

TAKING A NO BULL APPROACH

Practical, determined and strong of will are the characteristics that define someone born under the Taurus sign and when you speak with Sharon Williams, founder of Taurus Marketing, you understand why those characteristics underpin her business. Jonathan Jackson speaks with Sharon about uniformity, non-conformity and making your own play in life.

Her great aunt and grandmother founded one of the most exclusive schools in London, where uniformity was norm and the 'Churchillian' stiff upper lip was a practice, not an expression. For Sharon Williams, growing up in that environment meant becoming familiar with systems and processes and by her own admission she conformed to school life because her great aunt was headmistress and her grandmother was Deputy Head.

Yet there was a deeper desire than to just play by the rules; she wanted to make her own rules. Individuality, which she had picked up from those who were teaching and raising her, was a big part of her makeup.

"I had very firm female role models in early life," Sharon says. "Nana would run the junior school and then take us home and make home-made everything. I had a loving, supportive upbringing and learnt I could do anything. I had a strong sense of individuality from them because they were running businesses and running families."

Sharon learnt the value of responsibility and hierarchical management structure and this served her well when she applied for a job at iconic retailer Marks and Spencer. She had turned down a position at university and left behind her dream

of becoming a naval officer, but the benefit was that Marks and Spencer were known for their stringent management training.

"It was well thought of and I went through seven sets of interviews and Boards of people, so to get through you knew you were going into something special."

Once again, systems and processes came to the fore as management training became a huge discipline.

"I didn't last very long with such constraints, but I lasted long enough to do a lot of the training and understand that it was important to set systems and processes and start from the ground up. All managers at Marks and Spencer had swept the warehouse floor and folded clothing so they had done what was expected of their staff."

After 18 months, Sharon decided that a future in retail wasn't for her, although she does say that she did some "splendid" things with the company.

"I didn't want to conform within that environment. I didn't want my brain to sit within that square. I wanted to explore other things."

So she went travelling and worked for a Kashmiri Prince and bought her first flat and sports car at age 19. She learnt that things aren't always the way you expect them to be, nor do they always turn out how you want.

"I have lost a brother, a sister, a niece and a marriage and you don't expect these things

to happen, but you have to get through it and weave through life in a positive way. You keep good people around you and surround yourself with people who are genuine and have your best interests at heart. Positive influences, a faith and energies help you through bad times and support the good."

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Sharon travelled to India with her then husband which is where she learnt many of the traits that have made Taurus such a force for so long: patience, resilience, tolerance, cultures, acceptance and fearlessness.

"There is a fearlessness that comes with travel and making your own way. I think that's my makeup and the same of many entrepreneurs; we think of only the possibilities, not failing. My great aunt, nana and mum defined their own way. You have to make your own future and the buck stops with you."

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BELOW
Sharon Williams



Sharon was forging her own path. Her first taste of the PR world was with the Shipping Tycoon Prince who wanted to build the largest cruise liner in the world. He put her through marketing training. Next she took a job with Synon Ltd as the 2IC of European marketing and PR. In 1992, having established herself in the role, the company moved her to Hong Kong, where, with her then husband, she helped set up Synon Asia Ltd.

"I was so excited at the opportunity. It was just my husband Guy and I, he was tech and I was marketing. We had the world at our feet and forged our own way. It was a huge adventure and I'm still on it."

By 1994 she found herself doing the same thing in Australia. Yet she found *the Australian* culture more difficult to adapt to.

"It was a blokey, sexist, informal, slow culture and I remember thinking, after living in the fast pace of London, my home city and then Hong Kong, I wasn't ever going to settle here. Now I'm so Australian I can't imagine anything else. The opportunity was here."

That opportunity was to start something of her own. Eighteen years ago Taurus Marketing became one of the first small businesses in the integrated marketing sphere. It was tough to begin. Her daughter was born on the day Taurus was registered, her husband was travelling a lot and Sharon was still considered a foreigner. Yet she took to pioneering and quickly built a brand.

"I was lucky to have a good first client – Peter Kazacos of KAZ. He sold KAZ to Telstra for \$400 million and we championed each other. I helped build KAZ and Peter's brand and through KAZ I gained more business.

"In the services industry, if you are good at what you do, people will come to you. It's growth by reputation and positive word of mouth."

Taurus has serviced over 1,000 companies globally from major ASX-listed organisations to smart entrepreneurs and Sharon and her team (18 staff, plus 30 contractors) have advised on starting a business from scratch, business growth, PR, marketing, social media strategy and much more.

It is a mixture of uniformity and individualism that has kept Taurus as a leader in the field.

"The internet was just starting when Taurus launched and now we have social media which is exciting because you have to keep reinventing. Social media has made communication cheaper, smarter and faster. When I was 20 we had the Telex machine that was soon replaced by the fax →

machine. Evolution and openness to change and invention is here to stay. It's what I love of the tech industry."

Sharon took well to social media. She founded and leads the 'Not Just Another Social Media Seminar' series, dedicated to addressing the implication of online for business and covers questions on social media strategy, content management, risk and return on investment.

She also writes a blog for Ninemsn and was voted one of the Top 25 business bloggers in Australia in 2011 by Smart Company.

Sharon guest writes a column for *The Australian* and last year travelled to India with Dell as a guest in their Dell Womens' Entrepreneur Network. She has followed her love of mentoring through in other ways as well, becoming an Adjunct Professor at the University of Notre Dame, a Good Beginnings Ambassador (a children's NFP) and a Syndicate Chairman of The CEO Institute. Sharon is also a well sought after international speaker and one of 40 Australians chosen by the Archbishop of Sydney for the Connect09 'Inspiring People' series of panel discussions alongside Peter Costello and Roger Corbett in 2009.

She says of her role at Notre Dame and TaurusFastTrack®, a graduate mentoring program she runs, "It's my way of giving back to our youngsters – who are our future. I am firm and my aim is to help our youngsters find their way. I want those on our intern program to come on a journey with me. The most successful are hired – one even becoming my general manager after four years with me."

As for the future of Taurus, Sharon is looking to fill more niche needs.

"I am growing the online personal branding practice and working with businesses to adapt to the online, gamification world. I'm also hoping mid management will take over so I can step back."

Sharon says Taurus' success came from being the best of everything that she could be. "It's being the best of everything, the best mum, the best ex-wife, a good friend, the fairest manager and to retain the strength and health to do what you love so you can at least say 'I've given it my best shot'. To make the most of every opportunity, of every strength. Of course things don't always go according to plan, but you have to do your personal best." **TGR**

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SHARON'S ACHIEVEMENTS

- Counsellor on Australia British Chamber of Commerce.
- Trademarked two award-winning and specialist services: TaurusEngage™ and TaurusProfile™.
- Has trained over 400 graduates with the trademarked program Taurus FastTrack.
- Voted one of the Top 25 business bloggers in Australia in 2011 by Smart Company.
- A monthly contributor to *Dynamic Business* magazine and a regular commentator on SBS, ABC and radio. Has featured on Channel 7's *Kochie's Business Builders* and *Sunrise* as their guest marketing and SME expert.
- A Golden Target award winner for excellence at both state and national level.