



WMB Female Entrepreneur 2013 – Kira Walton VOYA

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“Oh my goodness, I had an amazing experience. I think I was the only one who thought I had won an Oscar,” says Kira Walton reminiscing on her award win at the recent 7th Annual WMB Conference and Awards. Kira is the co-founder of VOYA – a certified organic seaweed beauty product manufacturer based in Sligo. The business is a world first.

VOYA has family at its core. Not only is Kira in business with her husband Mark, but the duo also complement Mark’s brother’s business; Neil Walton runs the VOYA Seaweed Baths in Strandhill. “Basically they’re sister companies. They feed into each other; Neil benefits from our success and we benefit from his success... Our whole range is in Voya Seaweed Baths, the only range he has. So Voya Seaweed Baths is our biggest account.”

VOYA essentially was created out of a needs must situation. Unhappy in his job in Dublin Mark left and returned to Sligo to join his brother in business. In 2002 Kira followed him, saying: “I had no other choice than to start the business with Mark because I didn’t have a job so we had to do something. Mark was trying to figure out how to grow and expand the business. We worked together on Neil’s computer on the off-times when Neil wasn’t using it. The two of us would sit together going through ingredient listings for cosmetics and what kind of formulation is in a body lotion or hand cream.”

Kira says pairing up with her then boyfriend felt natural. “At that stage we were working in a small office and we had no arguments. It was only when we moved and it got a little bit more serious, when we knew this was something a little bit more professional and we had to get it right. We clashed on our opinions but after a stage we thought this isn’t going to work so we learned to appreciate each other’s opinions and then bring in a third party to give their views and then we’d work off that.”



Kira Walton



L-R: Kira Walton, VOYA; Rosemary Delaney, WMB and Lisa Vaughan, Enterprise Ireland.

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It was the creative aspect that Kira had most input in, having previously worked as a freelance illustrator and graphic designer. Kira brought the female perspective so to speak: “The creative side really sparked off my imagination and what we could do as regards how the packaging and product would look. The smell, the essential oils we would put in the formulation, how the scent was going to be created within the product.”

The name VOYA originated from customer feedback, when a seaweed bath was likened to a private journey or voyage to the sea. There are no machines or quick fixes for creating VOYA products. “We harvest around two tonnes of seaweed a week. No machines, all hand harvested to be eco-friendly. To adhere to the EU standards we have to sustainably harvest the seaweed off the coast near Easkey. We have a licence to harvest within those areas. We also harvest the seaweed in a particular way where you only cut the top two thirds of the plant so that the plant can regrow again. The area is a supreme area of conservation, so there is no industry or habitation around the area that we harvest.”

As for emerging competition Kira says: “To be honest there are other brands on the market but they actually aren’t doing what we’re doing. We provide a spa product into the market that has an amazing efficacy – your body benefits from an anti-cellulite

point of view. So it is the real deal. It’s not actually scraped from the bottom of the sea with machines. We hand harvest the seaweed, the algae extract is taken from the hand harvested seaweed and used in all our products so I don’t see anybody else within the industry doing that. Also our seaweed spa treatments use the exact same seaweed that we harvest.”

Today VOYA Products employs 14 staff members, has 41 retail products, 51 professional spa products and 24 hotel and airline amenity products. It is exported to 35 countries with the main markets being in the US, but also some unconventional ones like Oman, Maldives, Vietnam and Malaysia. Despite economic difficulties, turnover for the business doubled for three years in row, reaching €1.5 million in 2011 and remaining consistent in 2012. VOYA also opened a flagship retail store in Selfridges of Oxford Street, London.

Breaking into new markets remains a challenge though as certain countries have trade barriers, Kira elaborates: “So you have to get creative if you want to be a global brand. It means getting into Joint Ventures, agency and distribution agreements. Some might say why bother? Maybe it’s an inherent anxiety, fear of missing out, but I think the day you stop trying to grow into new space, you become complacent and begin a slippery slide.”

As for the recession, it’s an excuse that Kira won’t accept when it comes to succeeding: “I have this bugaboo about the recession. From a sales point of view I feel if you really want to make a sale you will make a sale regardless of the recession.”

In 2007 when the product was launched into the retail market, Kira says people were becoming aware of organic products. Joking that “they may have thought it was all about tree hugging! But I think we came in at the right time as people were becoming aware of the planet and about the effect of what you put on your body. We’re still educating people on this.”

In fact Kira’s father-in-law Michael Walton was one of the original proponents of the Irish Organic Movement and one of the original directors of the Irish Organic Trust. Husband Mark is currently on the European Unions Expert Panel for Organic standards, as well the Soil Association/Organic Trust Standards Panel (one of the largest organic certification bodies in the world).

The milestone moment for Mark and Kira remains to be when they received a phone call from the Group Spa Director for Jumeirah Hotels in Dubai. “We pulled into the car park of the old Dundrum shopping centre and by the end of the call we had agreed on the rollout of the brand across the Middle East.” Within three days of getting that phone call Kira and Mark were on a flight out to meet their new clients. “There is no better person to talk about your project than yourself.”

Today some of their clients include: Park Hyatt, Ritz Carlton, MGM Properties, K Club & Doonbeg Lodge in Ireland, Waldorf Astoria; and in retail Selfridges, Avoca and House of Fraser. Kira puts their success down to invention and reinvention of their product offering.

It hasn’t all been a plain sailing voyage however, as Kira says: “Whenever we get a new account we all high five each other but then there have been rough periods when a supplier or a carton provider goes out of business, two weeks after you’ve paid them! That would have cost thousands of pounds so that’s rough. Then you might lose a member of staff but we haven’t had many of those thank god!”

What advice would Kira give to other entrepreneurs? Firstly she says: “It’s hard work being an entrepreneur, why? The term entrepreneur creates misconceptions, largely because people gloss over the hard work and hard years associated with surviving being an entrepreneur, they just see the end result, which is ‘success’. Her advice is to “trust your gut instinct. And my dad always says to me ‘Be calm, be tranquil, be elegant.’ That always helps in situations where I’m nervous.”

For now there is no exit plan for the Walton’s. With so much scope for the business they have their eye on growth: “This is a \$3billion industry and we are like a minnow in the pond. So there is a lot of room to grow. We’re making inroads into the US and we haven’t even tackled Africa or South America. We’re actually making some inroads into Australia currently also. So I see us growing.”