

Country business WINNERS 2011

IN MARCH WE TEAMED UP WITH EXPERTS THE NEXT STAGE CONSULTANCY TO FIND A FLEDGLING BUSINESS VENTURE WE COULD HELP. HERE ARE THE RESULTS...

THE JUDGES

Rhoda Parry, Editor, Country Homes & Interiors
Samantha Raggatt, Managing Director, The Next Stage Consultancy
Kate Forman, Owner, Kate Forman Designs
Martine Joule, Head of Brand Development, Joules
Dominie Cripps, Brand and PR Marketing Manager, Joules
Belinda Cooper, Publisher, Country Homes & Interiors

THE WINNERS!

Wild at Heart
 Ginny Knox and Caro Willson

Ginny and Caro run Wild at Heart together. They make and sell preserves handmade from English native fruits. Ginny lives in East Horsley in Surrey with husband Jim and children Adam, 18, and Ollie, 14. Caro lives in Horsmonden, Kent, and is married to Mark with step-son John, 14, son Sam, 10, daughters Elizabeth, six, and Madeleine, five. As school friends, Ginny and Caro enjoyed picking crab apples and blackberries in the Sussex countryside. Having both left corporate jobs around five years ago, they've rediscovered the pleasures of their childhoods in their business. The range was launched in March at farmers' markets, and is now sold through the website and outlets. *Wild at Heart*, 07836 656476, wildatheartfoods.co.uk.

What the judges said

The judges thought that Ginny and Caro showed enormous talent in creating their jams and chutneys. They are confident that



The Wild at Heart range includes Quince Cheese, Red Onion Marmalade and Wild Plum Chutney.

there is real potential for the business and opportunities to make it more commercial.

The Next Stage Consultancy advises...

Identify the specific target market for your product.
Review whether the branding is appropriate for that specific market.
Identify the roles and responsibilities of the respective business owners.
Ensure consistent branding and promotion throughout all media such as website, leaflets, social media, etc.

The prize, worth £6,000!

- Business plan development (2 days), with forecast of profit and loss and cashflow
- Social media strategy and set-up (1½ days)
- Property and licensing (1½ days) – advice on any property-related issues
- Wellbeing at work workshop (½ day), including exercises to find out how to manage energy levels throughout the day
- Marketing strategy (2 days)
- Business logo design (1 day)
- Copywriting for website (1 day)
- Business coaching (6 x 45 minutes)



OUR SIX RUNNERS-UP...

Sophie Made This
 Sophie Field

Sophie lives in Great Missenden in Buckinghamshire with her partner, Rowland Johone-Smith, and their cat, Little Cat. She moved to her house in the Chilterns 18 months ago, and fell in love

with the region. Her work is inspired by the beautiful surroundings of rolling hills and farms, as well as the artistic local communities. A love of crafting and creating new designs meant she began by filling her cottage with her quirky designs, and she has launched her business in order to bring them to others. Currently working as a graphic designer full time, Sophie spends all her evenings and weekends developing her new business in her home.

Sophie creates seasonal decorations and gifts in a country, hand-crafted style. Made from fabric, all Sophie's unique products are stitched with a homespun look, so that they have a homemade appearance but without the accompanying price tag. The current range includes natural motifs and creatures, including pigs, chickens, roosters and robins, as well as country-style patchwork designs. She will also create seasonal collections for Christmas and Easter, all in harmonious colours and with a soft, tactile finish for a homely feel.

She will offer her characterful and homely buys in quality independent gift shops, and online through companies that showcase country-style gifts and decorations, as well as through her own website. Her aim is to create a sustainable small business, run with integrity through ethical manufacture, continuity of quality and creativity in its products, marketing and place of purchase. *Sophie Made This*, 07584 810466, sophiemadethis.co.uk.

Sophie (above left) makes homespun gifts and accessories, such as these decorations.



What the judges said

The judges were impressed by Sophie's designs, which were beautifully made. They found them unusual and quirky, and admired the obvious talent of their maker. They commented that Sophie Made This would create a perfect small niche business.

The Next Stage Consultancy advises...

Identify your product USP to ensure the business stands out among others because this is a busy sector marketplace.
Identify where you want the business to position itself within the sector marketplace.
Examine options for scaling the business while retaining the individual nature of the products.
Assess the financial feasibility of the business: the cost of production time per item versus the sales cost of the product.



Vintage Style Hire Kate Fletcher

Kate lives with husband Jonathan and sons Angus, 12, and Toby, 10, in Thaxted, Essex. Kate has collected vintage items at flea markets, boot fairs and charity shops as well as from skips since she was young. She used to be employed in corporate event management and started working for herself in 2005, when she helped set up a wedding venue. She was asked to organise the wedding of Jimmy and Michaela Doherty of TV's Jimmy's Farm, and this led to the launch of her own wedding planning business.

The idea for Vintage Style Hire came about when Kate was looking for inspiration in her role as a wedding planner. She saw that in America many weddings involved a planner, stylist and vintage hire company. She had styled many of the weddings she'd planned with her collection of vintage pieces, and realised she had the skills and props to combine all these functions herself. Kate also realised she could hire out her extensive range of vintage props to others to use in styling receptions, guest book displays and outdoor seating areas, in order

to make the event unique. Vintage Style Hire also hires out vintage props and other items to wedding planners, stylists, photographers and shop owners so they can give their events, photo shoots and window displays style and originality.

Vintage Style Hire, 07875 667642, vintagestylehire.co.uk.

What the judges said

The judges saw that Kate is a talented stylist who takes found and recycled things and creates something beautiful with them. As vintage looks are very popular, they saw it as a great business opportunity. Kate has good contacts and the opportunity to use them to develop her business.

The Next Stage Consultancy advises...

Diversify the product range and service to build longevity into the business.

Set up partnering arrangements with other businesses in your sector, such as wedding photographers, to grow your business through cross-referrals.

Focus on building on the USP of the business, particularly within your niche sector, to ensure that your business is the one people buy from.

Provide examples of your services for customers within your branding.



Kate (top) hires out her vintage finds for brides and wedding planners to make the big day unique.



The Cotswold Gardening School Caroline Tatham

Caroline lives at historic Gossington Hall in Gossington, Gloucestershire, and is married to Mark, with children Adam, eight, and Emma, six. She launched her gardening school in October 2010, and spends about half of her time running this, combining it with looking after her children, running a garden design practice and renovating her nine acres of garden.

Caroline was inspired to launch the business by her own study at The English Gardening School. This allowed her to get back to work having been at home for four years with her children, which felt like a daunting prospect. She aims to share her lifelong love of gardens and gardening, and to offer people an opportunity to be creative, as well as to give them the confidence to begin a new chapter in their lives. She offers long courses, such as the 10-week design your own garden or the four-day gardening for beginners or professional planting; day courses, which include

container gardening and gardening with wildlife; and workshops, like making a Christmas wreath, at the school. All the courses take place in the Hall's former dairy buildings, which are located within a walled kitchen garden. The aim of the school is to offer quality learning in a fun, friendly and relaxed atmosphere, giving participants the opportunity to gain professional skills whatever their current level of experience. **The Cotswold Gardening School, 01453 899018, cotswoldgardeningsschool.co.uk.**

What the judges said

The judges were impressed by Caroline's business, which is on track to be successful,



Caroline (below right) holds gardening courses (below far right) in the old dairy buildings at her home in Gloucestershire.



and by the school's beautiful setting. They thought that it was important for her to define her school's unique selling point in order to stand out from the competition, and to create more sumptuous marketing material. They thought that creating appealing courses at a lower price point would be a good strategy for the future.

The Next Stage Consultancy advises...

Set up partnership arrangements with other local businesses, for example to offer accommodation.

Offer weekend and themed packages so that groups of friends can book together.

Utilise low-cost marketing opportunities to promote the business to a wider geographical audience.



Lucy Schmidt (below left) decorates pieces such as this solid oak chest and small wardrobe (left), which is painted as a beach hut.



her home, Lucy works part time in Topshop. Painting, researching and tracking down pieces to work on at recycling centres and car-boot sales takes up the rest of her time. The inspiration for Lucy's business came to her when she painted old furniture for a newly built cob and thatch house near to her home. She had the idea of turning discarded furniture into something new by hand painting it. She offers various designs, creates bespoke pieces – such as furniture for children's bedrooms and kitchen dressers – and revamps treasured pieces when her customers want to give them new life. As well as re-using old furniture, Lucy turns electrical cable reels into tables and light fittings. Her designs are aimed at customers who are environmentally conscious and want creative and unique objects, and her goal is that her art is functional and practical as well as admirable. Lucy's ambition is to grow the business so that she can employ other young artists. **Barnickle Furniture, 07912 482391, barnickle.co.uk.**



Barnickle Furniture
Lucy Schmidt

Lucy lives in Honiton in Devon. She graduated from the Central School of Speech and Drama at the University of London in 2010, having studied for a degree in scenic art, and lives at home with her parents and brother – who have supported the launch of her business and put up with the pots of paint and pieces of furniture! Alongside launching and running her business, which occupies studio space in a large barn at a farm a short drive from

What the judges said

The judges saw Lucy's great artistic talent, and loved the way in which she is doing something fun and unique. They were particularly impressed by the customised looks for children's rooms, and also the on-trend lettering and signage.

The Next Stage Consultancy advises...

Produce a catalogue of products to use to promote your products and commissions.

Use your website to promote your products, build your brand, and as a showcase for interested buyers. Make sure it includes an online version of your catalogue.

Use low-cost marketing opportunities, including through social media such as Facebook.

Establish relationships with other furniture makers and sellers both locally and nationally to grow your reputation and product awareness.



Angela (above) sells a selection of trees to give as lasting birthday, wedding and Christmas gifts.

Baby Roots
Angela Ward



Angela lives in Bardsey in West Yorkshire with her husband Andrew and children Nick, 23, William, 10, Maisie, seven, and Edward, four. Angela became a full-time mum when she had her third child and now combines running her business with looking after her family, planning to spend more hours on its development once her youngest is settled at school.

The inspiration for her business came about when the family had to move into rented accommodation while work was being done on their home. Angela had to move a box of Christening gifts when she cleared the space. She thought that if someone had given her an apple tree to celebrate the birth, it would always be on display and would grow with the child.

She launched the business selling rowan trees as Christening gifts because of the beneficial qualities folklore ascribes to the tree. The range now includes fruit trees – wild cherry, wild pear and crab apple – as well as the rowan, and blue spruce trees for Christmas. The trees are at least two years old, and around 60cm to 90cm tall, and are sent to recipients in a hessian bag with a gift card. It's important to Angela that her business offers an environmental take on gift giving: the tree should last a lifetime.

The trees are now popular for newborns and naming ceremonies, plus birthdays, anniversaries, housewarmings, Christmas gifts and as wedding gifts and favours. Angela sells through her website, gifts shops and craft fairs, and hopes to work through large chains as the business grows. **Baby Roots, 01937 579162, babyroots.co.uk.**

What the judges said

The judges were impressed by the Angela's marketing material, which makes it into a special gift. They thought that there was more opportunity to expand the business using the idea of gifting a tree to anyone rather than just on the birth of a baby.

The Next Stage Consultancy advises...

Review the message of the business name to ensure it is representing all of the products and themes on offer.

Take a look at the copy on the website to ensure it's promoting the business and generating sales.

Target appropriate outlets to increase sales and awareness of Baby Roots.

Promote the success of the business, for example through social media.

Debbie's dog Frankie in the Wiltshire hand-knitted jumper. Debbie's range also includes the Suffolk coat (far right) and Retro Red Floral dog bed (below right).



**Redhound
for Dogs**
Debbie Humphreys

Debbie lives in Totnes in Devon with husband David and whippets Frankie and Bruno. Debbie moved to Devon in 2008 and ran a shop selling British products, introducing buys for dogs as part of the mix. The dog products were doing so well, they began to take over the business, leading her to sell the shop and launch Redhound for Dogs on its own website in November 2010.

The business began when Debbie tried to find something to keep her dog Bruno warm. He suffers from alopecia, so is particularly prone to feel the cold, and she could only track down fleece coats or knitted jumpers that didn't fit well. Always a keen knitter, Debbie's solution was to

buy a knitting machine and make Bruno a jumper to fit perfectly, which looked stylish, too. The business now sells dog jumpers that are hand knitted to measure.

The range also includes waterproof wax dog coats, as well as machine-knitted coats and jumpers, dog collars, leads, dog beds, bowls and more. All the fabrics used are British, wool comes from Ireland, and leads and collars are made locally, as are dog treats. Debbie's aim is to sell practical buys that also look good, picking on-trend fabrics for the dog beds. The products are sold through local shops, at big country shows, and through her website. She hopes to develop the business to provide full-time employment for her husband, too, and to expand the customer base. *Redhound for Dogs, 01803 840480, redhoundfordogs.com.*

What the judges said

The judges loved the dog jumpers and thought the buys were a fantastic product.

The Next Stage Consultancy advises...

Undertake an assessment of the profit margins for the products to ascertain the feasibility of scaling up the business.

Investigate more cost-effective ways of producing the products while retaining their individual nature.

Use low-cost marketing such as social media to increase awareness of the brand.

Do market research: ask your customers what other products they would like to see.

For more information about The Next Stage Consultancy, call 07944 886598, thenextstageconsultancy.co.uk.