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AUSTRALIAN  
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# HOME IS WHERE *the business is*

*Homemade is becoming a worldwide name on Etsy, the online marketplace for handmade and vintage wares for one man and woman businesses. Frances Mao finds out why Etsy is proving popular with customers and what lessons the gift and homewares industry can learn from that.*

IN THE FIRST 12 months of starting up her first online business, Tags and Labels, Sasha Fowler racked up almost 900 sales and made over \$15,000. A maritime lawyer in a past lifetime, the 34-year-old left the corporate world to be a stay-at-home mum, but soon found herself drawn to the eCommerce trade on Etsy, the world's largest online marketplace for hand-crafted and vintage goods.

Recent business from her not one, nor two, but three Etsy stores has been large enough to warrant expansion for Fowler's little empire, taking out a business loan to boost the stock of her second online store, Fabric Fusion. Plans to open a bricks-and-mortar version in Brisbane are also under way.

She is just one success story among the ranks of Australians who have converted their hobby into a full-time business on Etsy.

Caboolture-based jewellery designer, Jessica Van Den, describes herself as typical Gen Y, a demographic that has its multitasking stamp all over eCommerce. As well as publishing Bespoke zine and running a full-time blog, Van Den, a qualified primary school teacher, forwent a "traditional job" in the education sector in favour of making a living off her Epheriell jewellery label. She has two Etsy stores where she sells her sleek and stylish contemporary sterling silver designs.

Van Den dubs the US based site as the springboard for her business's rapid growth and competitive standing in a global online market. With its 10 million members in 171 countries and 800,000 stores, which last year racked up sales of \$314.3 million, Etsy is known in gift circles as the Mecca of all hand-crafted wares, the go-to place for vintage and customisable goods from all over the world.

The site prides itself on its vibrant, engaged community, and hypes its simple user-friendliness as a selling point. Vendors new to the site are given direction and guidance to hawking your wares online; there's the 'Etsy Seller Handbook' updated weekly, a myriad of marketing blogs, and the support of hundreds of user teams on online forums where members bounce ideas off each other.

As a growing household name in the eCommerce arena, (it's been described as a crafty cross between eBay and Amazon,) Etsy's online stature and high visitor traffic numbers are a major draw-card for its store owners, who can tap into the 'ready-made Etsy customer base' and get a leg up on finding buyers.



LEFT: Jessica Van Den wears 'Long Raindrops' from her Epheriell collection. ABOVE: Her 'Entwined' earring design.

*“It takes time and effort and deliberate learning to create a successful Etsy shop.”*



ABOVE LEFT: Kylie Jackson says starting out on Etsy was straightforward but managing the business takes effort. RIGHT: Wallfry paintings and prints are one of Etsy's success stories.



Van Den says she always recommends friends to start out on Etsy first. “It’s so much easier for people to find your work there than on your own standalone website, at least until you have an established brand.”

The simplicity and relatively low cost in starting up on Etsy is another attraction. The site charges 20 cents per listing, and takes a 35 percent cut of each sale. Co-founder Adam Brown describes these overhead costs as “almost negligible.”

Kylie Jackson agrees, whose Etsy business, Wallfry (short for Wall Art for Small Fry) has been going gangbusters. She says the minimal costs involved help shoehorn the sometimes elaborate process of setting up a physical shop.

“When you are starting out and not sure anyone will want to buy your work, the low costs involved gave me the confidence to just go for it.”

It’s that notion of products on Etsy being an accessible luxury that Jackson banks on. Her artworks can fetch a premium price, up to \$90 for a set of nine prints, plus \$14 for shipping to the US, where the core of her customer base is located. Yet with up to 10 sales a day, Jackson sees no slowing down. “If customers like something and want it, they will buy it.”

For all the template opportunities and

benefits provided by the site though, the path from Etsy start-up to Etsy success story is still a tough slog. It is not by any means, an easy road to take.

Van Den says the standard expected of Etsy stores is incredibly high, and runs the gamut of not just product quality, but also marketing and advertising, customer service, back-end logistics, and store layout and design. Even “just getting photos on the website up to a decent standard is hard!”

“Many people start out thinking, ‘I’ll just put my stuff on Etsy and it will sell and ta-dah! I’ll have a business.’ And that just doesn’t happen.

“It takes time and effort and deliberate learning to create a successful Etsy shop. You have to work on your business every day to make it a success,” says Van Den.

And once you’re capped an Etsy success, maintaining a roaring trade from home is not an easy task either, especially when other responsibilities come into the mix. Overwhelmingly, the biggest issue for many successful Etsy sellers is time. More specifically, the lack thereof.

Since venturing online, Fowler believes that she has created, “A new day (and night) job... I spend a lot of time burning the candle at both ends.”

Melburnian, Vari Longmuir, runs her one-woman design operation, Buttercup Ink, from home and views her lay-off from her full-time design job in 2009 as the kick-start to a more fulfilling career online. Yet she admits to how consuming it all can be, especially with two young children.

“Essentially you’re always at work. Having an online shop means being open 24 hours a day, every day.”

Although she’s certainly “not complaining”, the early success of her paintings saw Jackson overworked to the point where she couldn’t keep up, and it was affecting the quality of her artworks. She was forced to diversify her business, taking it to more efficient ground, by changing the selling focus to prints, while still offering made-to-order paintings.

It’s a relentless work ethic accepted by top sellers like Jackson, who see that they have to be constantly switched on and on top of it. Yet, the personal rewards that Etsy has afforded her, she says, are more than worth it.

“It’s a very humbling feeling to know that your artwork is going to be displayed on a child’s wall halfway across the world and that they are going to grow up looking at it everyday. It’s like you become part of someone’s childhood.”