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The Sunday Telegraph



Baby swimmers, a booming business

JENNY HIRSCHKORN

WHEN Paul and Jess Thompson first dreamt up the idea for their swim school for babies, they thought it would add a nice little extra string to their bow.

Mr Thompson, a surveyor and scuba diving instructor, and his wife, a teacher and advertising executive, envisaged portfolio careers into which running the school would slot neatly. Not for a moment did they imagine that Water Babies would become the world's largest swim school for babies and toddlers, with over 30 franchises and a network income of over £10m.

Mr Thompson always wanted to have his own business and constantly used to "do a profit-and-loss on everyone else's business". He was taking some time out to look after his 18-month-old daughter, Imani, and swimming was one of the activities he had scheduled.

"He thought it was great not only for Imani's development," explains Ms Thompson, "but also that we could improve on the offering and make a good business out of it." But there was no grand plan for it to become the mega-business that has since evolved.

They spent the whole of their £5,000 start-up budget on marketing - creating the logo and website and printing high-quality leaflets that they then handed out themselves at street level. "We're quite lucky in

RECESSION TOOL KIT

- Listen carefully to your customers
- Make decisions based on fact, not emotion

STARTING OUT DO

- Have the courage to go for it
- Get professional advice if you plan to franchise
- Make sure you understand margins

DON'T

- Compromise on the quality of the people you employ
- See book-keeping as the least important aspect of what you do

Name Jess and Paul Thompson
Company Water Babies
Founded 2002
Start-up funds £5,000
Staff 15
Turnover £1.8m
www.waterbabies.co.uk

that our target market is fairly easy to identify," says Ms Thompson, although she admits occasionally thrusting leaflets into the hands of apparently-pregnant women who turned out not to be expecting at all.

With time reserved at five different swimming pools, it soon became clear capacity was going to be one of their main hurdles. "The phone just never stopped ringing," Mr Thompson recalls, "and by our first week of teaching we had 100 clients."

Still, it seemed the school would be a local, lifestyle business - until two phone calls in one week changed the direction of the company.

They had been operating for around six months when they were contacted by Ms Thompson's sister in Bristol and friends in Edinburgh, who, for various reasons, were looking for something new to do with their lives. "That's when our franchising journey started," says Mr Thompson. Franchising, though, is a complex business model and needs to be tackled with the help of an expert.

Training was another key issue. The couple had been shocked to find that there were no minimum qualifications when it came to setting up a swim school and decided that they would aim to help set a new benchmark when it came to quality of training.

Water Babies now has a rigorous training programme for all of its instructors, which it has developed in conjunction with the Swimming Teachers' Association.

Two further income streams have now been added to the core business of teaching babies to swim - underwater photography, which this year is set to produce around 60,000 shots, and the retail of associated products like nappies, goggles and wetsuits.



We're quite lucky in that our market is easy to identify.

The Devon-based head office employs 15 people, including a new managing director, and has an income of £1.8m.

Water Babies is now set to make a splash abroad. "Our first franchise in Ireland has been our most successful Water Babies business to date, and after just a year is teaching 800 babies a week, in spite of the terrible recession there."

"Next, we have very targeted plans to go into Europe - France, Germany, Spain or Italy - within a couple of years."