

Winning advice from a cereal killer

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Stay focussed and become obsessed with data.

That is the message to SMEs from Australia's muesli queen Carolyn Creswell, CEO of Carman's.

Her story is one of true determination. As an 18-year old university student, she faced losing her part-time job when the small muesli business she worked for was put up for sale.

Her first reaction: "You could buy this little business". So she offered the owners \$1000, which they eventually accepted.



The first few years of business were not easy. She was balancing the books in the university library and making morning deliveries before lectures.

For a long time she was completely broke, Creswell tells *Inside FMCG*. "In the early days I was having my brother siphon petrol out of my mother's car so I could do the deliveries the next day.

"I really just had to try and make the business successful. If I could have resigned, I would have. But it is a bit hard to resign from your own company. You owe money to people, and you have to work your way out of it."

Market leader

Fast forward 24 years, and Carman's is a market leader in muesli with a growing range of breakfast cereals and snacks. The export side of the business is growing, with Carman's products now in 32 countries.

"As a brand we are really trying to own winter this year," says Creswell. "We do a range of products in the breakfast space from muesli to clusters, but we have a really big push for porridge this year.

"The other category we have been in for about 10 years is what is known as nutritional snacks – the snacking space. We do a range of different bars. Our new entry into protein bars has been a great success."

Creswell does not pay too much attention to others in the competitive category, preferring to keep her head down and focussed on the Carman's motto, "Real food made with real passion".

Focus on taste

“We have always been a brand with a health focus, but we also have a focus on good taste. I think people know that when they buy our products, they are going to be delicious. That is at the core of who we are.

“We won’t bring out something that is too healthy and tastes like birdseed or like cardboard. It’s much more about real ingredients – ingredients you have heard of and have in your pantry, rather than being the latest health trends.”



As Carman’s has become an Australian household name, so too has Carolyn Creswell. She was named Telstra Businesswoman of the Year in 2013, and made her onscreen debut the following year both in a commercial and as a judge on *Recipe to Riches*, a series dedicated to turning home recipes into Woolworths-ready products.

“There is an authenticity around brands that have really been built from the ground up,” says Creswell, who once worked on the checkout at Coles. “Here I am with this business that I could never have imagined would be as big as it is today. People love that.”

About nurturing

She says that if there is one thing she has learnt about leadership, “it’s about bringing the best out of people”.

While she says she probably did not realise it in the early days, it is about supporting and nurturing the people around you. “The end game is ‘followship’. You hope that one day they enjoy working for you so much they love following you on the crazy journey.”

Her key advice for SMEs? “Be really focused and decide early what you are going to do, and what you aren’t going to do.

“In the early days, I thought I could do everything, say yes to everyone and tweak my product for anyone,” she says. “But you just cannot appeal to everyone.

“The one thing you really need to protect is time, so decide how you are going to spend it.”

Forward indicator

Creswell’s next tip is to become obsessed with data ... if you put a decal on the pack, does that increase sales, and if not, how fast can you change it?

“We make very simple packaging changes because we are always looking at what is working and what is not,” says Creswell. “In the early days I didn’t really understand how important that was.

“Those data numbers are a forward indicator of the success of the business in 12 months’ time. Don’t just look at your sales figures – that has already happened. You need to be looking at how you are going through the registers at Coles and Woolies, what is working, how you can change something, what promotions are most successful.

“It is important to stay ahead of the game and make the right changes.”

Creswell has just returned from a trip to China, where she sees “massive potential”.

“The world is our oyster,” she says. “We want to be the most-loved Australian food brand around the world.

“Not many Australian-owned brands can have such an imprint, so to me the marathon is only just beginning.”

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