

Starting FROM SCRATCH...

Being your own boss can mean flexibility and more control but, as these LOCAL WOMEN REVEAL, there are ups and downs to being an entrepreneur



'I knew how to write a prescription - but I didn't know how to write a business letter'

We've all had them. Those days when, with no time to breathe, we think how great it would be to control our own working lives. Imagine having the final say over your own diary and being able to work around those holidays or that extracurricular course you've simply never found the time to enrol on. Sounds great, doesn't it?

In reality though, would you be brave enough to set out on your own path? VIVA meets three leading businesswomen who took the risk right here in Dubai, to find out about the real trials and triumphs of going it alone...

Dr Lamees Hamdan, 37, is the founder of luxury skincare brand Shiffa. She lives in Dubai with her husband and four children.

"I've always been interested in skincare and was happy enough to use the products on the market, often believing the hype and advertising. But when I became pregnant with my first child, I was disappointed with the pregnancy oils available. The ingredients were no more impressive than olive oil!

My disappointment spurred me on to make my own and that's where the idea of Shiffa was born. I wanted to give consumers the equivalent of La Prairie but in an organic premium sense, using only essential oils and homeopathic and ayurvedic herbs.

My background and training as a doctor meant I had a strong understanding of the body, but what I didn't know was the language of business. I knew how to write a prescription – but I didn't know how to write a business letter!

Funding caused an even bigger challenge. The banks weren't accustomed to hearing about skincare product lines and thought the venture was too high-risk.

But two years after setting up Shiffa, the Dubai SME entrepreneurial programme agreed to invest. As a small business it was an ideal set-up because we could draw on their administrative resources and have access to their finance team. Since then, over the past 10 years, Shiffa has grown into a global brand and it's mainly down to word of mouth.

As a woman, I feel like I had an advantage thanks to government support, which I am grateful for. I am also lucky that my mother can look after my children whenever I travel. You have more flexibility as an entrepreneur – but the responsibilities and pressures are all yours. There's no one but you to ensure everything is done."

www.shiffa.com

Sawsan Ghanem, 41, owns a PR company, specialising in business-to-business clients, alongside her husband and business partner Louay. They live and work in Dubai and have a one and half year old daughter Maya.

“When my husband and I set up Active PR in 2002, we quickly realised that what we were offering was relevant and timely. The handful of clients we started out with liked that we weren’t a press release factory. Instead, our service was more personal and focused on offering best practices.

The first couple of years were tough because we had to create our strategy, work through HR issues and focus on getting our brand name out there. There’s always an element of risk, no matter how much groundwork you put into setting up a new business. You really never know how it’s going to take off until you actually start it.

Ten years on and we’ve grown from a small business to a medium-sized one. We continue to look after some of the clients that have been with us from the start. I’m often asked what it’s like to work with my husband and all I can say is that it works! Our strengths and our weaknesses are different so we complement each other. And while we have very specific roles within the business, we are always there to bounce ideas off each other.

One particular idea I’ve had for a long time now is coming to fruition. I’ve always admired how Londoners are adventurous in their fashion sense, but I kept wondering why they weren’t wearing any original fashion from young Middle Eastern designers. In response I’ve created Maya’s Closet, a platform to showcase Dubai’s fashion industry talents to the West.

After nine months – and a great deal of hard work and long hours – Maya’s Closet is now live online. I was able to draw on my PR experience, but it hasn’t been an easy feat to create the e-commerce site and do justice to the designers and fashion it features. I definitely felt a huge sense of responsibility and found myself on a big learning curve but, in the end, that’s made me more determined to make Maya’s Closet an even bigger success.

Having started out on two different businesses now, I think the biggest thing I’ve learned is that, as a business owner, you have to believe in what you are doing and stay focused and dedicated. It might be tough in the beginning but if you stick at it, you will reap the rewards in time.”

www.mayas-closet.com



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'We knew we were doing something positive by bringing women entrepreneurs together'

Claire Fenner, 36, is the co-founder of the women's global entrepreneur network Heels & Deals. She recently relocated from Dubai to Hong Kong with her husband and two sons, aged four and six.

"After launching my magazine business in 2008, I began to receive a lot of media coverage – as did my friend, Georgie Hearson, who also set up her own business around the same time. A number of women approached us and were keen to find out how we had formed our businesses.

It was around this time that the recession began in the Middle East, so I was busy keeping the business afloat, but I still managed to keep in touch with the entrepreneurs that I met. One day after speaking to four of them, one after the other, I realised they not only shared the same fears about the economy, they each felt they were alone.

That's when Georgie and I decided to launch our first Heels & Deals event. We expected around 30 to 40 women to turn up a month later – instead, 185 did!

It was a negative time for business owners and we felt we were doing something positive by bringing women entrepreneurs together and suggesting how they could collaborate. Then, in 2010, the economy was so much weaker that I decided to close down the magazine business. It was a hard decision but juggling two businesses and two young children wasn't easy.

Globally there has been a massive increase in women starting up their own businesses. Many are disillusioned with the corporate world, while others want a career and a family and wonder how they are going to juggle it all. Through Heels & Deals, we have realised that there are so many women who need help, connections and support to make their business ambitions a reality. That definitely kept us going through those dark hours when we had just launched the business.

Our vision now is to help create more female entrepreneurs and make them successful, in turn creating sustainable economies and better societies. We are currently talking to seven other countries that are keen to have Heels & Deals, so we know there is a definite need out there.

Women shouldn't be afraid to ask for help. A great entrepreneur is a lifelong learner and it doesn't matter if you don't always land on your feet – women are great at helping each other."

www.heelsanddeals.org

Entrepreneur Shimi Shah helps start-ups get off the ground, both through her work as an angel investor and through her SME advisory business, Carousel Solutions. She shares her advice for anyone thinking of setting up their own business.

What traits does a good entrepreneur need to have?

I like to see passion, commitment, and a total focus on their business. I invest in people first and, without a clearly motivated founder, it's more challenging. Entrepreneurs who commit their time, but who also invest some of their own capital in establishing the key foundations of the business, show a deeper level of commitment and focus.

How do you gain investment?

Persevere and don't give up if you truly believe in your idea and business model. Early stage investment is challenging to obtain, so ensure you try all avenues and use the support of your friends, family, and networks. Think through your business model and work out the key value drivers. You need to know how a potential investor will make a return on their investment and make sure your financial and business proposal is clearly communicated.

What are the downsides?

There are many! This is why passion and a complete belief in what you are doing is so important. Being an entrepreneur is often lonely and at times a long road. It's also an

expensive process. You need to ensure that you have financial security to at least cover your living costs for a period of six to 12 months.

What support is there for entrepreneurs?

Dubai is an interesting city to start your entrepreneurial journey. Despite the high costs of setting up a company, there is a growing infrastructure to support the start-up environment. Increasingly, there is more early stage capital available and there are a variety of networks and events catering for entrepreneurs. Additionally, Dubai's location allows for easy regional and international travel as well as access to the whole MENA region as a growing market.

www.carousel-solutions.com