

The Time of Her Life

In 1996, a determined visionary with an eye for clean lines and exquisite timepieces launched Delance Inc. Armed with degrees in engineering and art, 10 years' experience in the watch industry and very little financial backing, she created a Swiss empire solely operated by women, for women. Speaking to **DESTINY** from Macolin, Switzerland, Giselle Rufer shares her insights into business success

You started your own business at the age of 50. When was the idea of Delance born?

Destiny being what it is, at the age of 40 I was hired by Swatch to launch its Flik Flak watch, then by Omega to develop new products. It was in 1988 that the idea of creating a watch made exclusively for women was born.

But the response from the male-dominated industry was unenthusiastic...

I went from one watchmaker to another, trying to convince them that women represented a hitherto-unexploited market which was often unhappy with what was being offered. My arguments met with no success. I was tempted to give it all up and go back to painting, sculpture or writing, but I couldn't get

the idea out of my head – I had to find a way to make it possible for such a beautiful dream to become reality. To update my knowledge in the field and ensure it was what I truly wanted to do, I enrolled at the University of Neuchâtel for an intensive, six-month entrepreneurship programme. I studied the various aspects of running an enterprise in detail. And in 1996, with a well-developed business plan, I decided to launch my firm.

What were the biggest challenges you faced?

Risking all my money on a venture which everybody warned me was completely crazy. The biggest obstacle was credibility. No banker could believe that a woman of 50 could come up with a good idea in the watch industry. I couldn't find financing and, as a result, I had to start off very small. I was



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almost bankrupted when a big company bought my agent in the USA and cancelled the order, and [on another occasion], when 15kg of gold – worth some \$450 000 [about R3,3 million] – “disappeared” after one of my suppliers went bankrupt.

How did you deal with such obstacles?

Both in business and my private life, I follow the same set of rules: to rely on instinct and intuition. In times of turmoil, crisis and urgency, I act fast and focus on finding a solution. I ask myself: “What do I really want? What are the risks? Is [this problem] really important? What’s the simplest and most easily applicable solution? Who will it affect?” Sometimes these routine questions lead to a total reconsideration of the matter. I talk to all the people involved – networking has always been very important to me – and I look for solutions which will satisfy most of them. By doing this, I can rely on their support – which gives me additional strength.

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Delance watches are very feminine. Is it important to you to help women embrace their femininity?

I’ve created the Delance watch to say to women: “Femininity is magic. Be all that you can be without having any doubts.” A Delance watch is the talis(wo)man, the lucky charm that should serve as a reminder to its wearer that she can succeed, that she’s connected to all women and that she has the right to be proud of herself.

In addition to your role as founder and CEO of Delance, you’re a frequent speaker at international conferences on entrepreneurship, marketing, cultural creativity and women’s issues. What inspired you to do this?

Since my childhood, I’ve known that women need empowerment as much as



they need love. They need to feel connected to other women. My talent is to be a creator and I offered my talent to women by creating the Delance watch just for

time – anytime.

What’s your life philosophy?

I try to make myself and others happy by accepting what people give me – and giving them the best of my talent and love, in return.

Delance is based in Switzerland, with distribution as far afield as Japan, the USA, Romania and Iceland (although not in SA yet). What tips can you share with South African entrepreneurs on globalising their businesses?

Firstly, if you want to go global, think global from the very beginning. Start by creating a company and a product which are both based on the universal values of your targeted clientele. Hire people who embrace [and express] those values. Then choose a brand name that reflects your product and values. Develop your network and find suppliers who share your values. Finally, concentrate on your clientele and learn to love them as your friends.

RUFER’S RULES FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS

- Be prepared to work hard.
- Be patient.
- Be prepared to fail and begin again.
- Be willing to lose some friends and gain new ones.
- Be open to gaining new freedoms, acquiring new knowledge, travelling to new places and enjoying your job. **D**

them. In doing so, I discovered that I enjoy talking to women and that [many of them] want my support. So I began to speak at these conferences and I loved it. I’m so connected to the women who listen to me that, very quickly, there’s a highly emotional atmosphere.

Do you think women still hold themselves back and doubt their own potential, especially in business?

All over the world, women are oppressed from childhood, to greater and lesser degrees – if not by their parents, then by society. A woman can go to conferences, have good friends and a coach who supports her but, ultimately, she’s alone with herself when she has to work with others. That inspired me to create a watch with a very strong message. As soon as you lose your clarity and your power, just look at the time and you’ll know that it’s *your*