

From kitchen floors to commercial contracts

When she started Green Mop, Brighton's first environmentally friendly cleaning company, Rachael Hughes wasn't particularly interested in being 'green'. BONNIEYUILL finds out how lemon juice, vinegar and a lot of elbow grease helped take her from a handful of domestic customers to winning commercial contracts.

After spending nearly 20 years commuting and working in IT, Rachael Hughes was joking with friends one day that she'd had enough and would rather be a cleaner. A few months later, she'd created a website and found herself cycling to her first customers with a rucksack full of cleaning products on her back.

As a long-term asthma and eczema sufferer, Rachael Hughes used the same old-fashioned cleaners in her business that she used at home. "I wasn't being clever and thinking that the green ticket was the way to go, it was actually for my own health and then, as the business grew, it's been good for the health of my staff and clients.

"Everyone has become accustomed to using something that's labeled 'bathroom cleaner' or 'kitchen cleaner' and 'this will kill 99% of bacteria', but unless you're having surgery on your kitchen table there's really no need." Lemon juice, white vinegar and soda crystals are some of the cleaners that get the job done for Green Mop.

When she began the company in 2007, there were no other green cleaning businesses in the area and Rachael had stumbled on a niche market. But with no formal business training and after a hard day's cleaning, she still had to tackle the business admin. "It was blooming hard work with my backpack on, doing six lots of housework in a day then coming back and realising this is actually a business – I've got to invoice people, I've got to do banking and I've got to keep a record of everything."

Two years later she sold the domestic cleaning work to another cleaning company in order to concentrate on the commercial and contract side. "A huge amount of time, energy and overheads went into domestic cleaning, which was fine when Green Mop only had 10-20 customers with maybe a once-a-fortnight or a once-a-week cleans," she says, "but everybody wants their housework done slightly differently. They want that cushion left there and fluffed up like that and this folded in that way and it became quite complex. It becomes a huge overhead when you start employing people for domestic cleaning to make sure that that customer is getting exactly what they want."

Rachael had been employing one person full time just to keep on top of rotas, worksheets and logistics for domestic cleaning. Changing to commercial cleaning was a good business decision as it is more straightforward, but it was one that it took her a while to come to terms with because it was difficult to turn customers away.

"I hadn't really thought about it but then I got a few calls," she explains. "With commercial cleaning you just clean the washrooms and the kitchens, Hoover the floors and empty the bins and everybody's happy. There's also just one invoice at the end of the month instead of perhaps 40 separate invoices for domestic customers for the same amount of hours and income. Clearly I chose this for an easier life.

"It is also easier when you start employing people to have a really clear expectation from the customer, and the team like to work five nights a week with teams of two or three doing commercial cleaning."

"I used people I knew to start off with," she says, "and they would know other people who were interested in working for the business so everyone was always kind of connected to start with. Then we got to the point where we had to advertise. We used Gumtree and the universities."

Local students soon found that being part of an evening cleaning team fitted well with their lifestyle. "They're not morning people!" Rachael admits. "It's something they like doing because they can work in teams in the evenings, it's actually quite good fun and it's not antisocial like being



RACHEAL'S TOP TIPS

DO:

- ✓ **Make sure your business vision** is clear and understood by the whole team.
- ✓ **Reward consistently good work** as well as extra effort.
- ✓ **Find out if there's funding available** to get training for your team. "Nobody's going to offer it to you on a plate," says Rachael, "you have to go out and find it. National apprenticeships for young people will always be funded for 16-19 year olds and it also means that the person is committed to work for you for that year."

DON'T

- ✗ **Expect the first few years to be easy.** "I think people will never work as hard as the first two years they work in their business," says Rachael, "but once you've been through your steep learning curve it's actually really enjoyable."

REMEMBER

"Treat both staff and customers with respect," says Rachael, "and let your team know that they are valued and the work they do is important."

on a pub shift for hours or on a shop shift all day Saturday."

Ethical employment methods as well as ethical products are important to Green Mop and Rachael was determined not to use casual workers. Instead she has always put each employee on the payroll and pays above the minimum wage. This ensures better staff, who stay with the company and who do a better job. Incentives such as shopping vouchers also encourage employees to maintain high standards. "It's hard work," she acknowledges, "and it's obviously not very glamorous – it's cleaning at the end of the day, so you try to give them the incentives to perform well consistently and do a good job because the day they have an off-day is the day that the customer will notice."

Rachael's mother and grandmother were cleaners, and she instinctively treats her staff with respect and expects everyone else to do the same.

"It was alright when I was an IT geek," she says, "but the minute I was a cleaner arriving with my rucksack to do housework, people would treat me differently – they would have an attitude towards me and I'd be 'just the cleaner'. Nowadays I can be at a Chamber of Commerce meeting and be respected as the director of a company and then in the evening I may be covering a cleaning shift and mopping a floor and I'll be treated like 'just the cleaner'."

She works to a business plan these days, but it's centered around caring for her team and concentrating on sustainable growth. "I try not to set ambitious targets," she admits. "I'm not a risk taker – I just want to make sure their jobs are secure, so it's

a steady pace of growth hopefully, not huge risk taking like taking over other cleaning companies and going after bigger jobs and things like that – I feel really responsible now I'm paying other people's wages."

Now with an established team including trusted supervisors out in the field, Rachael can concentrate on networking and bringing in business. "I still go round on a moped," says Rachael. "It's easy to get around, it's free to park and it's environmentally friendly, but basically it's a lot cheaper. Sometimes it's a bit scary when there's gale force winds coming off the seafront though."

She enjoys networking and benefitting Green Mop by getting out and about in the same green uniform as her cleaners wear. "I wear it when I go to networking events and it's covered with Green Mop logos so people know who I am. I also quite like being involved with the business community in the local area because I can have my say and I can push things forward in the direction that is firstly good for Green Mop and good for my team and good for everybody else."

Currently Volunteer Co-ordinator for the local Chamber of Commerce, she began as a volunteer and an ambassador. "Because I turn up to everything and because I wear a bright green Green Mop hoodie, people remember who I am," she says. Volunteers can get involved in several different steering groups and one of the volunteers has recently set up a green group, organising the eco-friendly and ethical businesses to meet on a monthly basis and advise other businesses on taking their first steps towards being more eco-friendly.

She believes that other businesses are starting to realise that they have at least to give the appearance of being green, even if they don't really believe in it. "They have to be seen to believe in being green," she says, "and to be using ethical suppliers because their customers will like it."

"All of Green Mop's products are eco-friendly and local because something that's produced in this country has less of a carbon footprint. If you're going to claim to be green and ethical you have to look at all of that side of things, for instance whether it's local or at least produced in this country, buying things in bulk and only getting one delivery instead of six – once you claim to green and ethical you have to walk the walk."

Now, with around 30 staff and still growing steadily, the 2008 winner of the Argus Eco Award for Green Business and 2011 winner of the Brighton and Hove Chamber of Commerce Star Award is branching out into franchising.

Green Mop is ready to clean up with another good business opportunity. ❖

Infobank

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Businesses have to be seen to believe in being green

