



The Simply Bows and Chair Covers team, left to right: Chris Burgess, Lucinda Thompson, Kristy Small, Sarah Pittendrigh, Charlotte Harris, Jo Harris and Lesley Nockels.

Simplicity is key to success

TWO YEARS AGO, SARAH PITTENDRIGH TURNED REDUNDANCY INTO OPPORTUNITY WHEN SHE SET UP HER OWN BUSINESS. SIMPLY BOWS AND CHAIR COVERS IS NOW THRIVING, AS REBECCA EVES DISCOVERS.

WHEN I SPEAK to Sarah Pittendrigh, managing director of Simply Bows and Chair Covers, she's between appointments on a day that's full of client meetings.

"We're working nearly 24 hours a day at the moment," she laughs. "But I certainly won't be complaining."

After nearly two years in business, the chair cover and table linen specialist has grown to incorporate six franchises, covering the whole of the North East, plus North Yorkshire and Cumbria.

Further franchises are on the way in Lancashire, London, Cheshire and the Midlands, with a total of 30 forecast to be up and running by the end of 2012.

Sarah puts the company's impressive development down to its integral high standards of both product and service.

She explains: "I used to be a brand manager for Land Rover and Jaguar and then worked in event management. When we hired linen it didn't seem to matter where we went, the quality was poor and the service was very underwhelming.

"There was a definite gap in the market, so when I lost my job in 2008, I thought I would grasp the opportunity and set up my own business.

"We've become the preferred supplier to many of the key wedding venues in the North East and I

would hope it is because we provide the complete package: it's a quality product, at an affordable price, supported by an exceptional standard of customer service."

The business took off thanks to Sarah's determination and strong work ethic, as she recalls: "I took the product to market myself – I sat down with wedding co-ordinators and general managers, and asked for feedback about the product. They loved it and we took notice of their comments and requirements.

"I set the company up in January 2009, and by September I couldn't cope with the amount of enquiries we were getting."

The resulting decision to franchise the company was clearly a smart move, but it wasn't an easy option.

"To hand over the brand to franchisees is quite a daunting task," says Sarah, "so I spend a great deal of time selecting suitable individuals who demonstrate creative flair, exude enthusiasm to develop the brand and are totally customer-focused.

"I've turned people down because I didn't believe their motivation for coming in to our brand was right."

The team now includes Jo Harris (Northumberland), Charlotte Harris (Newcastle), Lucinda Thompson (Sunderland and Teesside),

Kristy Small (West Northumberland and Cumbria), and Lesley Nockels and Chris Burgess (North Yorkshire). Sarah stills takes care of South Northumberland and County Durham herself.

Simply Bows and Chair Covers has certainly grown, but the simplicity of its offering remains at the core of the business, as Sarah points out: "We stick to what we do best – high quality chair covers with matching table linen – but we work with recommended partners who take care of any other requirements our clients might have, such as florists and stationers, allowing us to offer our clients the full package, prepared by specialists in each field."

When it comes to keeping their own products fresh, the Simply Bows team has a creative approach.

"We're constantly coming up with new ideas," says Sarah. "We might take inspiration from the catwalk and manipulate that to accessorise a chair, as well as seasonal trends in colours and accessories.

"We create bespoke events that make the most of the client's budget – we don't do anything off-the-shelf."

The company has also expanded its services for the corporate market in recent months.

"Napkins and chairs can now be branded with a logo," says Sarah, "and we've also got an extensive range of coloured linen, so a client can tie their corporate colours into the look for an awards ceremony or a product launch."

For those who like the idea of pursuing their own entrepreneurial venture, Sarah has some advice: "I think the key thing is to fully research and understand the market you wish to enter," she reflects. "Because I had ten years' experience in events, I had a lot of contacts and experience in that field, which helped me to get the business off the ground quickly.

"If you're passionate and you believe in your product, you've got to give it a go because if you don't, it will always be a 'what if.'"

For more information, log on to: www.simplybowsandchaircovers.co.uk