

Bringing up baby on the world market

Cover story

Catherine Arfi is passionate about the brand she created more than eight years ago from the rear of a Brunswick shoe factory, and so are many other mums across Asia, Europe and the US.

AROMABABY is an aromatherapy-based natural skin care range taking local maternity wards by storm and making an even bigger impact on the international infant skin care market.

'I've just signed contracts with Belgium, Holland and the US,' says Catherine, founder of 'babyWORKSHOP' in Melbourne.

'And at a recent New York exhibition showcasing body products from all over the world, Aromababy was the only infant skin care range represented.'

With a high success rate on eczema-prone skin, Aromababy is sold to more than 600 Australian stockists and has become the brand of choice for a select group of Australian hospitals in favour of more natural offerings.

Catherine has donated her products to the Peter MacCallum Cancer Institute in Melbourne, where Aromababy was used for both breast care following radiation therapy and for children with cancer. Other recipients include AIDS orphans in Thailand and Kosovar refugees.

Not surprisingly, comparisons to The Body Shop's founder, Anita Roddick, are becoming more frequent.

Building trust and reputation

Before starting her business, Catherine held a senior position in a product development firm and worked on accessories and bodycare products for some of Australia's leading retailers.

'Prior to that I was the beauty editor for a lifestyle magazine, so I'd read many



Addressing consumer concerns: Catherine Arfi's brand is generating glowing testimonials and breaking open new export markets.

reports discussing skin irritations and other concerns associated with the long-term use of certain ingredients, such as petro-chemicals, propylene glycol, parabens and sulphates.

'The infant skin care market is monopolised by a handful of major players who formulate their products using these ingredients, so I decided to develop my own brand.'

After launching the range, Catherine 'participated diligently' in Australia-wide consumer and trade exhibitions to spread the word about her all-natural products.

'I believed it was important to talk to other parents about their needs and build up a rapport with consumers. Growing my business on ethics and trust was paramount.

'I wanted to share what I'd learned over the years and equip new parents with information to allow them to make their own choices.'

Catherine received her first export inquiry out of the blue from two young Middle Eastern mothers who had heard about Aromababy through the Australian hospital arena.

'I visited Dubai where they organised an official launch for Aromababy. I stood back from it all and thought, wow — this is my company and this is how they see it, which gave me more confidence to continue embracing new export inquiries.'

Gender-specific communication

Calls from Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore soon followed.

'I'd enjoyed extensive dealings with Hong Kong Chinese people during my career in product development and built up quite a fondness for Asians as well as an understanding of how they conduct business.'

Catherine says this experience has helped her communicate more effectively with her Korean distributors and carry on negotiations with South China associates — all men.

'They are not as focused on my passion for the products and what goes on behind the scenes. I therefore address business on a more formal level. It's all about figures — how well the product sells, how appealing the product looks and which markets to target.'

By contrast, Catherine's female distributors show more passion for her products. 'They are often mothers themselves, and so have a much more personal interest.'

Exports now account for more than 40 per cent of the business and Catherine predicts they will eventually overtake local sales figures.

'It was more important to me, however, to be accepted and respected locally first.

'With a focus on Australian-made, I love to work with people who really understand what I've developed and why, and who believe in what our company is providing.' ☺