

Our BUSINESSES do well by DOING GOOD!

Three women tell Fiona Wright how their passion for environmentally friendly, ethical products have given them successful businesses that give back

BIG SUCCESS STORY

'I make luxury bags from recycled fire hose and donate to The Fire Fighters Charity'



Wash bags made from genuine decommissioned fire hose

KRESSE WESLING MBE, 40, is founder of Elvis & Kresse, a sustainable business making luxury bags and goods from decommissioned fire hose. She donates 50 per cent of her profits to The Fire Fighters Charity.

+ THE IDEA I have a background in finance and venture capital, but I had a keen interest in sustainability and had left to set up a small biodegradable packaging company. I'd gone on an environmental management course to improve the impact my company had on the environment. I met officers from the London Fire Brigade who were also taking the course and got talking to them. They mentioned that the hoses they used go to landfill because of the nylon core, so when they start to leak, it went to landfill. I was horrified and asked if I could go and have a look. The hose is such a

gorgeous rich, red colour, and it's incredibly tactile. I couldn't believe these huge, beautiful coils would be thrown away. I asked if I could have some, and ended up staggering back home on my bike with 40 kilos worth. My next challenge was what to do with them. At first, I thought they would make fantastic roof tiles, but I discovered when they dry out, they crack and break. I did a lot of research on niche waste products, and stumbled on a report which said that very few high-end luxe companies achieve ethical environmental performance targets. That was my light bulb moment – gorgeous products made of hose rubber. My first product was a belt that my partner, Elvis, made out of the rubber when his broke. He bought a sewing machine and taught himself how to sew, and made me a simple handbag. Friends and family absolutely loved what we made. I knew it was a winner.

+ MAKING IT HAPPEN I sketched a few designs and set about trying to find a factory that would make what I wanted. We tried all over Europe but no one could do it, and certainly not in the tiny numbers that I needed to kick-start the business. In the end, I managed to find a family-run factory in Romania that could turn the hose into workable material and apply high-end production values to my designs. I loved that lots of the hose had scuffs and lettering on it, which gave it provenance and an indication that my bags and belts once fought fires and saved lives. I had the buckles and studs made from brass, pewter or steel, and the linings and dustbags are made from orange recycled parachute silk, which I found online. I did a social media campaign and managed to pre-sell orders six months in advance to high-end boutiques. We billed ourselves as a social enterprise and fully sustainable company using skilled craftsmen, paying them well.

+ HIGHS We'd begun to get attention in the press and garner awards, such as the HSBC Start-up Stars Green Award, the Shell Entrepreneurial Woman of the Future and the Cartier Women's Initiative award. In 2009, American *Vogue* called us and asked for samples. I said no, because we didn't have a marketing budget, not really



Kresse with the beautiful bags she creates from discarded fire hose

The hard-wearing hose is perfect for a sturdy weekend bag

"My bags and belts once fought fires and saved lives"

understanding the full impact of what being in *Vogue* would mean. To cut a long story short, famous photographer Mario Testino ended up shooting Cameron Diaz in one of our belts and putting her on the cover. The magazine branded us "the future of luxury" and after that, everything went bonkers and our website nearly crashed from the number of sales. In 2013, I was asked if I would accept an MBE for services to corporate social responsibility. Meeting the Queen was amazing and she actually said thank you for our work, which really touched me.

+ LOWS In 2010 the Romanian factory we used were offered a more lucrative contract and, without warning, just stopped producing our products. It was very tough. We'd always been very fair and loyal to them but we learned the hard way that no matter what your values and morals are, not everyone will share them. Our alternative was to actually buy a factory in the UK to manufacture so we sold our flat to do that but the deal fell through at the last minute. Keeping the business going nearly killed us, but we gritted our teeth, found a temporary site, moved in with friends and kept going.

+ WHERE I AM NOW We now work out of a stunning mill in Kent with a staff of 12, which will grow to 15 by the end of the year. We give 50 per cent of our profits to The Fire Fighters Charity. We sell the majority of our products through the website, which is more profitable for us, but we're stocked by 18 retail luxury outlets around the world.

TIP Do your research about profit margins, costings, and logistics while you're still employed. It'll save you time and money later. >>

BUSINESS IN FIGURES

Launched: 2007
Start-up costs: £300
Turnover: £300,000-£400,000
Website: elvisandkresse.com

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

Website: £100
Equipment: £140
Sundries: £60

“I thought of it as a hobby – when I sold out I got a real buzz”



The relish range now also includes ketchups

THE WORK IN PROGRESS

‘My chutneys are made from unwanted fresh fruit and vegetables’

JENNY DAWSON, 32, is founder of Rubies in the Rubble, making chutneys and ketchups from unwanted fruit and vegetables, which would go to landfill.

+ **THE IDEA** I was working as an analyst for a hedge fund company. One evening, about seven years ago, I read an article about how we waste tonnes of food each year. I was so struck by the enormous numbers, the next morning, I went to New Covent Garden Market to see it for myself. It was staggering to see just how much fruit and veg is thrown away, often just because it’s not quite the right shape, as well as the vagaries of supply and demand. I was so incensed, I started doing research on what could be done to cut down. I realised cooking and preserving it would be one way. I went back to the market a few days later and asked if I could buy any veg that would be going to waste. I was sold a big pallet of Kenyan mange touts for about 20p, some squashy tomatoes and apples and pears. I made some chutneys and sourced free

glass jars from local restaurants. I filled about 100 and sold them at a local market called Cabbages & Frocks. I thought of it as a hobby but when I sold out on the first day, making about £100, it gave me a real buzz, so I decided to do it again. Weeks turned into months and I became hooked.

+ **COULD IT BE A BUSINESS?**

I resigned from my job in September 2011 and thought I’d give myself six months to make a go of it. I’d scraped savings together and moved into a friend’s spare room. I sourced large catering pans and borrowed kitchen space in restaurants. I had no free time or social life but just chutney, developing recipes according to seasonal produce. I started with apple chutney and rhubarb and ginger, and stocked a stall at Borough Market, London. I then moved to a purpose-built mobile kitchen in east London, and got a second stall. I employed two to three people on a part-time basis, and I partnered up with a friend who shares my vision for socially-oriented business.

BUSINESS IN FIGURES

Launched: 2010
Start-up costs: £500
Turnover: £2 million
Website: rubiesintherubble.com

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

Market stall rent: £200
Kitchen supplies: £60
Sundries: £240

+ **WHAT FINALLY WORKED** In 2012, we won Ben & Jerry’s Join Our Core competition, for best young sustainable business. Then in 2014, we won the Veuve Clicquot New Generation Award. This bought us to the attention of Waitrose, Fortnum & Mason and Selfridges and was the start of a period of rapid growth for us. We made the leap to deal direct with farmers and we also needed to move to proper manufacturing premises. We also won £150,000 of investment from Mustard Seed.

+ **BREAKTHROUGH MOMENTS** There were three. When Fortnum & Mason agreed to stock us in 2012; then Waitrose took us on a few months later, which was a huge boost to our confidence. Also, we sent a selection to Buckingham Palace addressed to the Queen and received a letter back from one of her household staff saying she’d really enjoyed them.

+ **WHERE I AM NOW** There are three of us working full-time on the business. We’d like to expand into the overseas market, and we’re also working on developing pickles and ketchups.

TIP Learn to let go of ideas that aren’t happening, no matter how much you love them.

THE BRAND NEW START-UP

‘I wanted to create beautiful clothes while helping the women that sew them’

MOLLY RUSSELL, 39, is founder of Pink City Prints, a fashion company that uses natural fabrics and traditional print and dyeing methods while supporting a women’s cooperative in Jaipur, India.

+ **THE IDEA** I was a primary school teacher which I enjoyed but, after years of teaching, I longed to travel, so with savings, I gave myself a six-month sabbatical to go to India. I wasn’t looking to start a business at all, but I was so blown away by the amazing prints and fabrics in many of the shops and markets over there, particularly in Jaipur, I couldn’t help myself. All the fabrics are locally sourced cotton or silk and decorated using traditional Indian methods, such as block-printing, Indigo dyeing, and hand embroidery. It’s all completely natural with very little waste and this really appealed to me. I bought lengths of gorgeous, brightly coloured fabrics and, over a few days, sketched a few dress designs and had them made up. It’s relatively easy to do this quickly and cheaply in Jaipur, dubbed “the Pink City” because so many of the buildings are painted pink, without ordering in bulk. I have a background in

art and sculpture, so used my skills to design a collection, including tops and shorts. I still didn’t have a plan, I just got carried away with the can-do attitude of the people there, their enthusiasm and their skill at putting my designs together so quickly. I ended up having about 60 pieces shipped back to the UK, with the intention of selling them to family and friends, and came up with the name Pink City Prints to reflect their origin.

+ **NATURAL ENTREPRENEUR?** Not at all! I’m still feeling my way and on a very steep learning curve. I managed to sell all of my 60 pieces very quickly, which whetted my appetite and I immediately ordered about 500 more. But I very nearly gave it all up when I became embroiled in the tougher aspects of the business, such as re-ordering, shipping and distribution, which was very frustrating and complicated. I had a few tricky moments with things getting delayed and the wrong stock arriving. I didn’t have any capital set aside so bootstrapping was a big part of starting the business. I created a website on Squarespace for direct selling, had a market stall in Hackney, east London, and did loads of social media. I couldn’t afford a photo shoot, but on holiday in Greece, I took photos of a friend wearing my designs. I didn’t intend it to be a formal shoot, but the photos were stunning and really worked, and so I used them as publicity shots and got picked up in the press.

BUSINESS IN FIGURES

Launched: 2016
Start-up costs: £5000
Turnover: £60,000-£90,000
Website: pinkcityprints.com

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

Materials and labour: £2,000
Shipping: £2,000
Research and marketing: £500
Sundries: £500



“I was blown away by the amazing prints and fabrics in Jaipur”

new directions

+ **NEXT STEP** A friend who owned a boutique offered to help me sell my clothes. And when she sold out, it dawned on me that this was something I could really develop. I went back to India and stumbled across a women’s working cooperative, which helps them to be independent and support themselves after being in abusive marriages or exploited by ruthless bosses, and together we started to develop larger orders, including accessories. It’s only in the last few months that I’ve stopped thinking about this as a hobby and realised it is a proper business.

+ **WHERE I AM NOW** I’ve recently been able to give up teaching and draw a salary. I’m still a one-man band and it’s very early days, but I’ve had interest from top fashion brands. My clothes are stocked in 16 exclusive boutiques across the world. I was also named as one of Refinery 29’s top sustainable brands.

+ **LOOKING AHEAD** I just want to keep growing the brand and looking at ways I can keep producing clothes ethically and sustainably, and supporting my amazing artisan workers in India, and help them become more financially independent.

TIP Make sure your passion for your business can override tough times. It’s tempting to give it all up when admin and logistics outweigh the creative bits. **w&h**



Molly’s ethically hand-made designs



The handloom fabric is made by a women’s co-op in central India