

> MY OWN BUSINESS

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA LAWN

Celia Lindsell, 46, runs a lifestyle brand, designing a range of lavender bags and oils, clothes, scarves and pillows made from Eco Possum fur. Originally from London, Celia now lives in Uzès in the south of France.



mid-1800s, are recognised by the The World Conservation Unions, the New Zealand government and many other ecological groups as a serious threat to the country's biodiversity and a major ecological catastrophe. Faced with massive destruction of its huge forested areas, New Zealand is providing a sustainable solution; the humane reduction of the Australian Possum is the only way to resolve this urgent ecological crisis.

Who are your customers?

I have customers here and in the UK, so I design for both markets. The French love what I do and come into the shop and say it's very English, and the English like anything that has a French touch! It's been really well received. Uzès is a small town; it's a huge compliment to me that everyone likes it. The French have a great appreciation of well-made things; it's never the price of something that puts them off. They really appreciate the work that goes into it. In England, people are more driven by budget. The website is constantly in development and I put everything in euros and in pounds.

How do you market the business?

Through the website and through Travelling Souk which runs fairs in big country houses. I tend to do eight sales in the UK, from Dorset to Scotland, prior to Christmas. It helps to make people aware of the products as, although it's great to have a website, generally people want to see the products first. Travelling Souk charges you for the stand at each fair and then 10 percent of your turnover goes to charity. In France, there are sales and Christmas fairs in chateaux; I might do that next year. Coté Sud also has a salon in the south of France which is open to the public and wholesalers so I'm looking at exhibiting there, too. I used to hold soirées privées at the shop and will continue to do so in the new one. I send out invitations to launches of new ranges or collections. There's something to eat and drink, there's music playing and people can have a look at the collection. It's nice and it helps to create a customer relationship. I think you have to be proactive especially as it is not an easy time for businesses.

ago. At the moment it's closed as we're relocating to a bigger and more central location in Uzès, and it will be running again at Easter.

How did you set it up?

I'm registered as an auto-entrepreneur, which is a brilliant system - it's so easy to register, I did it online. There is a cap on the turnover [€81,500 for 2011] so at some point I might have to change but it's a great system to get you off the ground. I come under the 'sell goods' section. To find the lavender, a friend told me about the southern slopes of Mont Ventoux. The best lavender grows at high altitude - it likes the extremes of heat in summer and freezing cold in winter! I went up there and knocked on the doors of the farms and came across a family who'd farmed lavender for years. I struck up a relationship with them and they've been supplying my lavender ever since. The farm is actually the last building before the summit. I also sell lavender oil which I get from a neighbouring farm. Two factories in Nîmes, ateliers protégés for disabled people, make the lavender bags. Clothing is made in both France and India using cottons, linens, silk and wool. And opossum fur is incredibly soft and silky. I chose to use the fur as opossums, introduced by European colonists in New Zealand in the

Why move to France?

When I met my husband, his family had a holiday home in the south of France. We fell in love with the area and moved some years later. I've lived in France on-and-off for ten years and permanently for the past five. When I first came to France, it was to sculpt, and I held many exhibitions. I then decided to start my own product range. I used to live in London and I have always worked in luxury retail, especially on Bond Street! I had a window-designing business, and designed the windows for Tiffany's and Chanel. I had run the business with a partner for six years and it was a lot of work and often at night. I decided to sell it to my partner.

Why did you decide to set up a business in France?

It has always been a desire of mine to create my own product range as I felt I had enough creativity for it, but I had no idea it would be in France! My product range actually began with the lavender in my garden! I found that the lavender products here were mean in quantity and out-of-date, so I decided to make a modern lavender range. I also design clothes, and I think my inspiration comes from having travelled a lot. I had a love of retail and wanted to do it myself. I opened the shop four years

What do you do for insurance and accounting?

Accounting is incredibly easy - I can do it! You just need to keep a record. But if the business grows, it might get to the stage where I'll need an accountant. For insurance, I have a policy with AXA. As an auto-entrepreneur, if you're selling, you pay 12.9 percent tax on your turnover.

What were the overall set-up costs?

The overall set-up costs were in the region of €18,000. I found the shop by going round Uzès and looking at the empty shops! I got the number of the landlord for one I liked and haggled over the price! It wasn't massively expensive as at first I wanted to test the waters. Now I know it's working, I'm going for a better location.

Did you have any difficulties setting it up?

No, no difficulties but I was terrified as the reputation of setting up a business in France can put people off! I've learned as I've gone along and through trial and error. Whilst the creative side came quite naturally, it was a massive learning curve to get involved with the production side, to organise fabric and lavender suppliers, but I've found that the factories I work with have serious business people who stick to deadlines and tell you if something's not possible. I find that it is busiest in the summer season, starting at Easter and running until the end of September, and then Christmas and New Year are also busy. From October to February it's very quiet in the south of France. It's very much a summer season but I have the website all year round. It's something every retailer in the south of France has to contend with.

What are the day to day issues of running the business?

I'm a sort of one-man band! There's a huge amount to do, so it's a question of juggling. There are the accounts, the factories, the suppliers and the shop. I've learned to delegate when it gets too much. I don't have staff but I know some great people, auto-entrepreneurs, who can help me out when I need them. The first thing I do is to look on the internet to check if any orders have come in. I also update the site and send emails. My day always involves a car trip, either picking up or delivering something. And when the shop was open, it was running that, too. But it's good, it's all fun! My dream would be to open a shop in Paris, but that's a whole other big leap. It would be fantastic to open more shops and reach further audiences.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to set up a similar business?

Run with your instinct. If you have any feeling that it's wrong, it most likely is. You often know the answer to something, so run with it. www.celialindsell.com **TFP**

FACT FILE

USEFUL WEBSITES

The Travelling Souk: www.thetravellingsouk.com
Cote Sud salons: www.vivrecotesud.fr

TRANSLATOR:

Factory employing disabled workers = *Atelier protégé*
Supplier = *Fournisseur*
Factory = *Usine*
To go with your instinct = *se fier à son instinct/ se laisser guider par son instinct/ suivre son instinct*
To test the waters = *tâter le terrain*

THE M-WORD

Marketing advice from Suzie Larcombe

Q 'Do you have any suggestions for making my website just a little bit different?'

A **The M-word response:** You haven't given me your website address, so I haven't been able to see what's already on your site but one idea I'd suggest you consider is adding video. Adding video to a website is not as complicated as it might seem and can be really effective.

Years ago, adding video to a small business website was pretty much unthinkable due to the cost. Today, there are companies offering professional video services at really attractive rates and there's always the 'do it yourself' option. The option you choose will depend on your business, your budget, the equipment and skills you have at your disposal and what you hope to achieve.

When it comes to marketing, video can be a great way to get your personality and business offering over to your potential customers. It can also be a great way to stand out from your competitors. A word of warning though...be careful to plan your video project carefully, otherwise you could end up scaring your site visitors off! Think carefully about what you want the video to do for your business. You may decide upon a 'how to' video; or an entertaining video; or you might plump for something purely informative: either way remember it has to add value to your business offering. Plan your project carefully and test it out on trusted contacts or even better existing customers before launching it on the world wide web.

One final thought - don't forget that YouTube is a great way of hosting your video and might even get you in front of a whole new audience at the same time!

Suzie Larcombe is author of 'The missing link?' and joint director of www.LimeGray.com - the small rural business development agency with the big city feel. Contact Suzie directly at: suzie@limegray.com or tel 05 62 69 74 99.

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<p>RENNES Wed 2nd Mar Hotel Mercure Rennes Centre Gare 10.30 for 11am until 12.30pm</p>	<p>CARCASSONNE Wed 9th Mar Hotel Le Domaine d'Auriac 10.30 for 11am until 12.30pm</p>	<p>BERGERAC Fri 11th Mar Château des Vigiers, Monestier 10.30am until 12 noon</p> <p><small>* limited spaces available, advance booking required</small></p>	<p>LA GRANDE MOTTE Tue 15th Mar The Thalasso Méditerranée La Grande Motte 10.30 for 11am until 12.30pm</p>	<p>CANNES Thur 17th Mar Hotel Martinez 10 for 10.30am until 12 noon</p>
<p>PORT DE CAP D'AIL Fri 18th Mar The Riviera Marriott Hotel 10 for 10.30am until 12 noon</p>				

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