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Bringing a world of experience to the dating game

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Inside Track Q&A: Jennifer Haskins, Two's Company

What is the most unique thing about your business/distinguishes you from competitors?

The individualised service. With some dating agencies there is automatic sign-up, but Two's Company we interview people individually, get to know them, and take it from there in terms of making introductions. It's also a discreet, professional service aimed at unattached professionals.

The fact that both Bill and I have previously been married and divorced, with children, and had previously tried out introduction agencies, means that we can relate to our clients. I also have a background in psychotherapy, counselling and executive coaching which brings added expertise.

What has been your biggest challenge?

Like many people, the economic downturn presented challenges for us. We both had successful business careers – my partner Bill had spent most of his life in commercial property, which was affected by the downturn. I had run my own manufacturing business for 23 years, which I had sold, and then moved into training, which was also affected by the recession.

We had a business idea for a dating agency focused on unattached professionals, and three and a half years ago, gave it a go. Thankfully it worked.

What has been your biggest success?

Growing the business from scratch. The first two years were very tough. We were barely paying our bills, but word of mouth and recommendations from people who had met partners through the service, meant that word spread. We've now made over 1,000 matches.

Any advice for businesses?

Focus is so important in a business. We come into contact with business people all the time, and we are amazed at the number of people who are extremely focused and driven about their businesses- invariably their companies are the most successful. Similarly, pro-activity is hugely important. You need to be pro-active about your own career and business in order to make it work - the same applies to relationships.

Are the banks open for business?

No. I think a lot of the lending is really older loans with different terms and conditions. We didn't need any finance when we started out, but I remember when I started out with my own business all those years ago, it was also impossible then to get finance. There was also a gender aspect too. I don't think I was fully taken seriously because I was a woman. Ulster Bank was the lender which eventually provided me with finance.

Would you sell your business?

At the moment, I don't think so. It's hard to put a valuation on it, but we've grown exponentially over the last year, with revenues up between 60 and 70 per cent in the last year. I don't think we would consider selling it though, the main reason being that we get huge job satisfaction from our work.

Bill, for example, has had a lot of success at different points during his career, but he was never enjoyed a project as much as this one. It's hugely satisfying to help people meet someone and make connections. You get a lot of positive feedback. It sounds corny, but it's great to be really making a difference.

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