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Sharon Hilditch

Founder of Crystal Clear

When Sharon Hilditch launched her Crystal Clear skin rejuvenating machine, she decided to ignore conventional ways of marketing a new product such as placing adverts in trade journals. Instead she spent the whole of her first year's promotional budget of £30,000 paying for the services of Max Clifford, the public relations consultant, in the hope of attracting celebrity followers. It worked. A well-known newsreader was the first to endorse the Crystal Clear treatment. She was soon joined by an actress and a former Page Three girl, generating lots of media coverage and getting the product in front of the public.

Hilditch says: 'It made a name for us. Trying to educate the customer about a new product can be a struggle, but the more celebrities we got, the more people started asking for Crystal Clear in the salons. And that put pressure on the salons to offer it to their customers.'

Brought up in a working-class area of Liverpool, Hilditch had a difficult start in life. A severe hearing problem in one ear affected her speech development and made it hard to



concentrate. She says: 'I struggled at school because I am not very good when a lot of people are talking around me. The teacher used to shout at me if I used the wrong word.' She nevertheless managed to get her first job at the age of 11 in a hairdresser's by lying about her age. 'My two older sisters had Saturday jobs so I wanted one too', she says. 'The work ethic was instilled in us from an early age. We knew that if we wanted something we had to go and earn money ourselves to get it.'

She left school at 15 to work in the salon full time, and two years later bought her own hairdressing salon after her father agreed to act as guarantor for a £8,000 bank loan. The business thrived and Hilditch bought a second salon, but by the time she was 22 she decided it was time to try something else. She had been studying for O and A levels in the evenings at a local college, and decided to take a law degree.

She soon realised, however, that she had to make a choice between law and business. She chose business. Hilditch says: 'To be honest I realised I was making more money

than I ever could as a lawyer.' She knew she did not want to go on being a hairdresser, however, and soon sold both salons for a healthy profit.

Her next move on the other hand was not so successful. She invested her entire savings of £30,000 in an advertising sales company, but within a couple of years had lost the lot. She is philosophical about the loss, saying: 'Failure makes you a lot stronger and a lot tougher because you think to yourself, I am never going to be there again.'

Hilditch then took a job in a cosmetic surgery hospital, looking after patients who came in for treatments for ageing skin. She says: 'I really loved coming up with ideas and thinking how we could bring new treatments into the practice. I realised the anti-ageing market was an area I wanted to stay in.' After the surgery, patients needed time to recover, and Hilditch decided there might be a gap in the market for a gentler alternative. She says: 'I wanted to find a method of skin rejuvenation that was not as harsh as the medical techniques but offered more than standard salon treatments.'

She discovered the answer while visiting a dermatologist in Italy – micro-dermabrasion, a method of firing crystals at high pressure to remove layers of dead skin. She says: 'I thought that if I designed a machine that worked at lower pressure and was not so aggressive on the skin, clients could come in once a week for a course of 10 treatments and get the same effect. The industry was crying out for something new, and salons had started to look at more machine-based treatments, so it was a good time to bring it to the market.'

Hilditch quit her job, and with the help of her partner and some design engineers from Liverpool University spent a year and £30,000 creating a prototype machine and holding clinical trials to ensure that the treatment was effective and safe. She finally launched her Crystal Clear machine

at a trade show in Manchester in 1995 – and did not sell a thing. But she remained hopeful, saying: ‘I knew it would be a success because other exhibitors spent more time on our stand than their own.’ She also faced initial scepticism for setting up her skin care company in Liverpool. She says: ‘People would always expect us to be based either in London or New York.’

Her optimism paid off and Hilditch now sells more than 1,000 machines a year, of which half are exported. She has also launched a second machine that pushes oxygen and anti-ageing ingredients into the skin, another which provides micro-dermabrasion anti-ageing treatment for hands, and a range of skin-care products.

In 2007 Hilditch decided to take her skin rejuvenation concept one step further by targeting the retail market with the launch of another innovative product, the Crystal Clear eyepen, a battery operated device which projects eye serum onto the skin to give instant visible lifting and firming around the eyes. The eyepen is now stocked in 22 House of Fraser stores and is set to be available in 40 stores over the

Fact File

Date of birth: 21 April 1961

Marital status: long-term partner, two children

Highest level of education achieved: college of further education

Qualifications: one O level, two A levels

Interests: learning to fly a plane, gardening

Personal philosophy: ‘You can have anything you want if you want it badly enough.’

next three years. It is also stocked in large department stores in Spain and Portugal and Hilditch is currently in talks with shopping channels about promoting the product.

She says: 'I will definitely be grey by the end of this but I truly believe the only way to really take the brand to a new level was to actually get on the shop floor with the major brands.' As a result Crystal Clear sales are expected to reach £12 million in 2009.

Now 47, Hilditch says that one of the nicest things about being successful has been seeing her parents' pride in her achievements. 'When my father died I discovered that he had taped every television appearance of me talking about Crystal Clear. Whenever someone visited, he would say: "Look at what Sharon has done."' "