

I started with nothing

HOW I MADE MY FIRST MILLION

By KERRIE DAVIES

Sometimes, it is the greatest challenges that lead to unimaginable success because they force risk and innovation. Twenty years ago, Julia Ross was pregnant, single and jobless, having just left the company she worked for because she disliked her boss.

Knowing her pregnancy wouldn't make her a stellar candidate for another position, the human resources expert instead began her own business.

"I only wanted to be able to give my baby a secure future and education," Ross says today, sitting in her Ross Human Direction boardroom.

"I started off with nothing and I sold everything I had to raise capital. I advertised for candidates in the newspaper and went through the phone book for clients, found out who to talk to and went after them."

As she expanded with her pregnancy, so did her second baby — her company. Within a year, she made her first million dollars and got an apartment in the city, to help her juggle breastfeeding with her business as it faced the looming recession.

Characteristically, Ross rallied by thinking creatively: "I thought: why would a client come to us, rather than a competitor? So I began with value-adds. I started our breakfast temp program, where we have temps ready for work in our branches every morning so, if a client calls, they can be there right away instead of having to wait for someone to get ready for work and travel in. We give the temps breakfast while they wait and the majority are working that day."

Another innovation was what she calls "the Ross experience". She cheerfully admits it was over the top in the beginning, but desperate times called for dramatic measures: "I thought, in a recession, everyone is insecure and worried. So I wanted our brand to be associated with fun and happiness. I had singing receptionists and we sent pantomime horses, with gifts in their mouths, on Melbourne Cup Day. Our Pitt St office had an operatic receptionist, so people called her with requests. Twenty years ago, stunts like that were quite new.

"Competitors couldn't understand, but our brand became known for confidence and success. We were remembered. It was addictive and I guess Richard Branson was doing the same thing on the other side of the world. He's more successful than me, but then it depends on how you judge your success."

In the 1990s, the company won some lucrative government employment tenders.

By 2000, the economy was booming again — and so was Julia Ross. She was turning over \$200 million as a sole operator, 11 years after launching the company.

"While it was very satisfying, making my first million, I don't think I understood how successful we were until later," Ross reflects. "I don't think I realised what I achieved until the company floated on the stock exchange. That was a heady time."



Driven to be the best: Human resources specialist Julia Ross

Picture: Frank Violi

It was, also, arguably the most stressful time of Julia Ross's career. She floated the company to satisfy her own needs — to share the responsibility of her financial success — and to add to the company's prestige, credibility and visibility, although she says frankly that visibility has its downside.

"You are under the microscope," Ross considers, "and bad news can have a life of its own. When you are private, if you are having a bad year, you are the only one who has to know. But I'm proud of the company and you learn it is cyclical. You can't deliver good results year-on-year. So that's part of the equation. I do what is best for the company, even though, as a public company, everyone wants short-term results."

The build-up to the launch was exhausting. As well as the hours spent on due diligence to get the

company ready for public listing, Ross did back-to-back pitches to sell stock knowing that, if she didn't get the buyers in, the float would fail. Like her childbirth, Ross jokes you don't know what it's like until you go through it. And while her son was supportive of his hard-working mother, her boyfriend still had stereotypical perceptions of her role as a woman.

"I came home one night and he said, 'There's no milk in the fridge.' Needless to say, we aren't together any more," she says.

Just before they were due to launch, the tech crash hit and scuttled all floats, including Ross's: "We'd told everyone we were floating — staff, clients — and then we had to say we were postponing. I rang around for advice on what I should do. We finally got to market in the September. And the day of the float

was when it really hit me what I'd done. It was scary. I gained and lost millions in one day."

Perspective came from her personal life. Around the same time as the float, Julia's two elder sisters died from cancer in the UK: "I am the youngest of eight in a working class family from northern England. It doesn't get much tougher. Their deaths taught me that, despite all the millions I made on the float, I couldn't help my sisters."

Julia later soul-searched about what she wanted from life, especially when she felt confronted by confusion about how she wanted to live. She recalls buying a Bentley car, only to sell it because she felt uncomfortable driving it.

"My friend was a mum-of-four at home, but she was going through an identical feeling and age. Even though we were differ-

GOLDEN RULES

JULIA ROSS

Ross Human Directions

Staff: 500

Revenue: \$400m+

1. Listen to your instincts and believe in yourself
2. Be innovative
3. Employ great people
4. Be the best, not the biggest
5. Don't run out of cash

ent situations, we came to the same place at the same time," Ross recalls.

"She gave me a book, *The Seat Of The Soul* (by Gary Zukav) that helped. I took a deep look. I'm not money-orientated any more. I don't say, 'I wish I could buy that', any more. Before, I wanted to get somewhere else."

Arguably, Ross deserves to be satisfied with where she is now. She is still driven by the need to be the best company, rather than the biggest, and friends and staff laugh when she ponders working a few less hours. Her board assists her in making decisions, although she notes it is sometimes frustrating for a person like herself, who is entrepreneurial and instinctive, to report so extensively to other people.

In the current environment, she is watchful of the downturn but — so far — believes Australia's employment market is healthy compared to what her branches in the UK are reporting. Dublin, especially, is seeing a lot of people who have lost their jobs and are seeking employment, via recruitment companies such as Ross's. Here, she's also monitoring the debate over extending paid maternity leave.

"I'm the first person to support more maternity leave but, in this difficult market, you don't want the situation where women are disadvantaged because employers fear the prospect of future costs," she notes.

She travels extensively to Europe for work and to see family, often stopping over in Hong Kong for the buzz and shopping. She shares her love of art with son James, now a contemporary artist. She goes home to her harbourside mansion, Villa del Mare, which she bought in 2004 for \$21 million, and cooks dinner for James and her niece, takes her dog Atka for a walk and feeds the cats.

"There's no staff when I'm home in the evenings and weekends," Ross shrugs. "People are surprised when I say that. It's a proper home."

"At some stage, you have to say, 'I've achieved all this.' Now, why do I do it? I still enjoy it. I like building the business. While I'm not going to work until I drop, I've no plans to sell or retire. And I have fun. It's important to remain light-hearted."

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