



Great Expectations

Belinda Simon has always had great ambitions for her online maternity and children's boutique Pregoli. Now with earthquakes and late nights behind her, those ambitions are fast becoming reality. By Glenn Baker.

It could all have started so very differently. When Belinda Simon first looked into establishing her maternity wear business, she seriously considered investing in a babywear/childrenswear retail store in Christchurch that happened to be for sale. The idea was to convert it into maternity wear.

"The sale never went through in the end, but I got so far into the planning stages it seemed logical to carry on," says Belinda. "I had just fallen pregnant with our second child at the time so a website was much more suited to my lifestyle. I thought it would take an hour or so per day to pack and send orders, and an hour a week for admin, most of which I planned to do when my boys slept. Oh how I was wrong!"

Pregoli was launched in September 2009, catering for a gap in the market for stylish, quality maternity and children's clothing and accessories. Right from the beginning, time would prove to be the biggest challenge for its ambitious owner.

"I had always wanted a business I could run from home with my boys around me. The first 18 months I worked until two in the morning, and every chance I could get during the day," recalls Belinda. "I'm lucky to have a very supportive husband!"

"Now things are running really smoothly and I have employed help in certain areas which allows me to focus on growing the business."

Another major challenge came as a result of the events of September 4, 2010 and February 22, 2011. Not surprisingly, being based in Canterbury and with many customers living in Christchurch, sales did decline. Belinda also noticed less planning by her customers as many were living day-to-day. "Previously we would have customers thinking ahead for clothing for special occasions. It became more of a last minute dash.

"Luckily, rural areas and Auckland are also a big market for us so we were able to continue supplying our range to the rest of New Zealand."

Belinda says there was a lot of

support for Christchurch businesses including organisations such as Recover Canterbury and Hands Up Wellington.

"Hands Up Wellington put on an amazing expo for Christchurch retailers to exhibit and sell to Wellington locals – who really opened their wallets for us!"

Pregoli also gave back to the Christchurch community during this time by holding a community evening with a child psychologist, to help children and families deal with the trauma.

"We also reached out to our database and had clothing, toys, nappies etc, donated from all over New Zealand for those in need – many of whom had lost their homes or belongings."

Inspired marketing

Much of Pregoli's success can be attributed to some well thought-out marketing and making the necessary investment.

"I always say: start the way you mean to carry on," says Belinda. "I invested in the best website I could afford, and spent money on packaging, flyers, cards, posters and any other promotional material I could think of."

"First impressions are so important, and being online you don't have smiling staff or the 'feeling' of the store. So it is crucial to get your branding right, and have an easy-to-use, inviting website that customers feel safe entering their card details into."

"When a customer orders from us, we aim to send it that same day. When the parcel arrives overnight and the package is beautifully wrapped in tissue it provides another 'wow' factor."

Belinda says word of mouth is one of her best forms of advertising.

"I've learnt over the last couple of years which forms of advertising work – and it's about getting your target market right. Having good contacts always helps too!"

"Sales have recently grown by 200 percent so we're right on track for our sales targets."

Belinda constantly looks for ways to

raise the profile of the Pregoli brand. The 2011 'Yummy Mummy' Makeover Model Search was a big success, and there're plans to run it again in 2012 to promote the new winter range.

She regularly speaks at Christchurch ante-natal classes and assists with projects to help charities and quake victims.

"I'm excited about the prospect of following my marketing plan through the next three to five years, and not only meet, but exceed our goals."

"No doubt I'll need to hire more staff along the way as we plan to increase sales by a further 423 percent within the next three to five years," she says.

I ask her to elaborate on her growth plans for Pregoli and it turns out they are indeed ambitious. "Initially I would have said the plan was to open a retail store, but at this stage the plan is still to grow the online business, and move to a warehousing facility in the near future."

"I'd like to expand further into the North Island and lower South Island, as I know options are limited there," she says.

"If growth continues as it is currently tracking, in five years I'll be managing the business with plenty of staff to continue the great customer service Pregoli is known for!"

Glenn Baker is editor of NZBusiness.

Belinda's lessons

- You can't do everything yourself.
- 'To Do' lists will continue to grow but help you feel like you have some order!
- Always start as you mean to go on.
- Trust your instinct, you know your business and target market better than a salesperson!
- To run your own business you must be truly passionate about what you do.