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Emma Bridgewater

Founder of Bridgewater Pottery

Becoming a ceramics designer was not the most obvious way for Emma Bridgewater to make her fortune. She confesses to being hopeless at making pottery and she has never had any formal training in design. Not that any of this seems to have done her much harm. Her company, which is perhaps best known for its collections of plates and bowls with writing around the sides, has established an individual niche within the ceramics market and in the process has become a hugely successful enterprise.

For many years Bridgewater had no idea what she wanted to do as a career and was extremely envious of those who did. She says: 'I longed for a vocation and to know what I was going to be. I was so jealous of people who knew from an early age that they wanted to be ballet dancers or gymnasts or whatever.' She left university with a degree in English literature still no clearer, but got a job with a knit-wear company after meeting the owner at a party. She says: 'They were run off their feet because the Princess of Wales



had worn one of their jumpers with a sheep design on it and everyone wanted one. So I offered to help.'

While she was there Bridgewater asked dozens of questions about how the business worked. By the time she left 18 months later she was convinced that what she really wanted to do was start her own business. But she still had no idea what her business would actually do. Then one day she was searching the shops for cups and saucers to give her mother as a birthday present. When she could not find anything she liked, she decided to design some herself.

She went back to the family home to study her mother's existing collection of crockery and realised that those she liked had been decorated using sponge printing, a traditional technique by which simple designs are applied to ceramics using sponges. She says: 'I looked at the old pieces and thought, this is perfect for me.' She sketched a mug, dish and bowl on a piece of paper and then paid a potter in Stoke-on-Trent £500 to make 100 unglazed pieces from her drawings. Then she took them back to her flat in London

and started experimenting, creating her own shapes and then applying them with sponges.

She says: 'I think if I had been to art school I would have been discouraged or told it was impossible. But instead I just filled a dustbin with glaze in the bathroom and stirred it with a great big stick. I was endlessly rubbing off the designs and starting again because I couldn't afford to waste any pots.'

After three months Bridgewater had created four designs and sent a finished bowl or mug to 100 retail buyers accompanied by a brief description of the pattern. She was so confident of success that she deliberately priced her pieces at twice that of her competitors. It was a risky move, but the gamble worked.

Harrods, John Lewis and the General Trading Company immediately placed orders and Bridgewater Pottery was born. And thanks to the hefty price, orders were kept at a level she could cope with. She says: 'The price made the buyers nervous. But I never had any doubts because it instinctively felt right. It set a new benchmark in the industry and helped keep the volume down, which in retrospect was essential.'

Determined that her crockery would not look like something from a craft fair, Bridgewater also decided to get it all made in a factory in the traditional Potteries area of Stoke-on-Trent. At the beginning she delivered each order herself in a rented van, but with no money to invest in the business cash flow was precarious. She survived only by getting her pots on 30 days' credit and persuading buyers to pay her in 28 days. But then crisis hit. One day she turned up to find the factory on the brink of liquidation. She had just two days to find the money to buy the factory and save her business, and managed it only by borrowing heavily from her family.

Business boomed and when Bridgewater wanted to take time out to have children she brought in managers to run the company in her absence. She says it was a big mistake. Sales stagnated at £2 million and profits declined. She says: 'With hindsight, I didn't communicate my ideas properly to the managers. I gave them an almost impossible task. I would ask in an agitated way why the business wasn't growing but the systems were so chaotic I could never really find the answer.' So two years ago Bridgewater decided to take back control, getting rid of five people and cutting delivery times from 12 weeks to four.

She admits: 'I had allowed myself to be sidelined. We were ignoring our successes and thrashing around after failures. I realised there was only room for one amateur in the company – and that was me.' Her hands-on approach paid off. The company, which still makes all its products in Stoke-on-Trent, is expected to achieve sales of £8 million in 2009. Bridgewater, her husband Matthew Rice, who is now

Fact File

Date of birth: 23 December 1960

Marital status: married with four children

Highest educational level achieved: university

Qualifications: BA (Hons) in English Literature from London University

Interests: picnicking and cooking outdoors, gardening, spending time with her children

Personal philosophy: 'The worst thing you can do is hesitate. Get on with things even if you haven't fully worked out how to do them, because even the worst case scenario may turn out to be better than you expect.'

involved in running in the business, and their families collectively own 100 per cent of the company.

Bridgewater, 48, says she has found running her own business both exhilarating and exhausting: 'It gives you terrific financial freedom if you can make it work. But it is really obsessive. You find yourself talking about it to people at dinner. There's something always just disappearing over the horizon – and you are always galloping madly towards it.'