

Keep it in the family

Many of us have thought about starting our own businesses – but how about doing it with your own daughter? *Rachel Read* talks to one Hong Kong mum and daughter who did just that.

When it comes to mother-daughter bonding, there are plenty of activities that might come to mind – a spa day, a weekend break or dinner somewhere special – but have you ever thought about starting your own business together, instead?

That was the case for Karen Mead, a local printmaker who decided to start her very own fashion label with daughter Lauren in 2013. Their company, Louella Odie, now boasts four collections of handbags and scarves featuring Karen's distinctive, Hong Kong-inspired prints – and with plenty more in

the pipeline, too. But how did this mother-daughter team make the family dynamic work for both their professional and personal lives?

Inspiration

Louella Odie came into being after Karen, having completed a masters degree in multidisciplinary





printmaking in the UK, returned to Hong Kong filled with enthusiasm to find a commercial application for her passion for prints. Her studies had made her realise she could combine traditional print methods like woodblock printing with modern digital technology, plus incorporate surfaces as diverse as silk, leather and metal into the final designs. Inspired, she commissioned some handbag samples to see how her originally hand-drawn prints would work replicated on bag surfaces. Upon showing them to Lauren, whose background in fashion marketing meant that she had plenty of advice about the designs, the partnership came to life.

“I recognised that although I had plenty of ideas for designs, I could not market those ideas myself,” Karen explains. “I know my own style of working can be quite idiosyncratic and the idea of opening up to someone I didn’t know well was daunting, so working with Lauren

was a natural fit.”

Lauren was initially reluctant about going into business with her mum. “I hadn’t seen or understood Mum’s vision of the way she wanted to translate her prints into accessories,” she says, “and it wasn’t until I saw those first samples that I changed my mind and realised she had created something unique and exciting.”

Divide and conquer

The pair’s very different backgrounds have meant that dividing responsibilities in the business has been quite easy. Karen covers “everything creative and visual” whilst Lauren works largely on the admin and marketing side, although both offer feedback and advice on each other’s areas (when invited!). Meanwhile, new marketing and advertising campaigns tend to be joint collaborations, with the pair keen to ensure that both their personalities are reflected in the final

results, declaring that “this business is about both of us equally”.

Their differences also allow them to balance each other out. Whilst Karen admits that her multitude of creative ideas can sometimes make it difficult to focus on just one at a time, Lauren’s detail-minded and organisational skills help them hone in on what is needed to make their visions come together. “That push-pull is part of how we work,” Karen says.

Unsurprisingly, the two already had a very close-knit relationship before the foundation of Louella Odie – and it’s only got stronger during their 18 months in business together. “We know each other so well that we don’t even try and keep the family relationship out of the business,” Karen maintains. “We feel it ultimately makes us stronger as a team.”

Indeed, Karen believes that Lauren’s involvement actually made her take the business much more



seriously. “Knowing that she is directing so much energy into the business and has put all her faith in my ideas, especially when she had so many other possible directions, helps me feel that Louella Odie is a solid thing. We are both fully invested emotionally and I find it hard to imagine that I could look into the future with someone else who I trust as much as her.”

Lauren has also found that the mother-daughter dynamic has worked in their favour. “The best part of being in a business partnership with your mum is that you end up finding something funny in everyday situations, and not taking life too seriously reduces a lot of stress that might otherwise get you down,” she explains. Having said that, she does recollect one occasion where this slightly backfired: the pair visited a restaurant to take photographs of their products alongside some dim sum dishes, but they were so busy chatting and enjoying themselves that, by the end of the meal, they realised they’d eaten everything and forgotten to take a single picture! Nevertheless, Lauren speaks for both of them when she says that working together has made “every moment an opportunity for laughter; every day brings a new challenge but it’s nice to share each step with someone who knows you so well and can make you laugh even at the toughest times.”

Ups and downs

Inevitably, there are also a few downsides to being such a family affair. With Laurence (Karen’s husband and Lauren’s father) also being a key part of the team thanks to his wealth of brand-building experience, Lauren’s younger brother, who is based in the UK starting up a business of his own, did feel a little envious that the rest of the family was so focused on Louella’s activities in Hong Kong that they could not physically be around to support his

project’s launch phase, too.

Plus, as is the case with the early stages of most small business start-ups, their work-life balance is currently very much tipped towards work... a state of affairs only further amplified if your business partner happens to be your mother! “The worst thing about being in a partnership with your mum is you never get to switch off,” Lauren confirms. “When you get into the office in the mornings, you know that ‘How are you today?’ is actually code for ‘Have you done the invoicing yet?’ We have no boundaries between work and non-work talk.”

The duo says that the key to managing this and ensuring there is no mother-daughter bloodshed is to recognise when the other needs space. “We’re not sure the open-plan office space is necessarily all it’s cracked up to be!” jokes Lauren, explaining that their office set-up has separate workrooms so that “we’re not constantly in each other’s faces.” The pair also hopes to bring a new part-time salesperson into the fold this year to help them realise their plans for more retail distributors, noting



that adding someone from outside the family will probably help delineate work and personal time.

Making it work

So what advice do Karen and Lauren have for any other mother-daughter teams wanting to take the plunge? “Your relationship has got to be good before you start,” Lauren recommends. “Be prepared for good, honest communication and no shying away from difficult subjects, such as discussing a get-out clause or financial expectations.”

“You have to agree on your definition of professional behaviour when it matters, so there’s no reverting to pulling of parental rank or childish petulance,” Karen adds. “Your work ethics must be in line, too, and we both agree what a hard day’s work entails... even if Lauren’s often involves coffees and cocktails with people and mine a lot of staring out of windows!”

Nevertheless, as Lauren says: “If your director is your mummy, she is always going to be your mummy – she makes lunch for both of us nearly every day still!” Seems like a fun foundation for business to us! 🍷