

Of mascots and masquerades

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Patricia Moore talks to costume maker Denise Hosty about her business journey and the importance of teamwork.

So your mascot is a giant aeroplane? And you want it to sing and dance and give out leaflets?

Sometimes you have to draw the line says Denise Hosty.

"People forget that somebody is inside all our costumes; normal, average sized human beings who still need to breathe and see."

Hosty is the driving force behind The Costume Studio winner of the Benefit Best New Start-Up Business category at this year's Enterprise North Shore Business Excellence Awards.

"The award has been great for us. There's been lots of interest and exposure since the announcement and it's given me the confidence to feel we are going in the right direction and that people see us as costume makers, not home sewers."

Hers is a 'zero to hero' business start-up story; she arrived from the UK on a working holiday in 1999, worked the phones until she found a job that used the skills she'd acquired in the wardrobe department of a busy repertory theatre in Manchester and with a UK company making mascots, and went on to open her own costume studio, currently employing a team of ten.

"They're people who are skilled in all areas - designers, pattern makers, machinists, painters and people who are generally creative."

Using outworkers isn't an option because many of the projects The Costume Studio works on require the input of the whole team. "It's not your standard place to work," she says.

Setting up the business was relatively easy, says Hosty. "Of course if I did it again it would be so much easier but we're in a good place now." It's an enterprise that's too big to

operate from the spare bedroom so the right work space was important. "Our hub is in Albany and it's tucked away so people can't see what we're up to. A lot of our work is confidential so this is important."

By the time she established The Costume Studio, Hosty already had contacts in Auckland, but was unknown elsewhere - and in a niche market like costume making that could have been a problem. But, she says, the Internet has been enormously successful for her company. "The only advertising we have done is through our website and I spend hours a week on Google AdWords and analytics. I'm hooked on both."

Already the business has exceeded Hosty's five year plan. "That happened at the two year stage so I have had to reevaluate the whole thing. We are now in phase three of our growth spurt." And she foresees more growth over the next few years and the possibility of following up opportunities in Australia and further afield.

"We already supply the Australian market with costumes for TV commercials and there are corporates there who use us."

But what goes on behind that anonymous entrance in Albany? What does costume making involve? There's a world of difference between whipping up a fancy dress or two and supplying costumes for a TV ad, says Denise.

"Most of our costumes involve sewing machines, glue guns, heat guns, scalpels, plumbing pipe, cable ties and pots of paint.

"As of today (late October) we are working on 43 different projects. These include making items such as shoes, evening wear, costumes for photo-shoots, Santa parades, museums, underwater creatures, panthers, spacemen, dinosaurs and outfits for two drag queens."

Life as a costume maker is obviously never dull. So what's been the most memorable project this year?

"The squirrels we made for the Cadburys Moro Gold TV ad. Forty-five squirrel costumes, in a very short time. We had to hire extra space, take on new staff and learn to make quantities at speed. It was an amazing job to be given the opportunity to work on."

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