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WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?

Message from the brave

Australian entrepreneur Lisa Messenger has trained herself to be brave in business. She talks to *Acuity* about being fearless, having a huge appetite for risk and what she's learnt from Richard Branson.

BY JENNIFER BLACK

"IN BUSINESS, I'M AFRAID OF NOTHING NOW."

It's a bold statement, but after 15 years in business, Sydney-based serial entrepreneur Lisa Messenger has learned to be fearless.

"If I hadn't trained myself to be fearless I would be permanently catatonic in a ball on the floor," she laughs.

Messenger is CEO of The Messenger Group and founder and editor-in-chief of *Collective Hub*, an online news site, event agency and print magazine distributed in 37 countries. Messenger also writes books and recently launched a collaborative tertiary education course.

Her overarching vision for her business is clear.

"Creating extraordinary content for people to live their best life."

Her business continues to expand, but she admits things don't get easier as a business gets bigger.

"When a business is small there's one hard thing that comes out of the day. When it's bigger there are a hundred hard things that come out of the day, so I've become like Teflon."

She says she just lets the problems slide off her, otherwise she wouldn't be able to move the business forward. When she feels afraid she assesses a "worst case scenario" then puts in

place any steps she can to prevent, or manage, that eventuality.

Mind-set

Messenger is a firm believer in the importance of having the right mind-set, saying it's the common principle linking her magazine's diverse readership. While their backgrounds and situations differ, all are entrepreneurs or "intrapreneurs" – people working for a company in an entrepreneurial way – or who want to start their own business.

"It really traverses all sorts of people but it's all about mind-set – people wanting to do extraordinary things in the world."

Mind-set plays a big role in Messenger's hiring decisions. She has a staff of 32 in her Sydney office and always looks for attitude over experience.

"We can teach experience and we can train people to do the technical stuff – for me it's all about 'do you have the right attitude and the right mind-set?'"

Start before you're ready

One of Messenger's driving concepts is "start before you're ready". She believes in selling an idea before having all the plans and processes in place.

"I'm a big believer in selling what I call 'vapourware' – something that doesn't

yet exist – it's a vision and words on a page," she says.

"Pre-sell things, get money and commitment up front in whatever form that may take."

This is exactly what she did with *Collective Hub*, where her concept was to create positive media.

"I was surrounded by so many amazing, inspirational individuals in my life and then I was meeting other people who just had no access to these people, no concept that they even existed. My idea was as simple as 'let's create positive media – let's pool them all together'."

Her gut instinct was a magazine would work best. However the media market at the time – she launched in 2013 – was "either dead or dying".

"I definitely started before I was ready because I had three staff at the time, all under the age of 25 and none of us had ever worked for a magazine."

And she didn't realise there were already more than 5,500 print magazine titles in the Australian market alone.

"Everything was stacked against me... but I just had this unwavering self-belief that this was going to happen."

So she "banged on a lot of doors" trying to convince people to support the idea and partner with her, finding success with the Commonwealth Bank. ▶



“If I hadn’t trained myself to be fearless I would be permanently catatonic in a ball on the floor.”

which provided partnership money.

“For me it was about getting that external validation. It just took one person believing in me and then I thought, right, I’ve got to learn how to create this now.”

Messenger says while financial and business acumen are important, entrepreneurs need to create extraordinary relationships.

“I think at the end of the day business really comes down to relationships. People want to do business with people they like,” she says.

While some believe a rigorous business plan is needed when launching a new business, Messenger believes in failing fast.

“I really test things in a very loose, back of the envelope type of way before I put the rigour behind it.”

This includes testing ideas with her social media followers, or getting feedback from someone in her network.

Once there is appetite for an idea she puts rigour behind it and sets a business plan in place.

So when shouldn’t people start before they are ready?

That depends on the type of business and the industry, Messenger says.

“Businesses that require a lot of infrastructure and large capital outlay – if it’s physical goods – definitely before investing in hard products you put more rigour in the beginning.”

In a service-based industry she says it’s easier to take a leap without much investment in terms of time or money.

Don’t be afraid to jump in before everything is perfect, Messenger advises.

Business base/background

Messenger gained a Bachelor of Business at Australia’s Southern Cross University – “a brilliant grounding for where I have gone”.

“But I probably did it more to have the piece of paper behind me,” she confesses.

She has a strong understanding of the financial aspect of business and appreciates the value of using financial data to inform decisions.

“I’m creative and I’m a strategist and I’m a visionary and I love doing a deal – I love the commercial aspect of the business.”

But she says she has always had extraordinary financial people around her.

“That’s proven key to keeping the business going for all these years.”

Messenger’s accountant recently told her that in his 24 years at PwC he had never seen anyone take as much risk as she has taken.

“I wear that as a badge of honour,” she laughs.

“You can carry crazy risk for a certain amount of time, but now I have a COO, a CFO, several bookkeepers, a great accountant – I really now have a very strong commercial team with extreme smarts.”

Spreading the message

Since 2013, Messenger’s company has been approached by seven tertiary institutions wanting to partner to create higher education. She realised this would address a gap in what she offered entrepreneurs – training.

Messenger collaborated with academics at Australia’s Torrens

University and in October 2016 a year-long Graduate Certificate in Collective Entrepreneurship was launched.

“It’s very, very different from anything that exists out there at the moment,” she says.

“I just kept challenging and saying ‘I’m an entrepreneur, I’m not going to learn like that, I don’t want to do that, I want to gamify it’.”

The online course simulates an entrepreneurial journey.

“I wanted it to be really tough and everyone who goes through it is working either as an entrepreneur on their own business or they’re working as an ‘intrapreneur,’” she says.

Messenger shares her own experiences, injecting herself into the course as much as possible. [Amex shares its view on start-ups on page 106.]

Learning from Richard Branson

In recent years Messenger has spent time with billionaire English business magnate Sir Richard Branson, describing him as kind, humble and generous. In 2014, she was one of 28 entrepreneurs invited to spend time with Branson on his private island in the British Virgin Islands.

“We arrived the day after the Virgin Galactic incident,” she says, referring to the crash of the VSS Enterprise, a test flight vehicle that crashed in California’s Mojave Desert leaving the co-pilot dead and the pilot seriously injured.

Messenger asked Branson why he was at the retreat after the disaster and he told her three important things. Firstly, that he had made a commitment.

5 TIPS FROM LISA MESSENGER

- Start before you're ready
- Hire for attitude
- Surround yourself with a great team
- Train yourself to be fearless in business
- Make it easy for people to say yes to you.

Secondly, it was important he fronted the media and took responsibility. But then thirdly, he needed to empower the staff to get on with their jobs, so he got out of their way.

As part of the retreat, entrepreneurs were given the opportunity to “Pitch to Rich” and ask him to get involved in their business in some way.

“People were asking for very complex things like re-naming their entire company and strapping it ‘Virgin’ – that kind of thing.

“I believe business is all about relationships and when you're getting to know someone, simplicity is key.”

Messenger asked Branson if she could send a box of *Collective Hub* print magazines to Necker Island every issue.

“It was so easy for him to say yes, so he did say yes.”

Work/life blend

Messenger acknowledges she has had to make sacrifices to be a successful entrepreneur.

“I have a great lifestyle – my life's blended so I'm always on, and that's because I love it.”

The downside is she never really takes a break from work.

“I see opportunities everywhere and I genuinely love people and I'm always wanting to find out what they do and how we can do stuff together.”

When asked if the sacrifices are worth it, her answer is unequivocal.

“My answer is a resounding, 100% yes.” ●

JENNIFER BLACK

is the deputy editor of *Acuity*.

