

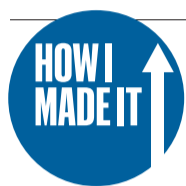


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BUSINESS

From fashion stars to Harry Styles, our firm is shooting for the top



MARIE OWEN, FOUNDER OF LS PRODUCTIONS

Andrew Saunders

Marie Owen's remarkable journey – from flight attendant to chief executive of one of the UK's fastest-growing creative services companies – might be said to have started with a kiss.

"I met my husband John in a disco in Tenerife. He said he was a fashion photographer; I wasn't even sure that was a real job, but I thought it sounded cool," she said.

It was not just a chat-up line – he was indeed a fashion photographer, always on the hunt for new and exciting locations. But when the couple moved to Edinburgh to marry and start a family, Owen took a career break... and the idea for what became LS Productions took hold. Today, the company helps organise film shoots for all manner of clients, arranging everything from equipment hire to catering. At the beginning, however, it was all about finding locations.

"We thought we'd start a database of locations in Scotland. Edinburgh, in particular, has a lot to offer: it's beautiful, and within a five-mile radius you've got the city centre, Arthur's Seat, Portobello beach – but not many in the fashion industry knew about it," said Owen, 48.

Working from a computer on her kitchen table while also looking after her three children, it soon became clear there was a business in organising shoots as well as sourcing locations. "John would come back from Minorca or wherever saying things like, 'There was no water on set – we were all boiling.' It was just ridiculous. I could see there were lots of little things that could be done better that, together, would make a big difference."

But there were white-knuckle moments along the way. For one, a bad choice of partners almost scuppered the firm's first attempt at expansion. She and John teamed up with a friend and

HIGH FIVE

My hero ... I am inspired by people around me – like the book-keeper in our office, a single mum bringing up her son and working really hard on her own career. And I'm inspired by my sister who lives with ME and has three kids, which is really challenging.

My best decision ... was starting LS, even though I had no experience of running a business at all. I never dreamt back then that we would get to where we are now. And maybe kissing that boy in the disco in Tenerife.

My worst decision ... Making the same bad decision a few times. And I can be a bit slow letting people go. I always want to believe the best about someone, but sometimes it is right just to part company.

Funniest moment ... We were asked to provide something called Ecstasy Activated Walnuts on a shoot. We didn't know what they were and had to Google them. It turns out that it was a brand of walnuts – but a lot of very weird drug websites came up in the search.

Best business tip ... Write a business plan. For a long time I was scared of writing a business plan, because if you don't achieve it, then you've failed. But a plan is not tattooed on your body – you can always write a new one.

her husband who ran a small, local photographic agency, and each side put in £15,000.

"We made lots of mistakes – like all four of us being equal shareholders," Owen recalled. "I had no power to make decisions, even though I was doing everything because I was the only one who didn't have a day job."

After 18 months or so, she bought the partners out. It cost about £20,000 – an expensive but valuable lesson. "It taught me that there is a big difference between being friends with someone and going into business with them."

Growth came slowly to start with at LS, although Owen said this was a blessing as it gave her time to get the basics right. "I didn't pay myself a salary for the first five years – everything was reinvested in the firm."

In 2014 – having built a roster of big-name brands from Anthropologie to Chanel and Stella McCartney – LS branched out into music videos and commercials, working on the Grammy-nominated video for the Harry Styles song *Adore You*.

"We'd built this platform that can work for fashion, ads and film. They all need the same services: locations, logistics, facilities – everything from keeping them on budget and providing generators and the right kind of cameras to where people sleep, what they eat and how to keep everyone dry on set."

It is a model that has made the business much less reliant on a

single income stream, helping keep LS on an even keel first through Covid and now the cost of living crisis.

"Most businesses in this sector are project-based," said Owen. "But we've got a few eggs in lots of different baskets – so while the commercial market is tough at the moment, fashion is quite buoyant. We've also moved into film and TV production services, which is where our biggest growth is going to come from because so much of that work is coming to the UK just now."

LS's TV credits include a CBeebies show about an autistic child who struggles at school, *A Kind of Spark*. It struck a chord with Owen because her own children – twins Ralph and Lily, 18, and Grace, 21 – were recently diagnosed with ADHD. "They hated school, really hated it – it just couldn't accommodate how they thought." All three are now working, and flourishing, in the family firm.

LS generated revenues of almost £20 million in 2022, a figure that has grown by an average of 55 per cent a year over the past three years, earning LS Productions a place on this year's Sunday Times 100 ranking of Britain's fastest-growing private companies. Profits for 2022 were a modest £446,000 – a result, said Owen, of significant investment in expansion. She employs 50 people in Edinburgh, Manchester and Glasgow, and is about to open up with a local partner in Malta.

The best may be yet to come. Owen wants revenues of "at least £100 million" in the next five years – a goal that she admits will entail outside investment for the first time. "We'll need the funds to scale. I'm looking for friendly investors: people who want a return, obviously, but who get what we're doing."

And although she has come a long way from that nightclub in the Canaries, her enthusiasm for LS remains undimmed. "It's only as you go through the stages that the clouds part and you begin to see what's really possible."

PETER SUMMERS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Marie Owen's firm supports location filming for shoots from TV to ads and a Harry Styles music video