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GROWN SUCCESS

MARGARET BUTLER LAUNCHED A \$20 MILLION HOMEWARES BUSINESS THAT GREW BEYOND HER WILDEST DREAMS. KAREN FITTALL REPORTS.





THE BOTTOM LINE

Name: Margaret Butler

Age: 40

Company: Anasazi Trading

Industry: Importing and designing gorgeous homewares.

Role: Owner and managing director.

Turnover: About \$20 million per annum.

Background: During her twenties, Butler worked her way up in the textiles industry, before launching her own textiles agency, and then forming Anasazi Trading in 1992.



TOP: Butler values her team above all else.

ABOVE: Anasazi hopes to sell its own product line.

WHISKS DO IT. ERGONOMIC MIXING bowls definitely do it. And show me a funky rubbish bin, and that'll do it too. Fact is, even if you're not a whiz in the kitchen, smart homewares tend to push all the right retail-therapy buttons.

Thirteen years ago, Margaret Butler thought so too. But rather than indulge in a few new items for her own home, she decided to think big. Really big.

"I'd been working in the textiles industry, but I could see that homewares was a growing, emerging market and I decided to go for it."

And so Butler's company, Anasazi Trading, was born. Now based in Sydney's Alexandria, Anasazi imports about 800 different products for the office, kitchen and bathroom from chic international companies and sells them to 1,500 retail outlets around Australia and New Zealand. And in recent years, they've started developing their own product line. Not that Anasazi was that big to start with.

"I'd just bought a tiny apartment in Potts Point when I decided to start the business, so that became my head office, and I borrowed money on my credit card to get me started. I wound up with about \$2,000 to play with and I spent it on six boxes of stock."

From there, she started selling. "I just didn't think people would say no," recalls Butler. "Failure wasn't something I ever really considered." Blame it on self-fulfilling prophecy, but fast forward a couple of months, and Butler had sold her products into some of Australia's largest retailers.

"It was a pretty busy time. I had this little red car and I used it for everything – for deliveries into loading docks of huge department stores and once I even drove it all the way to Melbourne

and back just to meet a potential buyer." Invoices were generated on a typewriter, and every bit of money she made was pumped back into buying more stock. Soon, six boxes became 50, which became 500 – and now, Butler's Alexandria warehouse has enough space to hold more than 2,000 pallets.

But her rise to the top hasn't been without its hurdles. There was a robbery back in 1999 just before New Year's eve, which spelled the end for Anasazi's brand new computer system ("everyone was worried about Y2K affecting their systems that year – we didn't even have a system!"). And before that, there was a two-month transportation strike right before their Christmas orders were due to be delivered. "It meant that about \$200,000 worth of orders couldn't be delivered, which was basically our whole business at that point. We got down to about our last \$100, but I was determined not to fold."

Butler's determination and enthusiasm paid off. As it always does.

"I really believe that enthusiasm breeds enthusiasm. I believe that when you're passionate about what you do, you attract like-minded people.

We've got such a great team here, and I never make decisions that aren't team decisions. You can't expect your team to implement what you decide if they aren't part of the process."

Talk to Butler for even a short time and it's obvious her team is Anasazi's most valuable asset, and she treats the people involved accordingly. In return, she's rewarded by a loyal workforce and a next-to-nix turnover.

"One of my biggest thrills is seeing someone go from packing orders to taking on a different role that might involve developing marketing ideas. ▶



I'm passionate about nurturing the team, recognising the skills people have and giving them the chance to grow."

Butler is also passionate about the product. Even after 13 years in the business. "I do love what I do. The whole reason I wanted to start this business was to show people that everyday items can be functional as well as beautiful. I still get excited about seeing new products."

Her latest love is expanding the business into the export market – designing their own products and selling them overseas. And then there's a line of food products she's developing with celebrity chef Nigella Lawson. Having enjoyed a gig as the exclusive Australian distributor for Lawson's Living Kitchen Collection for the last few years, Butler recently spent a couple of days in Lawson's UK test kitchen.



TOP: After 13 years Butler still loves her work.

ABOVE: It's all about staff involvement at Anasazi.

"It's pretty exciting. The opportunity to work with Nigella is a fantastic one. She's such a warm and charming person and is genuinely involved in every aspect of each of her products. I admire that sort of commitment."

Clearly Butler has a fair bit of it herself. As if running a successful business doesn't make for a full enough plate, Butler is also mum to 14-month old son, Luca, and has just started writing her first book about business.

"I feel very privileged that I can combine being a mum with working, and I'm dedicated to continuing to do both things. Nothing is more important than Luca, but I don't think I'd be as good a mum if I wasn't running a business as well. Obviously it's a very individual choice, but that's how I feel and it's what works for me."

As it does for Anasazi as a company. After enjoying a 40 per cent annual growth rate since 1992, Butler admits that this year has been fairly flat.

"But I guess when a business gets to a certain point, it's unrealistic to think that you can keep growing it at such a rate every year." Besides which, Butler says that a slower 12 months has inspired the team to search for new business opportunities. "We're poised to have a very exciting year next year," she says. Same goes for the year after that. And after that.

See, we told you a kitchen whisk could make big business happen. ■

MARGARET BUTLER'S TOP FIVE TIPS FOR SUCCESS

1. Passion is always more powerful than experience, so don't wait until you have 'all' the experience. It may never happen.
2. Stay constantly motivated by surrounding yourself with like-minded people, and absorb everything you can to develop and learn.
3. Reward those who support you with loyalty – start a 'friends' of your business club.
4. Listen to what your stakeholders are saying to you, everyone from your customers to your suppliers and your team.
5. A successful business is all about quality – not just in terms of the products you have on offer, but all the way through.