


THE HOMeworkER

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"Somewhere in your gut, you know that you're not going to give in and you're going to be ok."

ANNETTE FOLEY-CRAIGEN

FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR,
B-LINE BEAUTY

Feet First: From treading the boards to jumping into the beauty industry. Meet the lady who has pioneered the foot care industry from her home in rural England.

The first time I interviewed Annette Foley-Craigén was also the first time anyone has shown me their feet during an interview. But Annette does have very lovely feet — unsurprising perhaps as the founder of a beauty company known for its specialist foot care products.

From her beautiful home in Lincolnshire, Annette has been almost solely responsible for raising the profile of foot care in the professional beauty industry. Now, well into her 70s, she still maintains a youthful spark and an enthusiasm which has almost certainly seen her grow and succeed in her business.

She describes herself as “artistically inclined and a bit airy-fairy” but it’s this self-deprecating manner that not only warms you to Annette but which belies a real tenacity and instinct for running her business. Relying on her gut, has been key to finding that balance between being positive and being realistic.

Creativity is certainly her strong point, but also what she finds hardest to contain “because you have all these ideas

bubbling away inside of you,” she says. “I’ll get an idea and be half way through it when something will happen and off I go on another thing. Over the years, I’ve had to try to be more disciplined.”

For Annette has not always been in business, she began her career on the stage, studying at the prestigious Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. (She’s even met one of her fellow alumni, Sir Anthony Hopkins.)

But it was acting that led to her interest in feet. She stands to show me that with feet as her foundation, they become the foundation to a character. “You automatically move, you build the body and it alters, depending on what part you’re playing,” she explains.

Today, feet remain core to her business. She entered the beauty industry almost by accident when, as a glamorous young actress, working “any job to pay the rent” in London, she was asked to do some promotional work for Estée Lauder. Later, she moved to Clarins and after years in various sales and marketing roles, Annette decided to branch out on her own. “I decided if I were going to work that hard for them, I could work that hard for myself,” she says laughing.



She did what she has continued to do — buck the trend. Stepping out on her own in her late 40s, and faced with a beauty industry already full of face creams, Annette did her research and decided to start with the feet. “I thought, and still believe, that feet are a vital part of the anatomy. It’s also an area she feels is “sadly neglected.”

B-Line Beauty was born; their first products were a foot spray, a foot and leg lotion, and an exfoliant scrub. “The packaging was done in white because I couldn’t afford colour,” she says.

While she can now afford colour in her branding and has close to thirty product launches under her belt, she admits that growing her business has been quite a “hard road” at times. “I never leave enough time to plan ahead... There’s a lot to do and I need somebody who’s more disciplined,” she says.

It’s reassuring to hear from a woman who’s celebrating her company’s thirtieth anniversary, that occasionally, even she is still “chasing her tail.” And there have been moments of fear and doubt as well. “Sometimes I’ve cried,” she says, recommending getting out, walking away from the office, thinking it through and returning with a clear perspective to find out what happened.

She talks touchingly about her late husband and admits the period after his death was her “lowest moment”.

“For a while, my business got nothing of me,” she says. “It was a time we could have gone under.”

But they bounced back, reinvigorated the brand, launched a new product and Annette was invited as a guest speaker at the Japan Footcare Association.

Self-belief and being surrounded by positive people have been Annette’s saviours and what she recommends to anyone who is setting out on their own business journey.

In thirty years, Annette has certainly learned the lessons and she admits, putting in place a supportive team has been crucial. “You have to learn and seek help when you need it,” she says, adding, “I’ve not been afraid to ask for help and get expert advice.”

She is also a big advocate for celebration, something that homeworkers often dismiss when working alone. Reflecting on her own thirty years in business, there’s much to celebrate: from environmental plaudits and product innovations to rubbing shoulders with icons of the industry such as Joan Collins.

Ever the innovator and pioneer, you sense Annette is constantly brimming with ideas. They have mostly served her well. At a time when foot care was medical, functional, corns and hard-skin, Annette was discovering the perfect blend of tea tree and lavender oils, becoming the first company to create a product range based on tea tree oil.

“I wanted [the products] to be plant orientated and I wanted to use natural products,” she says. “Tea tree was absolutely right because it’s antiviral, antiseptic, just right for the feet.”

They became the first independent beauty brand in the UK to remove plastic microbeads from their exfoliating products when many companies were simply talking about it. They became the first independent British company to replace the plastic with bamboo, which, along with its sustainability, reflects their natural, plant-based ethos.

But in thirty years, there have been changes which she has found challenging. “My first means of communication are telephone and letter... I haven’t taken to the digital age easily,” she says.

“I’m a touchy-feely person so for me, digital is quite difficult... but I’m aware of it and I love young people; I think they’re the lifeblood of everything.”

Instead, Annette has learned, she’s taken courses, and she now admits she loves typing. The days of non-digital communication were when Annette, as a fledgling business, was pitching to have her products stocked and used by top spas around the UK. With B-Line barely a year old, she won an account at the award-winning destination spa, Ragdale Hall. “They were dealing with big international brands,” says Annette. “They went with me because I was so enthusiastic about my product.”

Proof that her advice about believing in yourself, works. That, and never apologising for who you are and what you do. It’s something she echoes while recalling her first big exhibition. Everything she did was a DIY effort, including the dressing of her stand, an event which involved laughing hysterically with her friend at 2 am while they were up ladders, frantically trying to pleat material before the morning opening. “The other stands had their suppliers come in with crew to do it,” she says. “But if you have to do it yourself, don’t apologise. It was our first show.” They walked away with an award for the best-dressed stand and decades on, she still has her account with Ragdale Hall.

Would she do anything differently? “I think I would try to be more structured,” she says. But her advice is simple: Be enthusiastic, know your product, don’t apologise, and develop resilience “so you can take the knock-backs.”

“Somewhere in your gut, you know that you’re not going to give in and you’re going to be ok,” she says. “Your business will succeed because of you.” She laughs. “It just never occurred to me that I could fail.”

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