



# MY BUSINESS RULES

Working directly with talented artisans in indigenous Argentinian communities, Victoria Aguirre's ethical soft furnishings business Pampa aims to preserve heritage and empower culture.

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With no prior business experience, it was simply a passion for her idea and a nostalgic longing for a connection to her homeland, Argentina, that drove professional photographer Victoria Aguirre to establish Pampa with her Australian partner, Carlyon (Carl) Wilson. Based in Byron Bay, Australia, and founded in 2013, Pampa was originally a 'project' rather than a business says owner and co-founder Victoria.

Having grown up recognising and appreciating the value of handcrafted products and the work of indigenous communities, Victoria's idea was to work with artisans in rural Argentina to introduce their craft to Australia via beautiful, well-made rugs

and cushions, providing the weavers a fair wage and empowering the communities in the process.

Within a very short time frame the Pampa project had turned into a burgeoning online business, with orders flying in from all around the world.

Today, Victoria's business sells rugs, cushions, baskets and other homewares as well as Carl and Victoria's fine art photography prints. They have employed Victoria's brother to manage the warehouse in Argentina, have full-time staff in Australia, a new bricks-and-mortar store, and support artisans living remotely who are weaving for Pampa.

At its core, Pampa has a strong focus on the product and how it is produced. The story around that has formed the brand and this, combined with the passion that goes into the integrity of the product, has led to its organic growth and global success.

A beautiful business with heart, here Victoria reflects on how Pampa has evolved and grown over the years and shares the rules that have guided her.



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## RULE ONE

### *Tell a story and be authentic*

Whatever you are selling or communicating, there has to be a story behind it and it has to be real and genuine.

All our collections have a deeply rooted sense of place and are named after the landscape where they were made. Pampa was created with a very strong aesthetic and we always knew that we wanted to represent our culture and heritage under fair trade practices. It could be a rug. It could be a basket, a throw or a cushion; it all comes from the same story and the same background. We have a really powerful marketing strategy based on our own beautiful photography. We communicate everything through our photos.

## RULE TWO

### *Believe in what you do and what you're representing*

Before starting a business, I believe it's important to discover what will make you thrive because you have an interest, love and devotion to it – not just because you want to have a business and make money from it.

## RULE THREE

### *Take the effort to do it your way*

The best decision we made was to work directly with communities instead of having a middleman. Even though travelling the long distances to regional parts of Argentina can be a nightmare, actually being with the weavers, face-to-face, instead of buying through someone else is important. It's important to us that we know where the money is going to end up and how the workers are going to get paid. Taking that road was the best decision by far. It was the most complicated one but it was the nicest one.

Many of the weavers don't have a reliable phone reception and none have email access. Orders are made via phone calls and drawings and hoping the reception is okay. It's all still very raw and remote, but we kind of like that. I think that's the special side of the brand. It drives us crazy most of the time but we love it as well.

And the communities are really happy about the relationship. For them it's a regular income and we've seen firsthand a lot of the positive changes – like their being able to buy a car, a motorcycle or send their kids to school.

## RULE FOUR

### *Find balance*

I believe working hard is one of the keys to success. However, now I see I did too many hours at first. I still do them now, but in the early days I was working Monday to Monday and I left my personal life behind. We got a dog a year ago that's helped us a lot through the stressful times – we stop work and take him for a walk or go for a swim with him.

It's also good to get together for coffee with other business owners. That's really helpful because you chat and you ask questions of each other. It's a useful learning experience.

At first, we did everything ourselves, but now we have two staff in our Australian office and my brother in Argentina. I used to go to Argentina three times a year before he started working with us.

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## RULE FIVE

### *Embrace community and collaboration*

When we moved to Byron Bay from the Gold Coast, our business did a complete U-turn. The community here is very supportive and there are a lot of creative people. We had some good collaborations early on that helped us put the brand on the right path. This led to international orders and some decent stores representing our rugs. It made us realise we were doing something right. ■

