

# 'Sticky' situation

PP talks to the managing director of a business that was inspired by a mum decorating her baby's room and that, a decade later, is nearing its goal of becoming an international brand.

When Rachel Sellers and Louise Dutton sat down to prepare the business plan for their fledgling business over a decade ago, they had an ambitious goal in mind - to create an international brand.

"We had a blind belief in our idea," says Rachel. "Research suggested it was a relatively untapped market then but we could see its potential for growth."

Today, 10 years on, that initial idea, for a range of re-usable, peel-off decorative wall stickers for children's rooms, is indeed very close to being a global brand.

The FunToSee products are available in nearly 40 countries and through channels that range from party organisers to home improvement stores, gift shops to garden centres and interior shops to children's specialist stores.

Not bad going for two women who had no business experience before plunging into the world of commerce. Louise was a graphic designer and Rachel was a teacher and former children's magazine editor. The idea for their business began when Louise was looking for creative ways to decorate her baby's bedroom. She took undersea-themed illustrations drawn by Rachel's father, who is a cartoonist: and had them printed on large pieces of industrial, self-adhesive vinyl to create wall stickers.

Rachel loved both the impact and the simplicity of the idea - "my first reaction was 'parents and children would love this!'" - and she persuaded Louise that they should develop the concept commercially.

Launching themselves into manufacturing, of course, involved all kinds of other areas in which they had no prior experience - distribution, licensing, packaging among others



**Pirates are one of the popular party themes that the company makes stickers for.**

- and the learning curve was steep.

"It's just amazing how much we've had to learn," says Rachel. "And even though we have a team around us now, we've never asked anyone here to do anything that we haven't already done, be it royalty reports, packing boxes or sweeping the floor. We have lived and breathed this business."

Rachel thinks the company was lucky in the initial concept at a stage when the market for decorative wall stickers was relatively undeveloped.

"For ordinary room décor, people were using decorative borders, but there was very little attention paid to theming and co-ordinating rooms. There was nothing quite like our stickers when we started."



**The fact that the stickers can be peeled off without leaving a mark - and then stuck down again somewhere else - is a key selling point.**

A lot of thought and work went into developing the idea. Rachel explains: "Wall stickers have become an accepted art form but at the time we had the challenge of how to get the concept across - that you can use them to decorate a room like a mural artist would do. We called it 'wall art' but then people would ask 'what's that?' so we had to spell it out as being 'giant, removable wall stickers'."

There were negative aspects to overcome - the perception that stickers would leave marks and damage wallpaper when peeled off - so the fact that they are peelable and can be used time and time again has been a key selling point. (Rachel reckons that during trade shows, the stickers on the stand get peeled off and on by visitors anything up to 400 times.)

The product range incorporates room makeover kits retailing at about £40, smaller room décor kits for about £20, sticker packs for about £10 and mini packs for about £6. There are also picture frames and stickers for affixing photos to walls for under £3.

Consumer market research has been an important element of the business. "Although



**Rachel and Louise grew a successful commercial concept out of a creative idea.**

retail customers should be able to tell us what consumers want - and usually can - we still like to get it straight from the horse's mouth." This entails using focus groups to get feedback on anything from packaging to the popularity of specific shades of colour.

Another element of the business development has been making the products child- and eco-friendly. This has involved everything from using non-toxic inks to eliminating phthalates, using recyclable packaging, reducing the amount of plastic used in the polypropylene - and, currently, trying to source biodegradable materials.

Rachel says: "We wanted to be environmentally-conscious as part of our ethos, not just because of legal requirements. It was hard at first to find suppliers that could meet our requirements but now suppliers are far more likely to be able to tick all the boxes."

As the business grew, so did the number of employees - notably the staff has doubled in the past year or so as the business has sought both to cope with existing sales opportunities and to create new ones.

The team of 11 full-timers includes in-house designers (freelance illustrators are used too), a marketing manager and two staff devoted to export sales and administration.

There are diverse sales channels - FunToSee sells both to trade (including party planners, gift



**Barbie is one of the licensed products and another popular theme for parties.**

shops, toy shops, interior designers, children's speciality stores, DIY stores), and direct to consumer through a sophisticated e-commerce site, [www.funtosee.com](http://www.funtosee.com), spurred on by email campaigns and social networking. Overseas trade sales are handled through distributors.

One recent downside of the business has been increasing amounts of competition. FunToSee is one of three major companies that can be directly comparable in terms of activities and distribution channels. But there are plenty more doing similar work - and it's not always friendly rivalry. Not only have FunToSee products been copied; but also its packaging, right down to the very wording on its boxes. "The people concerned must have assumed we use a big marketing agency and wouldn't notice, but I wrote that text myself and I recognised my own writing style when I saw it," says Rachel.

"If copying is the highest form of flattery, then we accept the compliment. It's just annoying. But you can't let yourself lose sleep over it. You just have to carry on producing good quality products, giving great customer



**Football is an enduringly popular theme both for parties and for room décor.**

## Fun to play

The interactive nature of the products and their potential for creative play is a key selling point. Rachel says: "I'd hesitate to claim that they are educational as such, but there's no doubt that the children can get a great deal out of them. The stickers aren't just about creating a nice space - they're about play and learning together. Parents who aren't that creative but want to be good, caring parents can use the stickers as an opportunity to spend fun time with their children, while the more creative parents can work with their children to implement the creative process that we have begun.

"I watched a mother and daughter theme a playroom with the undersea stickers and it was lovely to hear them talking about the stickers as they arranged them. Without even knowing that she was learning, the little girl was learning about colours, counting, the names of the sea creatures... And this applies to parties too, where the children can all work together to arrange the stickers for the party."

## Sticky stuff that's great for parties

Many of the sticker themes - such as Princesses, Dinosaurs, Pirates, Mermaids, Space and Football - are themes for which plenty of mainstream party products (notably tableware and fancy dress) can be sourced. The stickers can thus be used as part of a broader, co-ordinated approach to party planning.

In addition there are licensed products - such as Barbie, Gruffalo and the Very Hungry Caterpillar - which again can make a party theme on their own or mixed with co-ordinating generic party products. Licensed characters, says Rachel, appeal "because children are attracted to icons that they see all the time. There is a comfort in seeing something often."

Marketing manager Claudia Wright says FunToSee stickers are a brighter, more interactive, more versatile, more eco-friendly - and re-usable - alternative to the plastic background theme scenes so familiar to party retailers. She points out that a pack of stickers can easily cover a whole wall, depending on how widely they are spaced. After the party they can be peeled off, replaced on the plastic backing sheet and kept for another occasion, or relocated in the child's bedroom. "It's a rather more expensive option initially, but the stickers are typically kept and used again in future, whereas the flimsy plastic scene backgrounds tend to be thrown away after the first use."

Because they leave no mark on the wall when peeled off, they are suitable for use in venues like village halls, where restrictions are typically placed on what can be hung or pinned on the walls.

They also appeal to the growing number of party planners who are expected to show "green" credentials to their clients

Additionally, the bunting stickers have proved popular for generic parties while the two sets of alphabet stickers are often used for spelling out Happy Birthday and the child's name. And the small packs of frame and photo stickers - designed for attaching photos and drawings to walls - are handy party bag fillers, says Claudia.

service and constantly looking for innovation to differentiate yourself."

This approach has helped the company to win or be short-listed for numerous awards over the years - in the fields of innovation, export, licensing and education. Most recently it won the Practical Pre-School awards last year and has been short listed twice in the Gift of the Year awards.

Are Rachel and Louise satisfied with the business's achievements so far? "We should be," says Rachel, "we should probably take more time to acknowledge our successes than we do! We keep moving forward, continually looking at ways to improve our performance and refine our product."

Rachel admits she is a workaholic. "I never switch off, even when I'm out running - that's when I think of more ideas! And Louise has to juggle work with two young sons."

So, does the former teacher ever regret swapping the world of education for the world of commerce?

"The two things are so different. There are cameo moments in teaching that business can't replace. Equipping a child with the skills to read and raising their curiosity, make the world their oyster - that's a very privileged thing to be able to do. And of course I miss the school holidays! But in business there are loads of challenges too - there's never a dull day at FunToSee."

As for the future, the growth potential is huge, says Rachel. The UK birth rate is still rising, providing a constantly renewing market for children's products; and theming is a big trend in interiors - not just the décor but also the bedding, the curtains, the carpets.

Further afield, many countries have seen little of this kind of product, so FunToSee plans

a big push on expanding exports.

So far the entire focus has been on children's products, but Rachel says the expanding market for room décor means considering other uses for the product. There could be mileage, she thinks, in working with party specialists to create ranges to decorate party occasions.

Work is also underway on POS and packaging to make the products appealing to shops that have little space or that need help with visual merchandising.

On a personal level, Rachel also hopes to share her experience with other potential entrepreneurs, by giving seminars to a local sixth form. "I'm not Bill Gates and we're not Apple or Nike or Sun Corporation, but I think that our experience of going into business with no prior knowledge - and working hard to make a success of it - could be really interesting to an audience and encourage a spirit of enterprise, as well as the belief that you can turn an idea into a commercial success."



**The alphabet stickers can be used for a variety of purposes, including spelling out Happy Birthday and the party host's name.**