



Mother of Invention

HOW MOTHERHOOD TURNED A FORMER PHOTOGRAPHER AND ART DIRECTOR INTO A CLOTHING DESIGNER.

Alex Weston wraps up a meeting in her office in Shouson Hill. The conversation is all business – fabric choices, flight schedules to China – but the setting is strikingly casual. Alex wears flip-flops and jeans; the furnishings include a child-friendly sofa and stacks of sample boxes. The office, in reality, is her dining room table in the apartment she shares with her husband, and their daughters, four-year-old Eve and two-year-old Agatha.

Welcome to the home of Hilly Chrisp, a gorgeous clothing label that has become a hot seller at some of New York's hippest children's boutiques. Launched in December 2006 the line comprises a single signature product – three-tiered skirts which mix delightfully clashing florals, polka dots, plaids and pinstripes. The result is a look that's a little bit vintage, a little bit country, and all girl – yet the sturdy fabric and comfy elastic waistband make them suitable for active (read messy) play.

The decision to manufacture a solo product line is a conscious effort to adhere to a business plan that favours simplicity over double digit growth.

Alex says there was no grand plan to become a clothing designer, and that the business developed when she started making the skirts for her own girls.

"Friends started commenting on the skirts and asking if I could make extra. Soon I was spending more time at the sewing machine than with the girls, so I decided to have a couple of hundred skirts made in Shenzhen, more to stop the requests than start a business," she says.

Those first skirts sold out within weeks and a fortuitous meeting with the owner of Smarty Pants (a Hong Kong-based children's store) meant Alex had a fully fledged business on her hands.

Alex's background in art and photography (evident in the skirt's striking cottons and ribbon embellishment) did not lessen the amount of work involved in design development. She made more than 50 trips to her suppliers in Hong Kong

and Shanghai to finalise the 10 designs currently available.

Add to this the learning curve that comes with finding suppliers, monitoring quality control, overseeing distribution, ensuring regulatory compliance and trying to maintain some semblance of family life and it is easy to understand why keeping things simple is the Hilly Chrisp business mantra.

Alex is quick to credit Hong Kong's "can do" spirit as a large part of the success of her business.

"If we lived anywhere else in the world it may not have been so easy to go from a few handmade skirts to having international stockists within a year. Hong Kong with its access to clothing and textile manufacturers, the availability of domestic help and willingness of people to share information has been invaluable," she says.

While too modest to admit it, Alex must also take credit for embracing Hong Kong's entrepreneurial spirit.

A key moment in the company's growth came when Alex attended a prestigious New York children's wear trade show. Participation at the invitation only trade show is notoriously difficult. Interested companies must submit a portfolio before being selected. Alex not only made it through the

selection process but then embarked on her first ever trip to the United States.

If Alex was nervous about the experience and the Big Apple's take-no-prisoners reputation the sales figures don't show it. The trade show netted Hilly Chrisp 12 stockists in North America, who are now her core market.

"The New York experience was great on many fronts. It was wonderful to see such an enthusiastic response to my skirts and it also

confirmed what I had suspected – that it was OK to just have one core product and do it really well," says Alex.

When asked what 2008 will bring for Hilly Chrisp, Alex answers succinctly "I plan to build on the success of our first year, design a new range of skirts and develop a 'Skirts for Smiles' donation program which will see a percentage of the skirts sold go to girls in need around Asia."

Three clear goals. All, no doubt, to be achieved as simply as possible.



FROM FILING TO NETBALL, ALEX WESTON SHARES HER TOP TIPS FOR COMBINING HOMEWORK WITH HOME-OFFICE.

■ **PRIORITISE**

It is a cliché but make the most of the precious time when kids are at school so you can spend quality time with them when they get home.

■ **MINI MOGUL**

Include your children in the business. I ask their opinions and explain the process to them – from design and manufacturing to selling and shipping. They enjoy hearing about what makes customers happy (and mad) at the end.

■ **FILE IT NOW**

Be organised, have good filing systems, attend to administrative issues immediately. I'm bad at all of these things but I know my life would be far easier if I was good at them!

■ **DE-STRESSER**

I can't get through the week without some serious physical activity. My weekly games of netball are the perfect outlet for business frustrations.