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Sarah Doukas

Founder of Storm

Sarah Doukas was waiting in the departure lounge to catch a plane at JFK airport when she noticed a waif-like 14-year-old girl with the most amazing face. Doukas gave her a business card and told her to call if she would like to become a model. The girl's name was Kate Moss. She joined Doukas's agency the next day, within four years had secured a world-wide contract as the face of Calvin Klein, and is now one of the most successful models in the world.

Doukas has always done things her own way. Sent away to boarding school at the age of seven, she quickly learnt to be independent and self-reliant. Her parents had hoped she would go into a 'proper' profession, but Doukas flunked her exams and escaped to London to become a model. She says: 'I was put under a lot of pressure from my parents to be academic. As far as my father was concerned, unless you followed medicine or law or a conservative profession you weren't going to have a reasonable life. But I thought, to hell with it, I'll do whatever I want. I completed one A level and walked out of the rest. My father was furious. He didn't speak to me for two years.'



In between modelling assignments, Doukas started selling antiques from a stall in Chelsea and embarked on a series of adventures. She went to live in Paris for a couple of years to sell antiques in flea markets and then returned to London to manage a punk band. She says: 'A friend in Paris wanted to sign the band to his record company and had nobody to look after them in Britain so I started managing them. I did everything from driving the van to loading the equipment to setting up their gigs. I didn't get any sleep but it was a lot of fun.'

While managing the band, Doukas met and married an American singer. They went to live in San Francisco, where she set up a children's clothing company. When they returned to Britain four years later in 1982 she got a job as a trainee booking agent in a modelling agency. She says: 'I had always thought it might be quite fun to do. I was delighted not to be modelling any more. I never enjoyed being in front of the camera, I was always panic-stricken.'

After seven years there she realised she really wanted to start her own agency even though it would mean becoming a rival to the company she worked for. She says: 'I knew my boss wouldn't like it but I had a burning ambition to have my own company. I felt bad about it but I was getting frustrated because there wasn't anywhere else for me to go within the company – and I knew I couldn't stay there forever with someone in a more senior position to me.'

However, she deliberately took no action to set up her agency until she had actually left her old job. 'It was a mad thing to do', she says, 'but I couldn't go to sleep at night or look at somebody at work and think I was organising something behind their back.'

Once she had left she asked some accountants to help her draw up a business plan. After much effort she found a backer who would lend her some money. However, just before the deal was finalised, the brother of an old school friend called to say he had heard about her plans and would like to get involved. It was Sir Richard Branson. It was not a situation most other entrepreneurs are likely to find themselves in.

Doukas says: 'Thank you, Father, for sending me to an expensive school. I shared a dorm with Richard's sister while I was doing A level retakes. It is all about who you know in this life.'

Despite having no money of her own to invest Doukas was determined to retain at least 50 per cent of her company, so Branson agreed that his private company would take the other half. In return he gave Doukas a £250,000 interest-free loan for three years and bought a house in Kensington for her to use as offices.

Her modelling agency, Storm, quickly became known for discovering and representing only the best models. Doukas

says: 'We used to turn people down who were actually quite good because I wanted to create a very elitist agency and work only with the most prestigious magazines. I was determined to strive for the top.'

Storm also became known for finding models in the most unlikely places – and for discovering and nurturing diverse and unconventional talent. Doukas discovered Liberty Ross shopping in London's Oxford Street, and took on Sophie Dahl even though she was much more voluptuous than most of the conventional models. In recent years Storm scouts have spotted Lily Cole and Jourdan Dunn – both of whom are establishing a significant presence within the fashion industry.

Business went so well that in 2005 Doukas launched Storm Special Bookings – a division that represents talented individuals for advertising prestige brands. The division now represents Emma Watson, Rupert Everett and Katherine Jenkins among others.

Storm has become very much a family business. During the early days Doukas recruited her brother Simon to help

Fact File

Date of birth: 21 December 1955

Marital status: married with two children

Highest level of education achieved: boarding school

Qualifications: seven O levels, one A level

Interests: art, music, horse-riding, farming

Personal philosophy: 'Anything is achievable. Be positive, be enthusiastic, and project confidence. Make every day a good day.'

her run the company and with his background in banking the two have worked side by side for over 20 years. Her eldest daughter Noelle is now also an experienced booker for many of Storm's top models and has worked at Storm for nearly a decade.

The agency now has a turnover of £8 million and employs 30 people. Now 53, Doukas says: 'There has been a lot of luck involved. I was lucky when I started this agency that there was no other agency starting at the same time and the economy was good. And then I was lucky that when we went into recession I had low overheads so we could spend money while other people were tightening their belts.'

Doukas says she has been driven by the desire to prove to her father that she could achieve success on her own terms. 'I am not interested in money. Yes, it is good to have a nice car but it is not my prime motivation. Instead, I have a desire to prove myself – I think I am terrified of failure. Also, I love what I do. It is easy to come to work and do long hours if you enjoy it.'