

Inside the CUBE

There's no doubting that Isy Galey has guts. The former nanny took an idea from thought process to fruition and with that started a movement which is giving artists across Australia the chance to build their brands from the ground up. Rachael Gavin charts her rise.

Coming up with the perfect name for any new business is always a dilemma. How can you come up with something original that encapsulates everything the company stands for? When Isy Galey first came up with her idea for a shop to support handmade artists by renting cubicles and sending back all money made, she knew its name needed to reflect her goal to make it a nurturing warm space. Add a symbolic number meaning continuity and you've really got something unique... in.cube8r.

"I wanted a small nurturing space and in the beginning everything was going to be in glass cubicles... Incubator is a small warm box where beautiful things grow so it's about a nurturing warm space," she says.

The concept was born when Galey realised she was never going to get back 100 per cent of what it cost to make her glass blowing projects if they were sold to galleries or retailers. She decided to use the Coles Myer concept which involves renting out a retail space and re-letting smaller sections. By taking it down to a microscopic level, Galey was able to lend her support to the handmade sector. Crafters are able to rent a cube, shelf or space from which to



sell their products. Leasing a space costs as little as \$21 for a minimum of three months.

It was a brave move that took the help of a private philanthropist to get started. Even with the financial support, the first store in Smith Street Melbourne opened in 2007 with only nine cubicles out of 100 filled. The initial result took quite an emotional toll on Galey.

"In the beginning it was terrifying. I had to explain to every customer why the shop was so empty. I lost 11 kilos and was pretty close to a nervous breakdown in the beginning because I had absolutely no idea, there was nothing else like it, so it was an untried model," she recalls.

"It felt like jumping out of a plane without a parachute. I really had no idea whether it would work and sometimes taking a huge gamble pays off but it did take an awful lot of courage to just do it."

She says the risk she took is something she'll never regret.

"To anyone wanting to try an idea out there, that was the main thing I said to myself, at the end of the day even if it fails, even if the whole thing goes belly up at least I know that I've tried."

"I wasn't one of these people that sat around, wishing, hoping, thinking about something. I went out there and I did it. Even if it all fell apart I would know at the end of the day that I gave it a red hot go and it's worked."

The hard work has paid off and then some. Within seven weeks of opening the store it was filled and she now has a waiting list of artisans who want to sell at her shop. It has also grown into a franchise with shops at Sydney and Brisbane and another in Melbourne soon to come.

"The only way that I could grow the business was by franchising because I have 92 artists of my own [and] I felt I needed to stay true to what I started. So I'm still running in.cube8r Smith Street,



but I got in a company who managed to franchise us.

"[Franchisees] have 10 days training with me at the beginning so I show them how to run the books, work with cube holders, how to introduce new contracts, but essentially it's their own business. I'm not here to control their businesses but I've proved a formula that works so we all follow the same structure."

in.cube8r's success can be measured by its passionate internet following. Google the term and you'll get more than 10,000 results. It's also popular with consumers because the cash they spend goes right back to the person who created the product.

"Customers love it because they know 100 per cent of what they buy goes back into the pockets of the maker rather than the pockets of a business owner.

"We have quite a large following and we've always got a long waiting list of people wanting to try cubes and spaces and we've been really well received by the craft world in general.

"There was a need for something different because all there was [only] wholesale consignment and commission based selling. There was nothing that offered a maker to get back 100 per cent what they made."

When it comes to the financial achievements of the store, Galey puts her money where her mouth is. She only pays herself a small weekly wage and puts the rest back into building her business.

"Pretty much 100 per cent of everything that comes back in, in terms of rental and now in terms of franchisees, goes back out again in terms of getting better software... just growing the name and the brand. Essentially the more I sell the more people stay with me, so the less paperwork I have to do and the happier everybody is," says Galey, who proudly explains the project has nothing to do with profits.

"This for me was never about money or finance. It was about supporting what I'm most passionate about and that's handmade. I wanted to be my own boss and grow something that had a future.

"I was a nanny for 20 years and every time the children grew up and went to school I had to start from scratch again so I wanted to do something that was long term and where I was in control of my own future."

Products sold in the store range from notebooks made from old vinyl records to belts and wallets created from used bike tyres. Galey says they've had practically "anything and everything handmade" including ceramics, jewellery, fabric and glass.

Though the products vary, their artists must have made them in Australia from Australian goods and Galey won't waver from this criteria. Not even parts of products can come from outside our shores.

"We are [completely] about being made inside Australia and being made by hand," she says adamantly.

"We don't accept components that have been bought from overseas or made in a sweatshop that have been put together, there has to be some kind of handmade element, be that a layer of resin or a layer of paint. That's what customers are looking for and we've found that things that look assembled just don't sell."

Prices range from as little as \$1 to \$500 with the makers given complete control over how much their items sell for. Originally Galey gave advice but now leaves it entirely up to the artisan because it's all part of the learning process of growing a business.

She says most of the feedback she gets from artists who sell at her store is positive.

"We find there are two types of people. There are the ones that are really hands on and they're in there trying things out all the time and trying new ideas, which is what we were built for. [Then] there are the other types where we see them once in three months and they kinda wonder why they haven't sold very much, but as much as you put in you get out of it."

Artists love selling their products in in.cube8r stores because of how well they are run. They are paid on the same day every single month without fail and can regularly check sales via an online inventory program. Also, products have never gone missing.

As to why in.cube8r is such a hit, Galey says it's part of a trend away from major retailers that gives artists the power unlike much of the industry.

"They have power and choice over their display, their price, the way the cube is set up, where they're located, which they don't have in a normal retailer."

The future looks bright for Galey and in.cube8r which has been nominated for New Enterprise Incentive Scheme and Business of the Year Awards for three years running. However, her goal is to have at least one store in every state and possibly even expand into New Zealand.

"I think it's very important to nurture what we have in Australia and... to keep nurturing that space and generating and keep being a platform for the talent we have.

"And the talent we have here is just incredible. You know the quality of product I've had through my doors is second to none and I've travelled the world many times and we have absolutely amazing handmade artists here in Australia." 🌸