



WRC Case Study: Social Enterprise

Interview with Becky John - Founder Whomadeyourpants?

23 February 2010

Summary

Whomadeyourpants? is a worker owned co-op in Southampton set up to empower marginalised women by providing flexible employment, education, advice and support, and a social and community space; it aims to do this by making great pants and selling them!! This case study looks at the journey that this Social Enterprise has been on so far, the key to their successes and the challenges they have overcome.

About whomadeyourpants?

Whomadeyourpants? works with refugee women who are marginalised by their status as refugees, refugee spouses or by associated language barriers. Initially women receive intensive English lessons, followed by training in sewing skills which forms part of an NVQ Level 2 in Manufacture of Sewn Products. Then, when they are ready, they are given a paid job sewing pants. Once they are working women are encouraged to complete NVQ training and will eventually be supported to move on to other jobs within or outside of the co-op, while their roles will be taken over by a new group of trainees. The pants themselves are made from 'upcycled' waste materials from the fashion industry which would normally have been discarded at the end of a season. whomadeyourpants? believe that ethical products don't have to feel boring and worthy; they can be pretty and fun!

whomadeyourpants? chose to set up as an Industrial and Provident Society, a worker owned business. They believed that this structure was the best way to empower the women involved in the project as they own the business and are involved in making the decisions that affect them; eventually they will also receive a share in any profits. Other legal structures don't provide the same opportunity for the workers to own and manage the enterprise. The process of setting up as an Industrial and Provident Society was very challenging and required a lot of paperwork. However, this structure protects the business from the influence of outside investors and encourages women workers to have control over the business.

The business is led by a committee which is made up of a Chair, Treasurer, Secretary and four other committee members. The eventual aim is for the committee to be made up from women within the co-op however the committee existed before the co-op was able to take membership and needed expertise to support the initial stages of setting up, so the rules were changed to temporarily allow co-opting of committee members from outside of the co-op. The first intake of women trainees will be eligible to become members after 6 months and they will be eligible to vote and stand for election to the committee at the next AGM in April 2011. This gives them time to get used to working within the co-op and understand how it operates. The co-op has one full time paid member of staff and seven regular volunteers coordinating and running the business, including long term planning, and general administration. Eventually, whomadeyourpants? aims to develop women's leadership skills and set up a team structure for each department of the business; women will put themselves forward to be team leaders and become committee members representing their area of work.

History of how they got to where they are today

The origins of whomadeyourpants? are closely connected to the personal story of its founder, Becky John. After completing counselling with Rape Crisis Becky felt driven to share her newfound strength and empowerment with other women. This desire, combined with her background in sales, passion for human rights and ethical products, and love of gorgeous underwear gave her the idea of setting up an ethical women's co-op which made pants! Realising that there was a large population of refugee women in Southampton who were excluded from employment, Becky worked with Solent MIND and City Life Education and Action for Refugees to locate isolated women and offer them the opportunity to get involved in the project.

whomadeyourpants? legally incorporated as an Industrial and Provident Society in December 2008, and officially launched on 1st December 2009, At their launch they created 11 jobs for their trainees and they employed another 9 women in March this year, and they are now training a further 14.

Initially Becky found it challenging to secure start up funding as setting up a manufacturing social enterprise in the UK was such an unusual idea. As the business needed to train enough women to run the pants production line it couldn't begin with just one or two women, and needed considerable investment to get started. Six months after their initial application to the Cooperative Fund, and after several revisions, they eventually received their first £26,000 of funding. This set the ball rolling and they have subsequently been awarded grants from UnLtd, Southampton City Council, Salaam Fund in Southampton, Skillfast and £60,000 from John Paul Getty Jnr Charitable Trust. In total they have received £117,337.

Before any pants had been produced Becky and her team sold 'pants futures' to get money in; they took pre-orders for pants and shipped them as soon as they were made! whomadeyourpants? already have some trading income from selling pants and aim to generate all their income from sales of pants within three years; until then they will be subsidised by various grants.

Keys to Success

1. Using Social Media to promote the organisation and raise its profile.

- whomadeyourpants? currently have around 1,000 people following through various online media, including:
 - Twitter
 - Facebook
 - Blog
 - E-mailing list.
- Social media is a great way to connect with people who are interested in what you are doing, to promote the brand and be more visible
- Social media works instantly and is completely free
- Having an online presence has been useful for networking and has even led to further opportunities to publicise the business

2. Gaining local support

- Local support has been invaluable, local people have been interested in the project and have helped the organisation to set up
- Initially Becky worked with CLEAR, a local refugee support organisation who connected her with various community groups and organisations who could reach isolated refugee women who were not accessing mainstream services
- Wessex Partnerships and the local Enterprise Gateway (business support agencies) offered lots of practical support and encouragement, right down to working out exactly how much thread you need to make a pair of knickers!
- Over 40 volunteers around the UK support whomadeyourpants? doing everything from designing the website and letterhead to answering the phones, legal advice, business support and bookkeeping
- The whomadeyourpants? offices are equipped almost entirely from Freecycle, skips and donations.

3. Network, Network, Network! (and having a catchy name helps!)

- Networking has been really important in getting the organisation set up. Having a memorable name has been helpful as people remember the organisation long after their initial contact and think to get in touch when they have something to offer.

- Going out and sharing her passion for the project helped Becky to get the project going. People have been attracted to her contagious enthusiasm and have been keen to support the work
- Allow everyone a chance to help; people enjoy giving when they see the value of what you do.
- Now the organisation is established Becky is in real demand to speak about their journey, this is a great opportunity to spread the word about their work, although it can conflict with operational responsibilities

Challenges faced and lessons learnt

- Not understanding what needed to be done and in what order. When their first grant was awarded, whomadeyourpants? didn't have a bank account to pay it into, this meant a great rush to sort out their legal structure so that they had signatories to set up a bank account!
- A large number of women who signed up but were not able to complete the training, mainly due to childcare arrangements falling through. The organisation can't currently afford to provide any childcare as it is expensive and complex to arrange. In future they would like to include a childcare training option especially if some women are keen to develop their skills and qualifications in this field
- Producing enough pants has been a key issue. Pants production was slowed down by a number of unforeseeable incidents including a ceiling falling in, equipment breaking and snowy weather! It also took longer than anticipated to train women up to an adequate standard to make good quality pants. Time and money were lost from the delay which had a knock on effect on paying bills and wages. They are now looking at ways to make up for lost time.
- After initial assessments they realised that there were two distinct levels of English tuition needed: basic and more advanced. They had to arrange two levels of classes, as some women required more English teaching than anticipated before they could move on to training in sewing skills.
- Bureaucracy and legal matters around formation were difficult to understand. Understanding the legal issues is important as there can be serious consequences if you don't get it right.
- Understanding between women has been essential for the development of the business, especially acknowledging difference and knowing how to deal with it.
- Communication with women who speak little English has been a challenge. It can be frustrating to try and explain important points without being sure that the women fully understand their impact or significance.

- Negative perceptions of Social Enterprise have been a challenge. Some business people do not consider that a Social Enterprise is a real business and some people working in voluntary and community organisations don't always see the social benefit of a Social Enterprise.

Future Plans

As consumers become more aware of ethical and environmental issues, whomadeyourpants? see local, traceable production becoming key not just in the UK but all across Europe. Within 3 years the organisation would like to be fully sustainable and able to offer a minimum of 100 people at least 3 hours work a week. Within five years, they would like to see whomadeyourbra? elsewhere in the UK, and other whomadeyour...? businesses making other ethical garments across the UK.

Contact details

Becky John
Fairways House
Mount Pleasant Industrial Estate
Mount Pleasant Road
Southampton
SO14 0QB

hello@whomadeyourpants.co.uk