

FROM THE SHARP END

Older and wiser

Jane Cleal, of Williams & Cleal, in Taunton, Somerset, looks at the lessons she's learned after 11 years of building up the business with her partner

As I prepared to write this article about my own experiences and the practical realities of setting up and running a business designing and making commissioned furniture, I was struck by two things. One – yes it is true that hindsight is a wonderful thing, and two – even though I consider myself to be young – 34 for those of you trying to guess – equally I do feel, after 11 years in business, surprisingly old and wise on this subject.

We established our business in 1990 and, as youngsters, were able to access the excellent Prince's Youth Business Trust for a low interest loan and support in producing a "realistic and honest" business plan, which proved to be just as important as the cash.

Romantic ideals

Looking back, I guess you could say that initially my partner Justin and I were swept away with a romantic idea of designing and making furniture. Herein lies my first observation. You must thoroughly analyse the reasons for wanting to establish a business. Clearly, in isolation, this reason was not enough, as such an aim could be achieved by working for others or designing and making as a hobby.

Fortunately, though, we also possessed the desire to be our own bosses, and were extremely ambitious to succeed both financially and creatively. Unwittingly, I am already beginning to sound like a textbook – you must have heard hundreds of similar statements!



Jane Cleal and Justin Williams trained together at Buckinghamshire College and have worked in partnership since 1990. Their furniture, which is mostly for private clients, is designed by Jane and made by Justin. They use European and North American hardwoods, paying particular attention to sustainable resources

from the sharp end

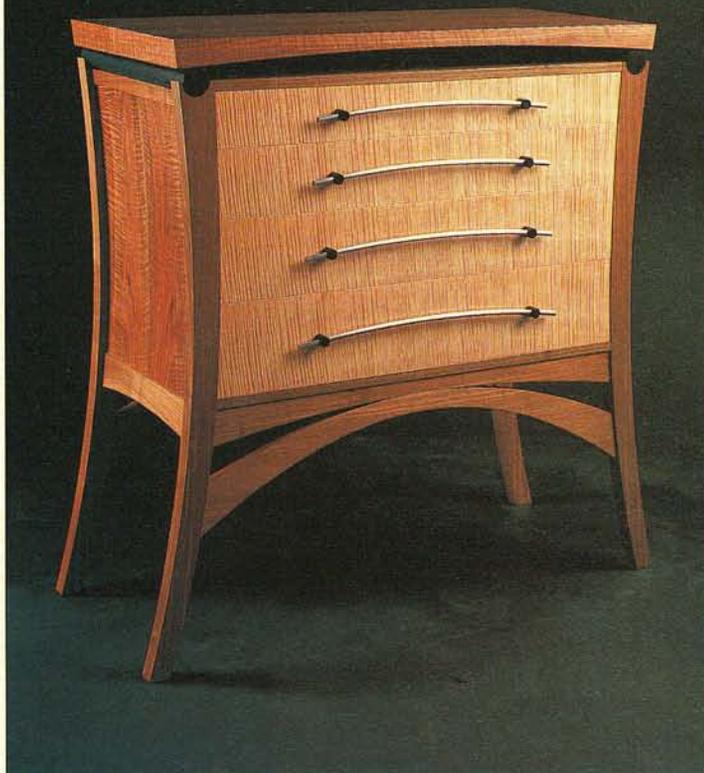
Essential advice

Let me try therefore to convey my insight, through a list of ten further observations which I feel, although extremely subjective, will stand up as good advice.

- Work for the top names before establishing your own business
- From day one start as you mean to go on
- Work out the figures and establish realistic hourly rates and costing procedures
- Devote a substantial amount of time to selling and marketing
- Get the balance right between prestige and earning a living
- Realise your strengths and learn to delegate
- Do not let your business take over your whole life
- Develop and maintain strategic and operational objectives
- Don't be frightened of change
- Above all – enjoy what you do

So which of these points did we include in our planning, which were hard lessons to learn and which in fact do we actually achieve? To put them in context, let me continue the story.

I first worked for Alan Peters OBE, where I gained valuable experience. I had seen the workings of a successful business and as a maker had increased my skills and perception of quality! ➤



Distinctive chest of drawers in English walnut and rippled sycamore, with ebony detailing and stainless steel handles



Next on the menu – the dining chair, left, is in rippled sycamore with steamed pear detailing and suede seat, while the other is in steamed pear with ebony detailing and suede seat



Side table in macassar ebony with a burr elm top

◀ Next – start as you mean to go on. Don't listen to those who tell you that you if you haven't got the reputation, exposure or client list you can't charge realistic prices or invest money in equipment, and so on. If your work is good then it is good! We initially took the wrong advice. Having attracted customers who were used to one pricing strategy we initially lacked the confidence to charge more. Many never climb out of this trap. Similarly, if you work out a low hourly rate or base it on an unrealistically long working week, when will you devote valuable time to other aspects of the business? Personally I would rather secure and produce half the amount of work for double the price than vice versa. Apparently the textbooks suggest you should lose 30-40 per cent of your potential orders if your pricing is accurate.

Aiming high

From day one, however, we were single-minded about one thing and that was the work we produced. We were very quick to realise that if we felt our furniture was of a high standard then our business should reflect this. I cannot stress how important all aspects of marketing have been for us.

Next, consider the balance between prestige and earning a good living – a topic close to my heart. The ideal is obviously achieving one through the other. Coupled with this we also need to consider the definition of success. Is it gaining the respect of your peers through exhibitions and publications, or is it never producing anything other than one-off contemporary furniture, gaining creative fulfilment by only undertaking jobs that interest or challenge you? Or is it ending up with 10 employees and a large workshop or is it purely making money. Clearly the answer depends on the individual.

Getting carried away

I have to admit that originally the sole motivator was producing well-designed and well-made furniture, often at the expense of money. I would design a piece, which exceeded the

customer's budget and expectations, and produce it, purely because I was swept away in the excitement of seeing the finished creation. If success, then, was based only on personal creative fulfilment, our first years were easy.

I have since learnt that if you spend time nurturing all aspects of the business you can pretty much achieve what you want to. Having started by only producing one-off commissions, we now pursue a much wider portfolio of work. Although one-offs still constitute the bulk of our work, we now also produce small batch items, work with interior designers and architects, produce fitted interiors and even undertake sub-contract work. I personally enjoy the variety. Some might say that the work now could be diluted and lacking in focus. I would argue that as long as you stay true to your original goal, which in our case was producing work of the highest quality, your business becomes far more stimulating and – as we've proved in recent years – more profitable.

Don't be frightened of change and above all – enjoy what you do. I'm not trying to claim that problems have never occurred. Originally we had no house, savings or rich aunts, so financially we have always struggled, but we do now feel an overall sense of achievement.

Lucky together

Finally, on a personal level I feel we have been spoilt in terms of our unique business relationship, which has been key to our success. Partners, in every sense of the word, we have been able to share the load and evolve together. Realising our individual strengths and weaknesses, we have delegated all aspects. Justin never asks me to cost work, and equally I never ask Justin to hand over the task of initially rough-machining all jobs. We have never had the problems associated with spending too much time at the workshop at the expense of never seeing your partner, as we are both always there. And although some might say: "get a life", we enjoy talking endlessly about furniture. ■