

Against the odds, the journey of a mumpreneur

Creating a business alone is hard, running a business as a parent of five is harder, add in chronic health conditions and surely it is time to reconsider your plans? Absolutely not, as Maddyness discovered when we spoke with Lucille Whiting, Lead Designer and Maker at Sophia Alexander Jewellery.

I originally set up my company back in 2006 after my maternity leave ended with my first child. Whilst I had loved my job, I'd had a really difficult pregnancy. I'd struggled with chronic pain flares since I was 18 and I'd been hospitalised after a serious road traffic accident at 8 months pregnant.

My priorities shifted and I decided to fall back on some previous stone and ceramic training to start a new business casting baby hands and feet in solid polished bronze.

I loved the work so much. It was amazing working with so many different families and I took pride in making every single sculpture, but there was one problem.

I'm based in the middle of Suffolk, halfway between Bury St Edmunds and Cambridge – 20 miles from anywhere. My new role meant that customers either had to visit me, or I had to visit them in their own homes. It involved a lot of travel and many customers ended up coming to see me from miles away. On occasion, I made baby casts for families who lived as far away as Surrey!

At that point, I knew I couldn't grow the company in the way I wanted, so it was time to think again.

Around that time, online shopping had really started to take off. In addition to this, a lot of my sculpture customers had also started to ask if I could make fingerprint or handprint jewellery in addition to baby casts. It was a really exciting prospect. Something I knew I could already make, but something I could do remotely. No more driving for hours. I only needed access to a post office.

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Did you have the expertise and experience in the field you chose?

I was extremely fortunate growing up. My father was an engineer who made sculptures, ornaments, jewellery and more. He invented and could make just about anything. We watched, listened and learned. I was an unofficial apprentice as long as I was prepared to pay attention. I went on to do several art and sculpture based courses once I left school and was able to transfer all the skills gained to start creating both baby sculptures and jewellery.

Did you start on your own or with any other partners?

I set up the company alone and I still run it alone today. Having a chronic illness, I work in a very isolated way, which works well for me. It helps me to capably manage my condition.

I make each and every piece of jewellery by hand, although I do work with several phenomenal master craftsmen from around the UK. Once I've carved an original necklace or charm in wax and added the fingerprint, handprint or paw print, I send it to be cast in gold or silver. Once I receive it back, I finish, polish and send it away again to be hand-engraved and set with gemstones or

diamonds. Gemstone setting and hand-engraving are trades in their own right, with experts training for decades to perfect their skills.

Once complete, pieces of jewellery are all sent to people at The Assay Office and hallmarked.

How did people around you react when you told them about your plans?

This is quite funny when I think back on it. Most of my family were very cautious about spending one penny on something that was just a fanciful idea.

It wasn't that they didn't support me or understand why I wanted to pursue it, it's just that they knew I was a complete novice when it came to running a business. Setting up or running a business, particularly an online one, was new to all of us. Plus, I'd moved away in my early twenties, so it wasn't something anyone could actively help me with.

I wasn't in good health, I had a new baby and my husband worked long hours in an unrelated field. It was always going to be me, myself and I. Spending money on it was a risk, so they suggested lots of ways in which I could tentatively startup. Unfortunately, I knew from early on that putting up notices in newsagent windows was never going to cut it.

Can you talk about your business plan?

I've set up and grown my business slowly and organically, around my deteriorating health over the years. My business story is one of slow growth, quiet resilience and learning not to give myself a hard time over unrealistic self-imposed targets that I can't possibly reach.

I do plan – a lot. I have a million to-do lists and I love journals, planners and apps like Trello, but a conventional business plan was never going to work for me. I plan on a weekly, monthly and annual basis. Setting tasks and targets for what I need to do right now and where I want to be.

“My life doesn't depend on getting everything done yesterday.”

How have you financed the business?

Financially, the business was built almost entirely from the money that was 'left' at the end of each month (I have five children, so you can probably imagine how much is 'left') and money that I earned from commissions. It's been a very long road, but the debt was something I never wanted hanging over my family. Every purchase has been carefully considered. I've only ever bought what I had to. Financial mistakes and paying the wrong people to do work for me has been heartbreaking.

Do you know how many times you have pitched your business?

I've never yet pitched my business, but now I'm more established and have a solid reputation, it's something I'm thinking about. I'm now exploring ways to raise money for new ideas and my next steps.

What would you say were the biggest difficulties that you experienced during your startup adventure?

It doesn't matter how careful you are, setting up a business is so complicated and involved, that unless you're experienced or have someone to coach/advise you, you're bound to make a lot of mistakes (FYI – Be very wary of 'experts' and coaches. Everyone and their Mother seems to think they're an expert these days).

I could possibly write a book about how *not* to set up a business. I've had 6 different websites, some painstakingly built on awful platforms. I've learned to use software that quickly became obsolete, but the most devastating mistakes have been trusting and hiring external people to do work for me.

A local photographer with a huge, established studio in town took the most atrocious photographs of my sculptures. I later found out that he'd told other people I was 'competition'.

Then, after asking around for recommendations, I hired another local man to build my first website and take professional photographs of my jewellery. I had no contract and halfway through, he decided that he wanted to double his prices. When he realised we didn't have the money, he walked away with our entire startup bursary from the local council and left us with nothing but 2 CDs.

One full of unusable photographs and a second with useless bits of website code.

I handmade expensive, time-consuming necklaces for 'influencers' who promised glowing blog posts – and then sent out a few social media posts instead. My mistakes have pushed me to learn these skills for myself. I now know how to properly research the people I want to work with. I'm adept at SEO. I'm well established with a huge number of trade contacts. I've invested in equipment like good camera lenses, learned how to use social media platforms and I do everything myself, wherever I can.

Have you had to pivot at some point?

I pivoted early on from making casts of baby hands and feet in bronze to making jewellery. It enabled me to work remotely so that I could take better care of my health and meant I could grow my business beyond my local customer base.

On a personal level, do you feel that you had the necessary support in these or other tough times?

My husband has always been the most amazing support. He's been with me since I was 18, so 20 years now! And he's been with me on this business journey every step of the way.

He's not around on a daily basis to help with the physical work. He doesn't deal with my customers or the people I work with, but he is always here for advice and to help with the big decisions. It's very difficult when you work alone in a very isolated way. I've put a lot of effort into cultivating online communities and relationships. It's so important to have like-minded people to talk things through with and to bounce new ideas off.

Where are you today?

Today, Sophia Alexander is a luxury British jewellery brand. I specialise in making modern family heirlooms and custom personalised fingerprint jewellery.

I work with prints from newborn babies, engaged couples, Great Grandparents

and even four-legged family members. Cats, dogs and horses.

I work in 9ct gold, 18ct gold, fairtrade gold and silver, making necklaces, rings and cufflinks. I also make fingerprint wedding rings in both platinum and titanium. We can add engraved names, actual handwriting, clients signatures, ethically sourced diamonds and birthstones. These are handmade modern heirlooms that I send across the world, from the UK to customers in America, Australia and East Africa.

“I often operate a waiting list, which is beyond amazing and still quite incomprehensible.”

I think I will always have eleventy-billion things I'd love to do, but it's good to look at the brand now and know that I built that.

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

1. There are so many things to do when starting out that it's easy to get overwhelmed. If you get overwhelmed, you won't get anything done. Plan, plan and plan some more. Break everything down into bitesize sections – Website, Social Media, Email Lists, Marketing, Blogging, SEO (it's a very long list).
2. Set and re-evaluate your tasks and goals every week using an app or a physical journal. Learn to prioritise what needs to be done now and what can be left. Be prepared to move things across to the following week or month because you're only human.
3. Set yourself at least one or two small, manageable tasks to complete each day, then even if you crash the car, flood the house or one of your children is ill, you will have still made one positive step forward.
4. Effective time management is so important. I personally use the Pomodoro technique, where I set a timer and really focus on one activity for 25 minutes before I have a short break and start over. It really helps to eliminate distractions and get things done.
5. Stop comparing yourself to every other entrepreneur out there. Particularly those ones running ads on Facebook with their multiple 6 figure businesses. Their situation might be totally different from yours. There will always be those with more time, more money and more help.

You do you. Focus on learning as much as you can building a reputation that speaks for itself.

6. Build a community of supportive business owners in a similar niche early on. These will fast become one of your most valuable resources. You don't have to go out to network (Something most people have only just realised over the past few months of COVID-19). Often the communities you find in Facebook Groups and on platforms like Instagram (via hashtags) are far more useful than generic networking groups anyway.
7. Be kind to yourself. Mistakes are par for the course and most of the time, you'll emerge stronger.

Lucille Whiting is a custom jewellery designer and writer, based in Suffolk UK. She's the founder of [Sophia Alexander Jewellery](#), she is also a mother of five, a full-time home-educating mother to one with multiple anaphylactic allergies and she's lived with a life-long chronic pain condition for 20 years. She writes about preserving family memories, workplace diversity, accessibility, inclusion and overwhelm.

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