

TWINS RAISE A MUG TO SUCCESS OF TEA ENTERPRISE



TEA FOR TWO Jodi and Stella Kean, who have married chocolate and sweet treats with tea in their Choclateas and Sweeteas ranges

TWIN sisters are brewing up big plans for their tea business.

Jodi Kean, 24, of Rowlands Gill, and her sister Stella of Gateshead, initially financed the business themselves before securing a start-up loan from Project North East, which helped to fund their website.

Their Newcastle-based Choclateas company makes specially-flavoured chocolate teas which range from vanilla to rhubarb and custard.

They are currently working on

Parteas, a new range including pink champagne and Battenberg cake flavours.

Around 20 food stores, delis and prestigious Newcastle store Fenwick stock the teas, which are blended by a company in Germany. They are also proving popular with retailers in London, Manchester and even Australia.

Now the women are hoping to impress judges in The Journal's If We Can, You Can Challenge, run by the Entrepreneurs' Forum. With just a week to go

before the closing date, other start-ups and early-stage enterprises can still enter for the chance to win up to £17,000 worth of investment, mentoring and practical help from sponsors Yorkshire Bank, Ward Hadaway, Onyx Group, PwC and Rivers Capital.

Jodi, a fitness instructor, and Stella, who works in human resources, are working part-time while they build the business.

Stella said: "Our main focus

now is on selling as widely we can with the aim of getting into Selfridges and Harvey Nichols.

"We want to build the brand and eventually expand to the USA and New Zealand."

Last year the sisters appeared on the BBC's Be Your Own Boss and made it to the final 35 businesses.

● If We Can, You Can is open for entries until June 21 at www.ifwecanyoucan.co.uk

Aranda Rahbarkouhi

**SARAH
PITTENDRICH**



Optimism can unlock opportunity

WHEN I started my business at the height of a recession in 2008, there were some people who thought I was mad.

With so much doom and gloom in the media and the perception that everyone was tightening their belts, it took steely determination to follow my instincts and start a business in the events and weddings industry.

However within every industry - recession or not - there's always business to be had if you spot a gap in the market. Thorough market research is the key to unlocking it.

The wedding industry is worth just over £10bn and one of the few growing sectors. According to a recent survey by You & Your Wedding magazine, the average cost of a wedding is now £21,939 - an increase of more than £7,000 in a decade, and 14% in the past three years.

Weddings are becoming more lavish, but also more intimate as the number of guests has fallen by 7% since 2009.

Another survey by hitched-wife.org shows that only 42% managed to stick to their budget or under-spend while the majority are willing to go over budget in order to achieve the perfect day.

Statistics can be useful when starting your business, but local knowledge and personal experience are more so.

Having previously worked as a brand manager and then a director of events and marketing, I would hire in table linen and chair covers every week for my corporate clients. I knew all the existing suppliers; their pricing structure, the quality of their products, their levels of service - and thought I could do better. My business idea was based on what I would personally want to receive as a client.

I soon realised that recessions often polarise the market. Both the cheap and cheerful one-stop shop venues for budget weddings and the high-end aspirational four and five-star hotels were flourishing. The rich still have money but the squeezed middle are having to economise.

It's so important to be clear on your position within the marketplace from the outset - and for me that was firmly at the luxury end of the market where I could compete on quality and service rather than price.

Business has grown year on year, which just shows what can be achieved with a clear vision and determination.

I would urge anyone thinking of starting their own business to view the recession differently, to see the changing marketplace as an opportunity rather than something purely negative.

It's these optimistic entrepreneurs who will help get the economy moving again.

Sarah Pittendrigh is managing director of simplybowsandchaircovers.co.uk.

Ask a question via Twitter: @simplybows

Turnover doubles for engineering company

ENGINEERING

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A NEWCASTLE engineering company is all smiles after seeing turnover more than double since moving into a new home with improved facilities.

Smiles Engineering, a specialist in repowering buses to make them greener and more fuel-efficient, moved from premises in Byker, Newcastle, to a new home on the Brunswick Park Industrial Estate 18 months ago.

Since the move the company, which uses manufacturing techniques to bring buses up-to-date, has seen turnover grow by 272%, from £650,000 to £1.8m and the workforce has also swelled from 12

employees to 26, including three apprentices.

Managing director Gordon Mockett said: "We now have better facilities and the larger workshops we needed to meet demand.

"We work with bus companies from all over the UK to repower engines and replace emissions control systems to make them greener and more efficient. By improving the engines' emissions, it gives the bus a new lease of life, so the bus operating companies don't have to buy new vehicles. We can repower the engines of five buses for the price of one new bus."

Buses that have been through Smiles' workshop use less fuel, something that is about to become even more important as the Bus Service Operators Grant is reducing.

Bus Operating companies claimed a 50% fuel subsidy up to

April 2012, but that has reduced to 30% and it's future existence could be doubtful.

Mockett, who has been with the business for three years, said: "From an operators point of view, repowering the engine can improve fuel consumption by between 20% and 100%, depending on the original engine.

"Along with saving fuel, it is also about improving air quality and there are potentially huge EU fines for non-achievement of specified air quality and target emission levels.

"As the average bus can last for 25 years, it makes sense to keep it running efficiently as long as possible."

The cost of a new bus is a major capital outlay for bus operators, but work carried out at Smiles Engineering enables bus companies to keep vehicles running longer

and more efficiently.

As part of the expansion, Smiles recruited general manager, Rob Pease in September last year.

Having grown the workforce over the last year the company has plans to add more technical apprentices to the operation.

Newcastle North MP Catherine McKinnell recently toured the site and workshop.

She said: "The great thing about Smiles Engineering is that it is a North East company employing time-served engineers, who know their job, whilst also training the engineers of the future.

"Public transport is a vital service and ensuring bus operators meet their environmental obligations is a big, but important, job.

"I've really enjoyed visiting Smiles to see how they are helping the bus companies to achieve this."