

THE BIG SUCCESS STORY

‘Winning prestigious awards helped put us on the map’

PATRICIA FOX, 55, is married with two adult children. She owns Aralia Garden Design and lives in Hertfordshire.

+ THE IDEA I worked as a brand retail consultant but I was fed up with the long hours. With the agreement of my husband, I resigned in 2004 and took two years out, to find a new career. I loved gardening, but it never occurred to me that I could make money from it. My children’s school held a “promises” auction at a fair and I offered to design and plant a border for someone as a prize. They were so delighted they paid me to do the rest of the garden. I ended up going on a full-time garden design course for two years. I got work from friends, but didn’t feel confident enough to charge much. It was only after I joined Business Networking International (BNI) about a year later that things took off.

TIP: If you use advertising or marketing, always test and measure whether it works for you. Know exactly where your customers come from.

BUSINESS IN FIGURES

Launched: 2006
Start up costs: £2,400
Turnover: £1m+
Website: aralia.org.uk

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

BNI: £1,000
Website: £500
Materials: £500
Equipment: £400

+ MAKING IT HAPPEN The BNI is quite expensive to join – you pay about £1,000 a year, and go to meetings every month – but members push you hard. They really mentor you, give you contacts and leads, and suggest ways to grow your brand and customer base. One of the most important things they taught me was to market myself by winning awards and making myself an expert in my field. So in 2009 I entered the British Association of Landscape Industries (BALI) award for best courtyard garden and won, and I also entered RHS Chelsea Flower Show the same year and won a silver medal for my kitchen garden design. Since then we’ve won two or three top industry awards each year. As well as the kudos, it keeps your designs fresh and pushes you to be the best.

+ HIGHS There have been a lot, thankfully, including a lucrative commission to design 11 roof terraces for penthouses in Chelsea, London; working on stately homes around the country; and doing designs for TV and film stars and foreign royalty. One of my favourite moments was turning a no into a yes for a client.

The Royal Bank of Scotland was hosting a garden-themed event at the Saatchi Gallery and wanted large RBS letters fashioned out of box hedge with only a week’s notice. My designer at the time told them we couldn’t do it. I hastily called them back and offered them an alternative, and I won the design contract for the event. It’s all about grabbing opportunities and taking risks.

+ LOWS We’d just designed a huge garden project for a client and the builders had nearly finished. I’d ordered the plants to be delivered, when the client suddenly phoned and said she wasn’t pleased with the work and would only be paying us 50 per cent of the fee. I cancelled the plants and ended up taking her to court. I won, and she had to pay the costs, but it was a horrible experience and nearly made me give up the business. It’s made me get feedback every step of the way.

+ WHERE I AM NOW I have four designers and an intern and use a team of freelance surveyors, builders and contractors. We have around 60 live projects on the go at any one time. **w&h**

PHOTOGRAPHS INDIRA FLACK. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX



‘As well as the kudos, winning industry awards keeps your designs fresh’

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