

Even though her recent talk at the Office show in September drew the largest crowd of the two-day event, Deborah Meaden doesn't revel in her TV personality status. "I'm not a celebrity, but a business person," she explains. The term 'person' isn't chosen at random – the entrepreneur and Dragons' Den star is adamant when she says, "I'm not a woman in business, I'm just in business."

In fact, she is a great believer in business not being gender-specific, which is exactly why it's an environment where women can thrive. "Customers choose the product on its merit, not the background of the person who's selling it," she says.

The drive to succeed in business was clearly in Deborah's blood right from the off:

she describes herself as coming from "a family of entrepreneurs" and the mantra she picked up on at an early age was 'if you want something, work for it; it's all there for the taking, but you have to work for it'.

Lessons learned

After half-heartedly finishing a business studies course (her attendance was so sporadic the college asked her to pay back the cost of her tuition), she decided the world of academia wasn't the right route for her, so she set up her own business, aged just 19, importing glass and ceramic goods from Italy.

When sales dropped off because the product started to appear in other stores, despite Deborah having sole agency rights, she came to the difficult conclusion that the business wasn't going to succeed. "I

remember thinking, 'This isn't fair', but then realising that just thinking it didn't actually help at all," she says. Lesson learned, she moved on to open one of the first Stefanel franchises (an Italian clothing line) in the UK, based in her native West Country.

Later, she ran a prize bingo concession at Butlins, where she realised "the single, most valuable thing about business is never to lose sight of the customer." She put this knowledge into practice when, after joining the family firm in 1988 to run its amusement arcade operations, she was later promoted to managing director of the holiday park side of the business, Weststar Holidays, based in Exeter, Devon, and with various sites spread across south-west England.

"I used to go round the holiday park interrogating the visitors," she laughs, before

adding, "There is absolutely nothing more powerful than being able to look your customer in the face." She sold her remaining involvement in the Weststar operation – "the business love of my life" – in 2007, for what was reported at the time to be in the region of a cool £19 million.

Making a difference

Since 2006, she has been the feisty, straight-talking female investor on BBC2's Dragons' Den, putting her own money into no fewer than 26 projects, one of which is the Magic Whiteboard product, the reason for her involvement at this year's Office show (turn to page 24 for more details).

A shrewd operator, Deborah is quick to acknowledge how vital a PA is when it comes to the smooth running of her business

interests. "Charlotte [Clark – Deborah's PA] is a fantastic organiser and commercially savvy, so she knows what will interest me. She is the power behind the throne."

As is the case with most PAs, it seems that Charlotte is a consummate multi-tasker, as Deborah is quick to point out: "She has the devil's own job because she has to deal with the business world, which has regular, structured meetings, and then that's overlaid by the world of media, which is totally random, so she has to be really good at juggling my priorities." And what kind of qualities make for a good PA, in Deborah's opinion? "Trust, honesty, directness – and a sense of humour," she says. "Charlotte and I end up giggling like schoolgirls sometimes."

As to what the future holds, while Deborah has no plans to give up her business empire

– "I don't believe there will ever come a time when I think 'I don't want to do this any more'" – she is branching out and devoting time to causes outside of the commercial world.

These include charities that are close to her heart, such as the World Wildlife Fund, the Make it in Great Britain campaign to promote British manufacturing, and Lendwithcare, a micro-finance initiative that provides loans to individuals in the developing world so they can set up their own businesses.

"It would be great if I could just make the tiniest bit of a difference," says Deborah. "I don't want to end up thinking, 'I wish I had done that'." Changing the way the world operates and reappraising our current way of living is a tall order, but if anyone can make a difference, the redoubtable Deborah Meaden surely can.

DEBORAH MEADEN THIS WOMAN MEANS BUSINESS

HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEUR AND PANEL REGULAR ON HIT TV SHOW DRAGONS' DEN, DEBORAH MEADEN IS ALSO ON A MISSION TO SAVE THE PLANET, ONE PROJECT AT A TIME, AS PA LIFE'S EDITOR COLETTE DOYLE DISCOVERS



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