

Case Study: Kempadoo Millar

by Ruth Farrell



Awakening



Eight years ago, Rhian Kempadoo of Kempadoo Millar had completed her Millinery training and was working in costume. A works trip to New York with her boss proved to be pivotal in the direction her career would take her. For her final project, Rhian had made three flat caps from local luxury wool fabrics mixed in a modern way with African type prints. She took these with her to New York to wear whilst she was there. Whilst they were

there, many hip New Yorkers came up to her to compliment her on her hat and ask where she had got it from.

These hats had been submitted along with her thesis named "Can you still make a flat cap in Yorkshire?", a rather tongue in cheek title around the decline of textiles in the local area at that time. This was when JW Myers of Holbeck, the largest flat cap supplier in the area, shut its doors almost overnight and many other companies transferred their production offshore. "Like dominoes we were losing our local Milliners and fabric manufacturers", says Rhian.

On their return Rhian's boss emailed her and said he believed that she should seriously consider making and selling her designs as there seemed to be an interest in them.

1. Discovering a USP

This was her light bulb moment reflecting on her thesis, the surrounding manufacturers were leaving the UK yet in west Yorkshire we were surrounded by quality wool manufacturers and there seemed to be a thirst for this traditional local product with a twist elsewhere.

2. Accepting help.

Rhian's boss offered to give her £5,000 to enable her to start her business. Although daunting, encouraged she took the opportunity to look further into the prospect of starting her own business.

3. Timing

This was the dawn of a change surrounding the fashion industry and manufacturing. Just as many companies were choosing to produce off-shore and fast fashion had almost become the norm, there was a kick back. The Ethical Fashion Forum was founded in 2006 as a collaborative movement to transform social and environmental standards in the fashion industry. At this time papers such as The Guardian and The Observer were running articles spotlighting cheap/quick fashion and unethically produced garments from both ends of the price spectrum: "[Why it's time to end our love affair with cheap fashion](#)". Cheap, throwaway clothes have become hugely popular on the high street, but, just as The Observer's ethical Columnist says, our appetite for disposable fashion is becoming an eco-disaster: "Cheap at twice the price". It's expensive, but is it good quality? Tired of fast fashion, many wanted their clothes to be well-made, ethically produced and fashionable, but high prices and designer labels are no guarantee. This was the beginning of the term "Slow-fashion". Rhian knew that she preferred to be part of this and to sell ethically produced pieces. She also wanted to engage with her local manufacturers.



4. Customer profiling

_This was the time of the Hip-hop fashion, music and culture. In British sport athletes were wearing cool yet dandy type clothing. New York hipster [OutKast](#)'s [André 3000](#) turned his love of fashion into a short-lived career with the preppy ready-to-wear line Benjamin Bixby. Eccentrics with an edge who lived the life-style. Rhian realised this was her ultimate customer and thus became her customer profile.

5. Finding a niche

_Rhian had always liked to wear flat caps but had often found them too masculine. They were predominantly made for men this was ok for her men's pieces. Rhian wasn't a girly girl but she wanted her women's hats to be desirable for women also. Thus she realised there was niche to offer a cap for the tom boys like herself, i.e., not super girly, but a little more feminine.



6. Provenance

_Rhian understood that the provenance of a brand was just as important as the

product. In fact for hers, her product would not exist without it. She visited heritage woollen brands Abraham Moons, Ogden fibres Ltd, and Dougdale Brothers & Co. and knew that she would like to use their fabrics. Thus the cloth was made locally by heritage companies.

7. Understanding limitations and managing expectations

Rhian always knew that she did not want to make her product herself, she felt she would not finish them to a high enough standard and would soon lose interest thus not be able to sustain production long term. Therefore this would not be a scalable business model.

8. Finding a manufacturer.

Therefore her next step was to find a manufacturer, preferably a local one. Rhian came across [Lawrence and Foster Ltd](#) a hat producer in Castleford. Lawrence and Foster are a family business who pride themselves in producing high quality, fashionable head-wear which is made to order. They have a wealth of experience and all their employees are dedicated to ensuring that their products are the best available. Finding the right manufacturer fitted perfectly. They added to the provenance of her product, were traditional of her area and held the same values. Something which was also proved to be greatly important was that not only did they have the strength of producing high quality styles but they had the vision needed to work on more modern designs.

9. Deciding a name and buying a domain

Once Rhian had decided on her name she was advised by her brother to purchase the domain. He had wisely stated that she had no certainty of how successful her business would become, however, should it become successful it would be a nightmare if later on down the line she should try to purchase this domain name and it not be available. This would mean rebranding, etc. Holding the domain name gave her security.

10. Registered as a limited company

As above Rhian set her stall out in advance.

11. Having a level of humility

As a recent graduate, Rhian quickly understood that she needed guidance and didn't know everything. That her problems were not anybody else's. Coming from a costume background she had no idea how to communicate with Manufacturers or the necessary steps to get her designs across to them and into work. Lawrence and Foster helped to ground her to be commercial and have realistic goals, including understanding lead times. Although at first they seemed brittle and a little tough, she learned that by having humility and a willingness to listen and learn over time she would gain their respect and grow a mutual respect.

12. Learn the steps and procedures

This proved to be a good learning curve. They taught her the need for terms and conditions, technical specs, style names, the terminology, and sealing process.

13. Being realistic

When she first met with the product developer at Lawrence and Foster he said to her: "Do you want to be in the fashion business or the business of fashion? One will get you lots of red carpets and champagne the other will give you sleepless nights, broken nails and potentially earn you some money." It was only later that his words

made sense to her. In the beginning on founding her business Rhian had gone out and bought a "power outfit", a tailored dress for her vision of a business woman. She never wore this dress for any of her meetings. Most often Rhian held her meetings in old mills wearing a high-vis jacket. It was often tiring, gruelling, dirty, and down to earth. The manufacturers were not easy on her. Now that she has done her time, proven her commitment and staying power - "walked the plank" so to speak -, they treat her differently. They know she is a real business in it for the long-haul. They all also have an understanding that they are working together for the greater good of Yorkshire, so have a common goal. Lawrence and Foster now are more open to trying more avant-garde ideas too, it is a two way street.

14. Understand it's not a fail to not know everything

_Rhian soon learned to admit that as she puts it: "Everyone doesn't know something. If you don't know ask someone who does or research."

15. Speculate to accumulate

_Having been turned down for various business loans, Rhian was willing to make a steady path. To not earn much in the beginning. To not owe anyone. To also reduce the risk of annoying any of her fledgling business relationships. She paid all her bills up front and only introduced payment terms after three years. Now her terms are 30 days to her fabric suppliers and 60 days to her manufacturer.

16. Have a good mentor

_Having someone that she could turn to for support or advice all along has been a major factor in Rhian continuing throughout the ups and downs of owning her own business. Besides the expert help from Lawrence and Foster, Rhian was lucky enough to have two mentors. Her accountant brother and Simon Brown, the founder of Joe Brown's. At a difficult time, her brother advised her she would do best to sell her car. She was told: "Do what's right for the business not what's right for you", a piece of advice that she has returned to time and time again.

17. Be willing to take advise

_Often industry professionals and mentors may be brutally honest. Don't take things too personally, it is a business. It is valuable to have honesty.

18. Have a good support system

_Often as a start-up company and SME you can feel isolated, frustrated, and scared. Having a good support system is priceless. Besides the manufacturers and Mentors Rhian also had her family. Her Mother and Father were incredibly truthful and supportive.

19. Don't grasp at every seemingly miraculous opportunity

_Early on, Rhian was offered major investment if she committed to manufacturing from China in high volume and low cost. This of course was a major curve ball, it was a totally different business model. Although it was the tougher decision, she chose to stick to her principles and what was ethically right for her and her business.

20. Know your strap-line and adhere to it

_The Kempadoo Millar strap-line is "soul-made with luxury". The above business model was the polar opposite of this and would have therefore taken the personality out of her brand.

21. Deciding if to go on-line and choosing the right time

_In the beginning, Rhian showed at lots of fairs to try and reach her target audience

and establish sales. She found that she was not reaching the type of consumer that valued her product and its reflective price points, also the shows were extremely expensive. Rhian knew that if she was to ever meet the prices to get the true cost of her product back, she needed to go on-line to reach them. Online was her ideal route to market. Thus she built her own website.



22. Research into Overseas sales and shipping

Rhian's other light bulb moment came with her first overseas order from America. It put her in the global market. Unfortunately, Rhian had not anticipated this and therefore did not have any idea about exporting. In hindsight, she wished she had done this in advance. To gain the knowledge, she undertook a UKTI course [Internationally optimising for Exporting]. During the course, she also learnt how important marketing was and came to realise her sales would be the opposite of provisional. This meant she had to be aware of the names and terminology that she used on her site. For instance, when she gained her sale from her American customer he told her that in America they don't call her product a flap cap that they call it an [Ivy cap]. This was something she hadn't ever thought of. Other names are [Newsie] or [Newsboy] derived from the street corner newspaper sellers who wore them. Besides this she learned that often a product is named after a brand such as [hoover] for a vacuum cleaner. In Rhian's case it was [Kangol hat] commonly named in North America.

23. Use marketing tools

During her course, Rhian learnt how useful tag words were for capturing an audience and sales.

24. Get to know your customer

Rhian soon came to understand that her customers like to tell their story and often send her photos of themselves in their Kempadoo Millar headwear. Hearing from her often eccentric customers and seeing them through their pictures helps her to better understand her market.

Publicity comes knocking



Then something remarkable happened: Idris Elba OBE (Idrissa Akuna Elba), the English actor, producer, musician and DJ, was photographed wearing a Kempadoo Millar hat! This gave Rhian the gift of publicity, but also threw up new obstacles.

25. Build a website fit for purpose

Rhian had a website, however, it was not an ecommerce one. Now Rhian had the publicity, but no way to easily sell her product. It was like a shop window with no actual store. A website with the back end built in was necessary. Rhian had to change her website to suit.

26. Interact with people who understand you and your business

From a bad experience Rhian learned that not all programmes and contacts were right for her to engage with. In 2013, Rhian signed up to a local business accelerator programme, along with around 50 other individuals and businesses of various levels and types. Unfortunately, due to it being for all different businesses the expert advice was more a case of "one size fits all". Often Rhian felt she was given conflicting information and felt that she was being pulled in all directions with information over-load. There was not enough structure to the programme. Businesses were each given unachievable targets that did not take into account the individual businesses life-style, ethos, or personality. Rhian began to feel demoralised. Nothing she did seemed good enough and she did not want to commit to "the get rich quick" culture, she was not a risk taker. Rhian preferred to take her business slowly and not pursue a fast growth model her confidence started to wane. She spoke to her mentor about how she was feeling and he told her to go and quit immediately - that she should be around the right kind of people.

27. Talk to people who have done it

From this bad experience, Rhian knew that her business pathway had to be based

on real life and her personal commitments. That it was better to engage with real people who had done it before and not theorised.

28. Keep your perspective

When she came to leave the leaders told her "You are not a natural entrepreneur and should do something else". Her family helped her keep her perspective and boosted her to realise how far she had come and to continue on and protect herself from negatives like this.

29. Trust your instincts

Just before she left the above programme, Rhian was introduced to myself the TCBL labs manager at TCoE in Huddersfield. Further to me helping Rhian through the design labs, I included some of her headpieces in the #Look_here and _now exhibition and fashion shoot that I was making for TCBL showcasing the designers and brands that I had worked with thus far through the project. I had arranged to produce the film and shoot on location at one of our member companies AW



Hainsworth in Pudsey. They are an 8th generation textile mill. Whilst there, I introduced Rhian to Adam, one of the owners. Adam offered all of us that were there that day to take some of the waste cloth to use. Following on from this meeting, Adam approached Rhian with an offer. We had been in early talks with AW Hainsworth and Leeds Beckett University about establishing a fashion and textiles hub at Hainsworth for SMEs and Start-up companies. Following the establishment of which, Adam asked Rhian if she would be interested in becoming their first hub dweller. At that time Rhian was still running her business from home with reduced overheads. She was offered three months free of charge, which gave her wiggle room. She knew it was a risk financially and as it was a new venture for everyone unsure how it would work out. Her instincts thought it was a good move though. In her new surroundings she would feel more professional and be surrounded by people with a wealth of knowledge. It was worth the risk.

30. Surround yourself with like-minded people - find your tribe

Although there have been a few ups and downs, moving to The Leeds Creative Business Hub at AW Hainsworth proved to be advantageous. Rhian said: "The

knowledge of the industry experts around me has been amazing and the help from The Hainsworth family has been great, being in such a prestigious building too with like-minded people as been the best thing



for me and my business. The Hainsworth family, though a business steeped in history, they have one eye on the future and generously give opportunities to individuals they have confidence in. Surrounding herself with people she had something in common with meant that Rhian did not feel so lost in the big bad world of business.

Full circle

The bright-coloured waste that Rhian took from the fence box at Hainsworth, which she used for the under-peak of some of her styles went on to become a Kempadoo Millar best seller. It also sits brilliantly within the ethics of her business: half a metre of this waste fabric is a staple section of 30 hats.

When Rhian set out to start Kempadoo Millar, her drive was to keep the production of a Yorkshire staple flat cap utilising high end fabric from local suppliers. This year AW Hainsworth and Kempadoo Millar will launch a brand collaboration of luxury flat caps.

This dual brand has its own unique story.

