

Renée has made very deliberate financial decisions about the way she operates and is not a shop-front retailer. "Our perfumes can be bought online through our website, www.renee.com.au, and I market the product to distributors myself. I have to trust my representatives; this is especially hard for me since most of my success has been international. By the end of this year we will be exporting to five overseas markets. Australian women are still testing my fragrances, but I think most women want more than the celebrity fragrances and global brands we are currently being offered."

Expert advice

Michael Blomfield, the Commonwealth Bank's executive general manager for local business banking, is a small business expert. "There are questions you need to ask yourself before you open a business," he says. "Be clear about why you want to change your situation. Are you looking for more money? A different lifestyle? Is being your own boss the driving force? Whatever the reason, be realistic; if you are looking for a better work/life balance, don't open a café."

"Like Renée, it's also a good idea to open a business that interests you, and can keep you interested in something more than making money. Don't open a business because you hate your job," he advises. Michael believes Renée has an unusual business model. "Renée has created an environment where she can spend a lot of time marketing her products, because she kept it simple," says Michael. "She is selling a product which is attractive in today's climate of globalisation. If you are going to use the internet to do business, concentrate on the payment end of things and make it easy and safe for people to buy your product. PayPal is a good option. You also need to look at distribution opportunities, such as eBay, and investigate how to make search engines work for you."

Petula Martin and Hugh Cowan

Snack food company, Health Attack, is owned and operated by husband and wife, Hugh Cowan and Petula Martin. "As naturopaths, we've always been interested in the physiological and emotional effects of food, particularly when it comes to children," says Petula. "What you put into still-forming bodies is really important."

Their company imports and distributes the brands Annie's Fruit Bars and Mrs May's, and they're proud to promote their products. "Our snacks are a legitimate and honest attempt at providing nutritious, as well as delicious, snacks," says Hugh. "To make products more affordable, they are often crammed with fillers and additives, whereas our products are made using only top-quality, wholesome ingredients."

explains Hugh. "The stores have a set mark-up they want to achieve and we are constantly pressured to meet this; but with the kind of products we distribute, the cost of the key ingredients is high and we don't want to change this. We would like to move towards educating as well as distributing, so the customers understand what they're buying and why some products will be more expensive than others."

Petula and Hugh are in the enviable position of running a business they are both passionate about, but they have encountered some stumbling blocks along the way. "It's given us great flexibility in our personal lives, but at times we have had the wind knocked out of us," says Hugh.

"We got into the business because we believed in the products and we are still here, still committed" – Hugh Cowan

Hugh and Petula have been involved in their business at every level, from packing and merchandising to making the deliveries themselves and keeping on top of the paperwork. Their business model has evolved as their market has grown. "We now distribute Annie's Fruit Bars nationally through Woolworths. This has been a steep learning curve. Not just for us – it has also changed Annie's as a company as well," explains Hugh.

The new contract required Annie's, a family-owned business, to build a new factory in order to meet the higher demand, and for Health Attack to revise the design, packaging and price of the product. "It took almost two years to build the new factory and even then we had to roll the product out state by state; we finally went national in 2006," recalls Hugh. "We now carry a large amount of stock to meet the demands of the supermarkets which, of course, affects cash flow."

Health Attack is under constant pressure to meet the pricing demands of supermarkets and stores that sell their products. "It's all about the mark-up,"

"Working together can be really difficult; there is a tendency to never switch off, but we got into the business because we believed in the products and we are still here, still committed."

Expert advice

"There is no business without passion and commitment," says Michael. "Think about whether you can improve on what is already being offered. Like Hugh and Petula, can you offer something different? And if you are going to open a business in a competitive market, ensure you do it better than everyone else."

"With a business such as Health Attack, it's about being as efficient as possible – carry the right amount of stock and have as little wastage as possible. Importing goods is a challenge for a small business, so ensure your systems are streamlined and you can work to tight deadlines."

"Businesses are not that different from personal relationships; you need to make sure everyone is clear on the nature of their involvement. If you face a hard decision, you need to get the rules out."