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TONGUE AND CHEEK



They say that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, but as entrepreneur Leona Watson is proving, the same rings true when it comes to rewarding and attracting the best staff. Chris Panteli reports.

A DESIRE to turn a passion into a business first gave Leona Watson the idea to start her cooking school firm, Cheeky Food Group.

Watson had been working as a cook on board yachts in the Whitsunday Islands earning next to nothing but loving every moment when she realised there was a way to do both.

Her idea was to give companies the chance to get together to cook a gourmet banquet, building relations between staff at the same time. Watson says the food is not the important part, it is the opportunity for staff members to have fun and work together that makes the events such a success.

And while she readily accepts that the Cheeky Food Group was not the first business to offer cooking events to corporate groups, hers was the first to run the event from the client's point of view.

"We turned it around and asked 'what would a corporation want?'" says Watson. "The existing cooking classes were looking at it from the chef's point of view whereas because my background was in large corporations, working with Microsoft and Optus and places like that, and I had organised events like that myself, I knew what these firms were looking for. I knew it had to be about the business and a chance for staff to find out what was going on in the business. It was also about setting out goals for the year ahead and trying to collect some analogies between what the business was trying to do in order to be successful and how a successful restaurant kitchen works.

"It makes it relevant while still keeping it really fun, and a lot of people are now using this for Christmas parties or client entertaining," she adds. "We also see ourselves very much as part of the events industry. We're definitely not doing a cooking class. What we are doing is an event where we just happen to use cooking as a way to create a big atmosphere and 'wow' factor. People are always looking for something different, something interesting and something everyone can do and that's what we've addressed."

Watson set up the Cheeky Food Group on a part-time basis with two other directors six years ago. Team-building events were just a small part of what the business started out doing, but following the exit of one of the directors, Watson convinced her remaining partner to concentrate on team-building.

"I said to him, 'let's just have a crack at it for a while and see how it goes'," she says.

"We doubled our turnover every year for the next four years after that. And we were still only doing it part time for the following two years. I came on full time and we doubled again, which was sensational."

The company employs seven full time staff and another eight chefs on hire three times a week and 20 more used once a fortnight to work on its eight events a week.

The last two years have seen Cheeky Food Group set up its own venue and buy out Watson's business partner, both of which led to a dip in revenue. However the Sydney-based firm has this year expanded into Melbourne and New Zealand, and projections for this financial year predict a 70 per cent increase in the number of events held, based on bullish figures for the last few months.

"We did double the number of events in June that we did over the same month last year and July and August have been just as good," she notes. "The part of our business that has really grown is our referral and repeat business, which is fantastic.

"There's a lot of talk out there about what's happening in the economy and business tightening their belts and in theory we are probably at the luxury end of the business market. It's probably a budget that can be easily cut, but maybe companies are becoming scared of losing staff and the incredibly high cost of getting new people in has kept firms looking at doing events going. We haven't felt the pinch at all; in fact it's been the opposite."

And Watson has no plans to rest on her laurels. Over the next two years the company will launch in New York and the UK and will diversify into several different product lines, including singles cooking classes, cook books and food tours.

Key to Watson's success is the passion she has for cooking and watching people come together in the kitchen. "The biggest highlight for me was an event we did for 200 people up on the Sunshine Coast," she remembers. "I was standing on stage and looking at this scene of people all cooking together at the same time and I thought 'wow'. I almost stunned myself. Every now and then you just know that what you're doing 100 per cent right there and then is exactly the right thing to be doing, commercially, personally and professionally. I had a second to stop and thought: 'This is pretty good!'" [wcm](#)

Chris Pantell is a freelance journalist.