with event organisers to see if they would promote my online shop on their social media platforms, which they all kindly did,” Kerry explains. “This helped get more exposure for my business and the new plan I put in place.”

Throughout this challenging period, Kerry’s kept a tight control on cashflow, placing extra emphasis on social media, utilising email contacts, direct messaging on Instagram, and producing quirky videos to catch the eye.

My little Bookshop sponsors an organisation called Story Dogs that helps primary school children improve their literacy skills by reading to the dog. “This connection is an extra buzz for us as the dog we sponsor is at a school where our own child attended many moons ago,” Kerry recalls fondly.



Kim Vespa

Co-Owner/Director, *Boobie Brands* and Co-Owner/Co-Founder, *Punk Angel, Vic*

Kim Vespa is an entrepreneur behind two successful brands: Boobie Brands produces, distributes, and sells food for breastfeeding mums; and Punk Angel makes a range of hair-care products that are safe for kids. Kim co-founded Punk Angel in 2015 and, a year later, bought the then four-year-old Boobie Brands where she also serves as its director.

COVID-19 impacted both businesses. “The feeling was like bombs being dropped and not knowing what was going to be hit, and how hard,” Kim bemoans. “We had to stay on our toes and juggle multiple scenarios, some immediate and some in preparation of the potential of things turning worse.” Honing in on excellent relationships fostered over many years with manufactures, suppliers

and wholesale and retail customers, Kim also partnered with Victoria University to scientifically quantify the benefits of Boobie Foods products. And some products became bestsellers, such as Punk Angel’s aloe-vera based Hair & Body Wash which helps relieve hands adversely affected by the constant use of sanitiser and hand washing.

Kim is strongly committed to supporting the Uplift Project by collecting recycled bras and nursing pads for disadvantaged women whose breast health is at risk. “Our Boobie Foods customer base are all women, so using our network to call upon our community to donate means that collectively we can really have a huge impact, and we have!” Kim says proudly.

Leigh Rust

Co-Founder/Director, *Safetyline Jalousie, NSW*

Together with his brother Nathan, Leigh Rust launched Safetyline Jalousie out of a two-car garage in 2010, manufacturing high-performance louvre windows based on a design they came across in France. The business has grown exponentially and now operates out of a 2500 sqm warehouse in Mona Vale. Leigh is proud that the business is the only Australian manufacturer of louvre windows, and firmly believes that local manufacturing is key to Australia’s post-COVID recovery. “The weaknesses the pandemic showed in international supply chains and demand for quality, Australian-made products became a lot higher,” Leigh says. “People want to support local businesses.”

Leigh is a champion of sustainability. Earlier this year the company introduced a new product that uses a lower carbon aluminium that reduces the carbon footprint per kg of aluminium to 4.0, less than a quarter of the global average. He is also at the helm of the Suppliers Declare movement, which aims to connect leaders in the built-environment sector in working towards a range of sustainability initiatives. “I’m proud to be leading this movement and I look forward to seeing the great impact it will have,” he says.

He believes success in business includes the impact you have in the broader community – this year he and Nathan are sponsoring an MND Australia event and participating in the CEO Dare to Cure event in support of the Children’s Cancer Institute.





Lielette Calleja

Founder/Director, *All That Counts, NSW*
“The canny mathematician”

Having held senior finance positions in multi-national companies, Lielette Calleja embarked on a journey to take her corporate management accounting experience from big business and apply it to small business, founding All That Counts in 2004. “I truly believed that being small does not mean you need to think small,” Lielette explains. “Being able to arm small businesses with specific targeted solutions that enable them to track, report and understand their numbers is at the core of what we do.”

Working out what keeps small-business owners up at night, or what keeps them from having a balanced life, Lielette assists her clients with guidance on operations to finance, deep-diving beyond the surface numbers to ascertain the real reason why a business is floundering or experiencing exponential growth without adequate cashflow and resources.

The COVID pandemic brought big challenges in terms of the rapidly changing landscape and the need to immediately understand, and advise on, stimulus measures such as JobKeeper. “Fortunately, I have always been an early adopter of cloud technology and remote staff,” Lielette says. “So, as a firm, we could devote all our energy and resources to our clients and the small-business community from day one.”

COVID affected every one of Lielette’s clients, so she set about supporting them with cashflow forecasting, accessing grants, negotiating rent relief, standing down staff temporarily, and managing their monthly JobKeeper process. “I decided to put a freeze on new clients so we could go over and above with all our existing clients,” Lielette says. “I invested time in writing updates after extensive research, talking on podcasts (Accountants Daily), writing editorials (Inside Small Business), hosting webinars

“Hearing clients say they wouldn’t survive without our team means the world to me.”

(The Virtual Water Cooler), and building community engagement on social media.”

To provide the level of advisory required in such a challenging environment required a refined approach. Grouping her clients and aligning them with her team members – the business employs three people alongside Lielette – based on their skills and experience ensured that every client was working with the most suitable advisor. “Hearing clients say they wouldn’t survive without our team means the world to me,” Lielette says. This approach meant that the business didn’t lose any clients during the pandemic, and Lielette is proud that they are all now recovering some of the lost ground.

Passionate about championing the accounting technician space, Lielette was particularly pleased to recently be awarded the contract with the Institute of Public Accountants as their Chief Accounting Technician. “My role is to identify and develop a program that provides BAS Agents and Bookkeepers with a pathway to get their public practice license,” she explains. “This has received significant interest in overseas markets as nothing like this has been done before.” This love of tech means Lielette is always open-

”minded to changes and enhancements if they mean achieving better efficiencies.

“I believe that using tech is not innovative if you don’t focus on changing your processes and mindset around it,” she avers. “My digital mindset has allowed me to speak in Singapore, Hong Kong, South Africa, and India on Digitisation for Accounting. I was also fortunate to host an Amex Masterclass with Mark Bouris during COVID.”

Lielette is on the ATO STP Advisory Board, the ATO BAS Agent Advisory Group, and the Tax Practitioners Board Consultative Committee. “Having a seat on these boards from a practitioner’s perspective is essential as it provides the ATO with vital information that enables them to make changes in small businesses’ interests,” she says. “Small businesses need a voice!”

Lisa Smith

Co-Founder/Director, *BYOM*, WA

BYOM, which stands for “Blow Your Own Mind”, is a business consultancy that provides learning experiences and creative solutions that support business growth. Unlike other entrepreneur programs based on the business idea and profitability, co-founder and director Lisa Smith chose to focus on individual creativity. “BYOM looks at the person behind the business to help them understand their motivations and to encourage self-belief, so that the business reaches its full potential,” Lisa explains.

Having started BYOM in 2018, bringing over her 10 years’ experience in the education sector, Lisa has managed to maintain unexpected growth through the pandemic. “As a business leader, it was important to show leadership in assisting small businesses navigate the new and unexpected landscape,” Lisa says.

As part of this objective, Lisa designed the PIVOT program which helps small businesses find new markets and opportunities despite the challenging times. She also conceived an online business “swap shop”, allowing people to swap their professional services and products with others without cash changing hands. “I am a visionary and am always looking for the next opportunity,” Lisa says.

As a leader Lisa believes it is important to act as a mentor, and to serve the community. She is a director of the board of Rowing WA, is on the board of not-for-profit independent adoption agency Adoption Jigsaw and is a special advisor to the Marribank Aboriginal Corporation.



Lisa Vincent and Jenny Bartrop

CEO and Chief Product Officer, *Savv-e*, NSW

Lisa Vincent and Jenny Bartrop were keen on taking e-learning to the next level when they launched their venture that would become Savv-e in 2018. They developed HowToo, a unique science-based learning intelligence platform that enables both experienced digital content creators and domain experts with no prior experience in digital education to transform their raw content into powerful e-learning experiences.

Among other features, Lisa and Jenny are proud that HowToo offers a wide range of accessibility features for people with disabilities. “People living with a disability have a human right to access learning content they can consume,” they explain. “Now, more than ever before, ongoing skill development and learning is critical to the livelihoods of workers.”

HowToo was unveiled in February 2020, an eerily opportune time as the COVID-19 pandemic began to hit, shutting down schools and accelerating the adoption of e-learning as an alternative method of education. “We were able to support companies in their transition to online learning quickly and effectively,” they say. The accelerated growth rate brought pressure that Lisa and Jenny have countered by doubling their team, winning Government grants and raising \$2.5million in investment – a significant achievement considering the challenges so many female founders face when seeking funding – to support their product development.



Lisa Sweeney

CEO, *Business in Heels International*, Vic

Since launching Business in Heels in 2014, its CEO Lisa Sweeney has built a community of 160,000 women around the world, helping them attain business and professional success through mentoring, education, connection and marketing. “Our vision is to create an unlimited future for women,” Lisa avers.

Traditionally centred on events, including in-person summits that draw a huge number of attendees, the pandemic brought about a change in direction, not only in shifting towards online events but also some re-evaluation. “Our long-term goal was to move the company from one dependent on events to more meaningful work around education and mentoring,” Lisa explains. This involved an overhaul of the company structure, which was met with some resistance. “The challenge was both a process and a personal journey of resilience for the me and the team, but today we have a balanced advisory board,” Lisa says.

Lisa has added to her offering through introducing Mentor Mornings online. “They came at a time when many business owners were struggling with denial, embarrassed that they had ended up in this situation,” Lisa explains. “It was through the opportunity to talk that they realised they were not alone, which enabled them to move onto the road of recovery.”



Matt Smith

CEO, MyPass Global, NSW

Founder and CEO of MyPass Global, Matt Smith set out to simplify the convoluted process of engaging skilled labour for sites, which entailed as many as 110 steps from requesting a worker to them showing up to work fully compliant – a process that Matt realised cost businesses a lot of money and exposed them to unnecessary, and potentially fatal, risk.

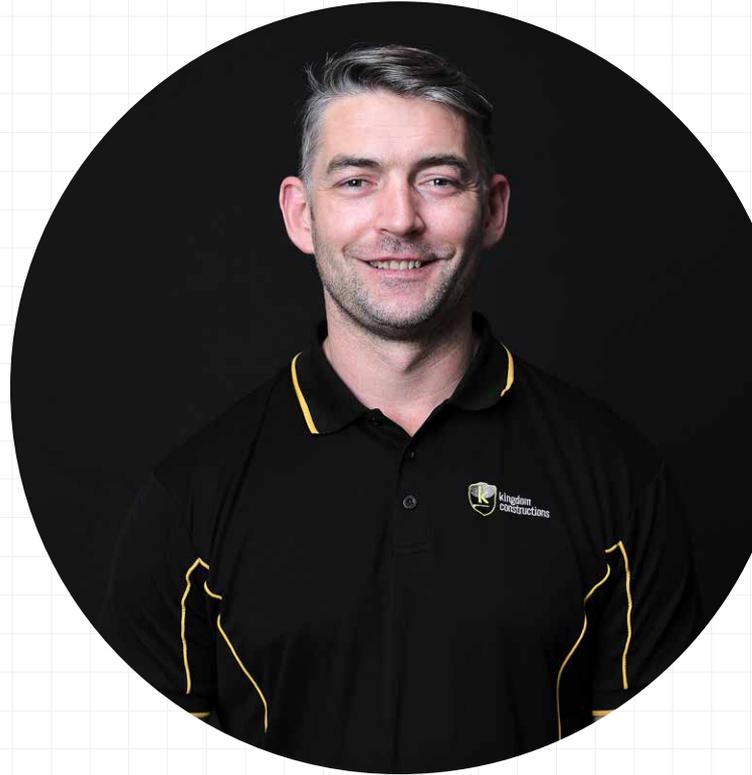
With 15 years' experience servicing large oil and gas, mining and industrial facilities, Matt approached the development of his workforce management system by designing a "bottom up" data ownership model and engaging with a range of industry stakeholders.

"Our key differentiator is that MyPass empowers individuals to own and control their personal profile and competency information within a 'Digital Skills Passport'," he explains. "MyPass provides organisations in highly-regulated industries with access to aggregated, real-time data to ensure that the 'right workers with the right skills' are performing their tasks on site."

Since its inception in 2013, the company has thrived through instilling resourcefulness as one of its values. "Resourcefulness is a core company and personal value," Matt says. "I am proud to have led the business to change the way entire industries operate, reducing risk and cost, and providing our customers with a platform for sustainable growth."

During the pandemic, MyPass launched an online self-declaration form for essential workers to share their COVID-19 health status, so they can move freely across facilities, while increasing security and tracking interstate movements better. It also partnered with the Victorian Government and Volunteering Victoria in the weVolunteer project, which helped mobilise volunteers to support local communities.

Having overcome the double whammy of the pandemic and the resignation of a key member of his leadership team – Matt empowered the team that individual led to be actively involved in the recruitment process to find a replacement, making that team stronger in the long run – the business is thriving and has increased its headcount since our Top 50 submission process began.



Michael Finn

director, Kingdom Constructions Group, Vic

The Kingdom Constructions Group is a commercial construction company that focuses on community-based projects for local government and private clients. Michael Finn established the business in 2013 and since then, it has expanded its operations considerably throughout the greater Melbourne area.

Initially forced to halt many of its activities with clients struggling to continue pursuing projects when the pandemic hit, Michael turned to expert advice from the Master Builders and HIA to move the business forward.

"We learnt the rules and then stayed ahead of the game," Michael says. "We created work bubbles for individual sites, QR code check ins, temperature checks, and masks on site as well as site specific signage that we have continued to use post COVID lockdowns."

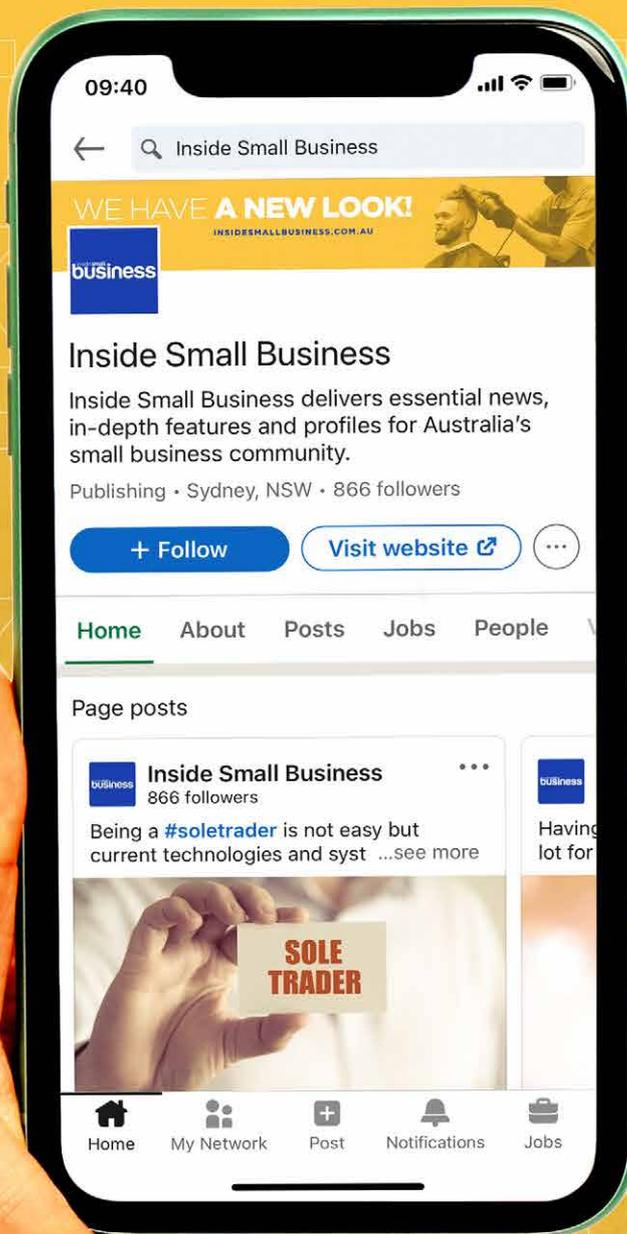
Doing this enabled the company to double its FY19/20 turnover on the previous 12-month period and to increase profitability. They resolved shortages of materials and issues regarding extended lead times for products through clear and early communication with the client and architect to notify them of the delay, and more often than not were able to substitute the product for an alternative if they couldn't change the program to allow for the extended lead time.

The pandemic has also resulted in Michael defining on-site roles and responsibilities more clearly, boosting the efficiency with which the business operates. "Prior to COVID all of our sites had multiple employees looking in. Now we have a sole site manager with full control of the project and a project manager who oversees two-to-three projects at any one time," Michael explains. "This gives the director more oversight of the entire business while everyday site issues are managed on site by the site manager."

In his spare time, Michael coaches the under-9s at the Heidelberg Junior Football Club in Victoria, one of a number of local sporting clubs Kingdom Constructions Group sponsors.

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Nathan Wardell

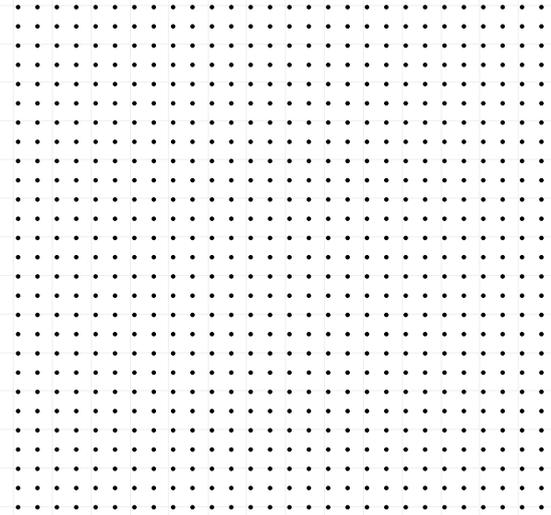
Managing Director, Packserv, NSW

Packserv has been providing machines to automate filling, capping, labelling, printing, coding, and induction sealing processes to the packaging industry since 2007. Originally a third-party provider, the company's MD Nathan Wardell has been managing a pivot to manufacturing their own machines to use in the packaging process.

That transition began in 2019 and was well underway when the pandemic hit. "We were initially inundated with requests for machinery to be employed making sanitisers of every description," Nathan explains. "Rentals of machinery were running at maximum extent through March and into June." As demand grew and foreign machines were unavailable due to borders being closed, there was a danger of the company being unable to keep track of the demands beyond four months, so Nathan decided to accelerate the manufacturing of its own machinery and secured larger facilities. "Our anticipation of all these facets meant that we were, and remain, well positioned to fill the massively increased level of orders that we could have normally expected," he says.

Nathan is excited about the machinery Packserv is manufacturing. "It incorporates the very latest industry 4.0 and IoT technology," he explains. "Whilst balancing everyday needs, I have designed new machine concepts that have been validated by academics and industry specialists."

Sustainability is enshrined within Packserv's values and responsibilities. When they moved into the larger facility they replaced the existing energy-sapping lighting system with new, low-energy LED lighting and every stage of their manufacturing processes incorporates a waste product reclamation aspect that recycles metal swarf and residual materials. "Our new generation of machines incorporates low energy requirement strategies and the recycling of product at every available point of mixing, filling, and capping," Nathan says. Proudly Australian owned, the company commits to buying their everyday supplies only from Australian businesses and the "Australian Made" logo is prominent on all their promotional materials.



Nicolas Cann

Founder/CEO, Blobfish International, Vic

Blobfish International is an activation and sampling media platform, providing first-to-market, engaging environments so businesses can reach their desired audience. Since launching in 2015, it has established partnerships with technology providers such as Uber, Deliveroo and Airbnb, as well as with over 10,000 office spaces.

"We enable all kinds of clients to speak to their audience in the most innovative and fun ways," founder and CEO Nicolas Cann says. "We give out millions of free samples each year, execute fun campaigns including branded keep bags, in-app integrations, eDM's...even taking over our Uber drivers radios!"

Up until 2020 the company only worked with Rideshare partners (Uber, Ola, Didi), so when COVID kicked in at the start of 2020, Nicolas only had two options: die or hunt. He hunted, identifying an area that exponentially grew because of COVID – food delivery (Uber Eats, Deliveroo, Menulog and DoorDash) – which grew 270 per cent during the first Australia-wide lockdown. He looked at any channel that could help Blobfish and its clients reach customers, adding both Catch Group and Providoor as partners.

Nicolas is passionate about sustainability, indeed it is the key factor behind the business's name. "The Blobfish serves a hugely important role in the ocean ecosystem," Nicolas explains. "As a bottom feeder, there are so many



ways that the Blobfish helps the environment – keeping many populations from explosive growth and helping keep the ocean floor clean of an abundance bacteria. At Blobfish the business we take stock at risk and save it from being wastefully disposed of." He envisions Blobfish becoming a B-Corp in the next 12-18 months, which he hopes will encourage other business to reach the same goal.

Despite the demands of the growing business, Nicolas is determined not to stress himself out. "My main mantra is you've got to have fun along the way, or what's the point," he says. "People always say, business is business, but stuff that – life is short, you need to enjoy what you do!"



Nicole Gibson

Founder, *Soka Australia, Qld*
“*The Water Saver*”

Nicole Gibson is the founder of Soka Australia, a business that provides an innovative a laundry soaking system that saves water, detergent, and space, while allowing multiple items to be separately washed. The Soka Tub was conceived and designed by Nicole, who is a sole operator and oversees manufacturing, coordinating the warehouse and dispatch, creates social media content, manages customer service, coordinates brand awareness and marketing and looks after the bookkeeping.

Being proudly Australian owned and manufactured is one of three reason Soka's sales actually increased during COVID – there were no supply

chain issues as Nicole has the tubs made locally in Brisbane. Secondly, health and safety became more important than ever, and the fact that the Soka Tub is a compartmentalised unit means that items of personal protection equipment can be washed separately without fear of cross contamination. And thirdly, with Australians confined to their homes, there was a focus on cleaning and being more sustainable. “I started sharing daily eco-friendly laundry tips and hacks,” Nicole explains. “These were so well received that I have continued educating and empowering my followers

on a daily basis. Inundated with requests for help I store all my stories and highlights for everyone to learn from on my Instagram account and have also started summarising key cleaning messages in my monthly newsletter called *Your laundry sorted*, which has been well received.”

Postage has always been a challenging component of Nicole's business due to the sheer size of the tub. Despite the fact that the tubs are under 3kgs, all postage is calculated in volume. “I have been dispatching from my office which can get quite time-consuming and I felt it was

“ I am passionate about highlighting the fact that every drop saved counts towards keeping water in our dams. ”

time I could be spending doing something more valuable to developing my business,” Nicole says. She overcame this issue by outsourcing to a warehouse business to dispatch her goods. “This has allowed me additional time to create new business opportunities, with the added benefit of cheaper postal rates with the warehouse.” Nicole sees the additional costs involved with engaging a warehouse for distribution as definitely worthwhile in terms of what she can achieve in the extra time it frees up for her.

Developing a water-saving device was at the heart of Nicole's

original idea, and her application for a Smart Approved watermark in Australia was approved in January 2021. She believes that having this recognition adds significant value to her brand, and she has been invited to share her expertise on saving water on 4BC radio, in *Vasili's Garden* magazine, *Readers Digest*, *Inside Small Business* magazine, and in numerous social media stories. “I am passionate about highlighting the fact that every drop saved counts towards keeping water in our dams,” Nicole says. “Teaching eco-friendly and sustainable laundry practices is my point of difference. Giving

my community support and teaching circular economy is something I am proud of,”

Nicole adds, pointing out that not only conscious consumers but also, now, everyday consumers are realising that eco-friendly solutions can be easier, more affordable and have better results.

Nicole supports her community by contracting industrial designers, IT support and business support services from within her local area, and has set up a Pay it forward charity online where people can purchase a Soka Tub with the funds distributed via the Sisters of Charity and Rotary Australia to farming families struggling in drought conditions.



Nina Nguyen

Founder/CEO, Pakko, Qld

As someone who is passionate about creating a unique and positive unboxing experience, Nina Nguyen had a vision to shake up the manufacturing industry. So, in 2017, she launched Pakko, a fully-integrated packaging company that aims to elevate standards, increase diversity, and compete with global standards at every level.

Pakko takes pride in being a packaging company that has managed to set itself apart from the rest of the industry. “Our ability to implement and adapt our business model using innovation and technology have allowed us to sustain our business throughout the challenges of the pandemic, Nina says. “The technology includes its proprietary packaging online ordering system which provides customers 24-hour access to the website where they can order all their standard packaging needs.”

This system was recently expanded to include the Interactive Design Process (IDP) which allows for custom design, ordering, and sampling. The inclusion of the IDP allows companies to design their own packaging online, with no limitations on quantity or of the quality of graphic design.

Nina is no stranger to entrepreneurship, having founded another business in 2011. But in Pakko, she has grown as a business owner and is becoming known as an innovator in the industry. In 2019, she spearheaded a collaboration with Glue4U, creating a packaging powerhouse in the process. “We like to think of ourselves as a box company who work outside the box – we are using our innovations to shake up the market,” Nina says. “We’re constantly working to create technological innovations that will allow us to surprise our customer and elevate the industry by producing cost-effective and timely packaging right here in Australia.”

Pakko only use sustainability-sourced materials certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to create their packaging. “Every single cardboard and paper off-cut is given new life as alternate packaging, with all off cuts donated to Reverse Garbage Queensland,” Nina says proudly.

Philip Chapman

Director, Leaser, Qld

Philip Chapman wanted to tackle the inequities between retailers and landlords on the matter of retail shop leases and establish a level playing field, especially for retailers who are struggling with high rental expenses. It is with this goal in mind that he launched Leaser in 1997, offering a unique lease-negotiation scheme that enables retailers to enjoy significant savings on rental expenses.

Leaser’s rental negotiation scheme would be put to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic, that not only saw retailers having to close shop (some of them having to shut down operations permanently), but also rising tensions between landowners and retailers as both sides experienced cashflow issues due to the pandemic. Fortunately, he was able to identify the effects early on and proceeded to take the necessary steps for the business to handle the anticipated demand. “The demand on support services for retailers escalated rapidly and soon the business was operating 12 hours a day, seven days a week,” Philip says.

Leaser sought to increase support to retailers through live webinars, Zoom meetings, and Facebook live sessions for industry partner members. The company also provided assistance for landlords and retailers in utilising their space more effectively. “With COVID-19 being identified as an accelerator of trends that already existed, the process over the past 12 months of educating landlords on the changes to how the industry uses land is vital,” Philip explains. “Reductions in shopfit costs and materials, along with reductions in energy usage, can deliver sustainable efficiencies on several levels of a retailer’s business.”

Concerned about retailers’ lack of access to information about retail lease legislation, their rights and government support – particularly when it comes to the role of the Office of Small Business Commissioners – Philip recently launched the world’s first digital magazine on retailer leasing, *Time to Focus on Your Lease*.



Rupa Parthasarathy

Founder, *Mindkshetra, NSW*

Mindkshetra comes from the combination of the words “mind” and the Sanskrit word “kshetra” which means “place”. For its founder Rupa Parthasarathy, Mindkshetra is a place to create mind space. It is a creative arts mental health studio that aims to nurture inner wellbeing through creativity.

Rupa originally planned the opening of Mindkshetra in March 2020, but the lockdown which began that month due to the pandemic put a sudden halt to those plans. Undeterred, she pivoted the business towards online operations. “As a new business, we started building our customer base online through a five-week program called Keeping it together, telling and sharing psychoeducation-based stories and research strategies to cope with the lockdown to keep mental resilience.”

Rupa stresses that Mindkshetra is a place that those without a mental health condition or an art inclination can still join. “We found out that there is a considerable stigma associated with mental health, both within the Australian community at large and more so within the South Asian community here,” she explains. “We have been overcoming the challenge through awareness campaigns and spreading the message that in the same way that going to the gym improves physical health; visiting our studio is a means to enhance and nurture mental health. No artistic experience is required.”

Rupa believes the work of Mindkshetra is now more important than ever with so many Australians facing mental health issues that it has become a pandemic in itself on top of the ongoing COVID situation.

“The sudden loss of employment, change in lifestyle, social distancing has created havoc in people’s lives,” she says. “Most often, people who experience mild to moderate stress most commonly do not have any or minimum access or resources to cope with life’s adversity.” Rupa is using Mindkshetra to bridge this gap and encourage people to invest in nurturing their mental wellness proactively.



Sarah Leung

Founder/Chief Dietician, *Alg Seaweed, Vic*

Sarah Leung was a practising private dietician when she launched Alg Seaweed in 2017, addressing a lack of quality seaweed products in the market that would have helped address the iodine deficiencies she constantly encountered in her practice.

“Iodine deficiency has been identified as the cause of thyroid problems, fertility issues, and the lack of brain development among unborn babies and children,” Sarah explains. “Awareness on the importance of iodine is crucial, especially for the benefit of pregnant and breastfeeding women. Seaweed contains the highest amount of iodine amongst all food and it’s sustainable, healthy and delicious.”

Determined to promote, design and incorporate high-quality seaweed into familiar foods so more people will start eating it every day, Alg Seaweed partners with institutions such as the University of Melbourne through student placements in order to provide students an opportunity for learning while they help the business achieve its goals.

Sarah took the pandemic-induced slowdown as an opportunity to assess how the business was faring. “We paused and took nine months to look within the business in every aspect from branding, operation, product, sales to marketing,” she says. As a result of this, she relaunched the brand early this year, having fine-tuned the brand messaging and product offerings. The relaunch proved to be a success and generated rapid growth.

Sarah is excited about what’s ahead for her business and Australia’s seaweed industry as a whole. “The Australian seaweed industry is about to kick off. The Australian Seaweed Industry Blueprint has indicated that the goal is to grow this industry from \$3million to \$10million by 2025. We are so proud to be part of this rapid growth,” she says.

Alg Seaweed only sources seaweed from companies with sustainable farming practices. Their imported seaweed is certified organic, and grown in an on-land farming system which is highly sustainable. Their Tasmanian seaweed is wild harvested in the ocean.

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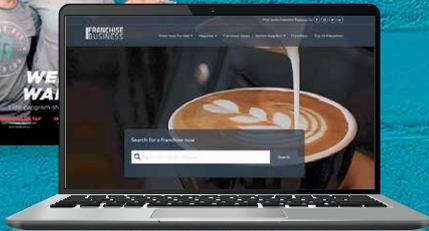
Inside Retail



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Sharon Melamed

Managing Director, *Matchboard, NSW*

Sharon Melamed's business was born out of frustration trying to find the right suppliers using search engines. Matchboard, launched in 2012, is a platform that makes it easy for buyers to find the right B2B supplier for their specific business needs, whether it is for digital marketing, call centres, offshore staffing, training or consultancy. "Think online dating for the commercial world," Sharon explains.

Demand on the site dived between March and May 2020 as COVID bit, but Matchboard was able to bounce back. "I rejigged marketing to focus on industries with high demand during COVID – healthcare, aged care, government, eCommerce and logistics – resulting in many new clients," Sharon says. "The last year has been our best revenue performance over any 12-month interval."

Matchboard also expanded into the UK year shortly before the pandemic hit, and Sharon has managed to attract new clients there thanks to a successful SEO strategy. "When travel resumes I can interview, train and reactivate a licensee on the ground again."

Sharon is committed to not only running a profitable business but also making a social impact by giving back to the community. She started the "Small Business for Small Charities" initiative, providing pro-bono marketing to 36 causes addressing issues such as child abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, health and education.



Shelley Cox

Founder/Director, *Makers & Merchants Barossa, SA*

Shelley Cox is a winemaker by profession who wanted to help sole traders and small businesses in her home region of the Barossa Valley. So, Shelley launched Makers & Merchants Barossa in 2020, providing those businesses with support and a venue in which to showcase their products. This business is Shelley's second contribution to her local community, having established co-working space Workspace Barossa in 2019 with her husband.

Shelley originally planned to open Makers & Merchants' doors in March 2020, but a COVID cluster effectively shut the state down so she pivoted and launched online in June 2020. "I pride myself on finding solutions as a natural habit, and so have been able to find agile solutions to COVID-related issues," Shelley says. "Thankfully, our landlords agreed to hold on the lease until the climate was more favourable for us, so we concentrated on launching online first."

In overcoming the fact that launching a new concept in a regional area is met with hesitation due to its unknown nature, Shelley is grateful to her foundation members who shared her vision for a sustainable collaborative business. "Commercial costs are not viable for all brands, and so with our membership we now have 19 makers and merchants who are 'open' to being discovered by a much wider audience," Shelley enthuses.

Sinay Salomon

Founder/CEO, *aXonPlay, NSW*

aXonPlay is a venture dedicated to helping adults on the autism spectrum and with disabilities build positive relationships through fun and engaging video games that teach social resilience and confidence. The concept was developed by its founder Sinay Salomon at the University of Technology Sydney Startups hub, and evolved into a fully-fledged business in December 2020.

"Our solution combines psychology research, technology, business and fun to deliver proven assistance to target a high number of people on the autism spectrum," Sinay explains. "Video games are a well-recognised context for teaching new communication, social skills, and contextual language, with 41.4 per cent of adults with ASD spending their free time playing video games."

aXonPlay's solutions are a product of research, technology, business acumen and a sense of fun that Sinay is constantly improving through feedback from their users. The company also hosts an online community through Facebook and MeetUp groups where adults on the autism spectrum are able to share their struggles and victories. "We are providing people from all abilities the support to socialise and develop their individual skills, regardless of their individual needs," Sinay says. "We have made it our mission to create the best possible tools for everyone." Sinay's efforts have seen aXonPLAY nominated for a social enterprise award at the University of Technology Sydney and her being invited to speak at events for social impact start-ups.





Steve Chapman

Co-Founder/CEO, *Shine Drink, NSW*
“The better-for-you drink guru”

Steve Chapman started his career at PwC but quickly came to the realisation that entrepreneurship appealed to him more than accountancy. Having launched his first start-up – a social-commerce platform and app that saw him recognised as one of Australia’s Top 25 Entrepreneurs Under 25 by Startup Smart in 2013 – Steve started an entrepreneurial apprenticeship with ACT Young Australian of the Year and serial entrepreneur Dr Sam Prince in 2013.

Steve and Sam went on to found Shine Drink with the aim of helping people “think, feel and do better”. Shine is Australia’s first Nootropic Drink that energises and awakens the mind,

using natural ingredients and low sugar. “My role is to get brilliant people on board and develop them into their highest potential as we pursue

our goal to rid the world of bad energy,” Steve enthuses. Having launched the brand online via an eCommerce site on 1 July 2016, Steve expanded into supplying Shine via wholesalers and wholesale/retail stores in January 2017, and his products are now available in over 6000 outlets across Australia including Coles Supermarkets, 7-Eleven, Ampol, Coles Express, Woolworths Metro and IGAs. Shine is now one of the country’s top selling “better-for-you” drink brands – a significant achievement considering the Manly-based business has just six full-time employees.

Steve is thankful for the fact that COVID did not impact his industry in anything like the way it did so many others, and, in fact, he says the pandemic was in some ways good for the business. “It forced us to consider every line item in our profit-and-loss sheet, and brought us even closer together as a team,” he explains.

And, despite the pandemic, Steve has fast-tracked the company’s growth and development in the last 12 months. The company has

implemented new project management software to track all the small moving parts and focus on what Steve describes as “the most important things every day”. The biggest project, however, has been improving and replacing Shine’s core product range – which came in 400ml – with a new, more profitable 330ml range. “This was a massive challenge given it involved finding a new manufacturer, new suppliers and new packaging,” Steve admits. “As a team we overcame this challenge using our ‘Win or Learn’ mentality, and trying to take every lesson we can from each section of the project.” The launch of the 330ml range has been a “triple

win” for the brand. “The new range is cheaper for the end consumer, gives better margins for retailers and is more profitable for us,” Steve explains. “In-store they are

“ The new range is cheaper for the end consumers, gives better margins for retailers and is more profitable for us. ”

selling about 100 per cent more stock than with the previous 400ml range, and they look even better with the new branding and packaging!”

That new packaging is a source of pride to Steve, due to its reduced environmental impact. “We removed excess packaging and the new bottles use over 30 per cent less material to produce, making it lighter to distribute around the country,” he says. “Furthermore, when selecting our new manufacturers and partners, we engaged them on their sustainability policies to ensure we were aligned.”

Steve sees a bright future for the company, with the energy drink market evolving rapidly. “We’re leading busier lives than ever before and at the same time we’re more health conscious than ever,” he told the peak body for convenience stores in Australia upon the launch of the new range. “Those are two lifestyle factors that would normally be at odds with one another, but natural nootropics do an incredible job of providing the energy needed to manage a busy lifestyle without compromising on health.”

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Susan Sadler

Director, *Red Wagon Workplace Solutions, SA*

Susan Sadler was pregnant with her first child when she was made redundant from her corporate job in human resources. Taking the opportunity to run her own venture in which she could leverage her experience in HR, Susan founded Red Wagon Workplace Solutions in 2017 with a mission to create a more positive environment in the workplace.

“I was tired of the unnecessary adversarial relationship between management and employees that existed in many corporations, and knew that I could assist everyone to achieve more positive relations and better business outcomes,” Susan says.

In the four years since its inception, Red Wagon has emerged as a leader in conducting exploratory reviews into industrial relations compliance activities, on the back of Susan developing a unique set of systems and tools to conduct deep diagnostic assessments of the activities of a business as they relate to various legislative and best-practice provisions of compliance with employment law. And, within the past 12 months, Susan has developed an assessment and response framework for instances and complaints of sexual harassment.

The pandemic has seen Red Wagon enhance its focus on providing the needed support to businesses struggling to keep afloat. “While the circumstances surrounding the work I carried out in 2020 were overshadowed by the fear, frustration, and sadness of struggling businesses, I know that my expertise assisted a number of SMEs to survive a challenging period and I feel privileged to have been able to help,” Susan says. “I believe that no matter what your role is in the workplace or the community, everybody has the potential to make a significant positive impact on others through their actions and behaviours.”

Susan takes this ethos further through a commitment to donating some of Red Wagon’s time to pro-bono services and volunteer work, and she is implementing a number of social and environmental targets for the business in line with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.



Tanya Abbey

CEO, *Black Wolf Group, Qld*

Tanya Abbey founded her boutique recruitment consultancy the Black Wolf Group with her husband in 2014. The Gold Coast-based company, that also operates out of serviced offices in Brisbane and Sydney, places candidates in blue-, white-, and grey-collar roles in companies of all sizes. “We pride ourselves on our personalised, tailored and customer-centric approach to business and our ability to find the best talent for our clients,” Tanya says.

As CEO, Tanya looks at her role from a unique perspective. “I am a nurturer, which I believe is essential, particularly in the recruitment and human resources arena that is the foundation of our business,” she explains. “I am the cultural leader, but I remain part of the team rather than some figure of fear – my role, in fact, the essence of our business, is to champion people and support them. I can’t imagine doing it any other way.”

Black Wolf takes pride in finding innovative solutions to whatever challenges arise. In March last year, as the number of COVID cases began to escalate, they launched Co-health, a user-friendly, preventive Workforce Management tool designed to effectively manage and improve workforce health, engagement, and well-being. These efforts were recognised through winning a bronze award at the Asia Pacific Stevie Award for having developed the most valuable HR tool during the pandemic.

Tanya is passionate about helping other entrepreneurs, volunteering as a mentor for the past 12-months as a Queensland Government ‘Mentored for Growth Program’ small-business mentor. “It has been an enriching experience,” Tanya enthuses. “Recently, I was a panellist in an online seminar for the program facilitated by the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, providing support to over 1000 registered attendees.” Tanya is also passionate about the environment – Black Wolf’s office is 90 per cent paperless, and the paper they do use is shredded and donated to an animal shelter.

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Tim Langford

Founder, *Claim App, Qld*

Tim Langford developed Claim App after regularly observing cafe and bar staff standing around with nothing to do. “Every business experiences quiet periods, so we wanted to create a product which helped lure customers in during the quieter periods, or if they get a last-minute cancellation,” Tim explains. The app was launched in 2019 to help cafes, bars and restaurants connect with their customers by helping them craft “irresistible” offers such discounts or special promotions.

Once the app was up and running successfully, Tim realised its potential went beyond its original client base. So, he then rebuilt the app from scratch so that it can be utilised by businesses in industries such as health & beauty, fitness, and even parking services. The rebuilding of the app came at a crucial time, with the COVID-19 pandemic forcing so many businesses in the original target market to close their doors. By expanding his offering, Tim was able to stay afloat and achieve the goals he had set himself in April 2020 through giving consumers a reason to leave the house and support local businesses.

Businesses who sign up for the service pay a small monthly or yearly subscription fee to be on the platform, and Claim App do not take any commission, something Tim says is unusual in this space. “Basically, the business signs up on our website, adds their business details then they are ready to start posting deals and information which pushes out to our android/iOS apps and website,” he explains.

Tim envisions Claim App becoming a part of many businesses’ marketing campaigns, helping them to attract customers. To that end, he is also planning to develop a loyalty program. “That will help assist with customer retention, whilst constantly improving the offering to best serve both business and consumer,” Tim says. “We are aiming to roll out updates on a fortnightly basis.”



Tracy Sheen

Founder, *The Digital Guide, Qld*

Having worked in technology, marketing and sales since 1990, Tracy Sheen was concerned about the number of small-business owners who didn’t consider themselves to be “tech-savvy” and who, therefore, were missing out. “I couldn’t avoid seeing that small business just wasn’t ‘going digital’,” Tracy explains. Her determination to help small-business owners make use of technology to ensure their growth and success led to her launching her education venture The Digital Guide in 2020.

The timing of the launch was propitious, with COVID-19 forcing many businesses to shut down their physical offices and operate remotely, placing them in the unfamiliar-to-many territory that is the digital environment. “I was seeing news reports about businesses with no website or social media presence, and, therefore, no way to harness public support,” Tracy bemoans. “That ‘digital divide’ was actually causing business failures, not just inefficiency or inconvenience.”

To ensure The Digital Guide was able to grow and fulfil its vision, Tracy developed partnerships with several government departments and agencies, furthered her involvement as an advisor for the Australian Small Business Advisory Services program, and wrote a book titled *The End of Technophobia: a practical guide to digitising your business*. She also set up her own club at the social media platform Clubhouse, hosting Friday afternoon chats on which small-business owners can freely share their experiences and advice. She also created the world’s first Clubhouse marathon to celebrate International Women’s Day, which was a 36-hour livestreamed event featuring 55 speakers from 20+ countries. “I fostered a warm, welcoming group where it was just as okay to be ‘flat’ after a tough week, as it was to be excited about a win,” Tracy explains.

Tracy makes a point of assuring clients of the advantage of digitisation in terms of their environmental footprint. “Alongside the dollar savings of using less paper and consumables, they can incorporate sustainability messages into their marketing, as today’s consumer is often highly environmentally conscious,” Tracy avers.

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