

SO YOU WANT TO... SELL UNDERWEAR ON THE INTERNET?

Thanks to ready-made warehousing in disused buildings and busy times that tie in well with the agricultural calendar, it's a diversification that has lifted the fortunes of many farming families. **Sarah Todd** explains

Why underwear?

Many small, independent shops selling underwear and lingerie have closed. This has left those in the country in particular having to travel a long way to find the products they want. At the same time shops in larger towns or cities often don't have the levels of customer service. Fanning families have proved very adept at plugging this gap.

Is this an expanding market?

Yes, though there's obvious competition and price pressure from high street stores, supermarkets, catalogues and other internet sites. So do your market research first.

What do you need to set up?

Computers, mailing lists, order handling software, a Post Office account, storage facilities, packaging and stationery mainly. The stock will be - by far - your biggest investment.

Do I need to be registered?

No, but it's a good idea to follow Mail Order Protection Scheme guidelines (see contacts box).

What sort of profit margin can I hope for? What are my main running costs?

Anything up to 10% profit is the industry average. Stock, postage, advertising and catalogue production (if you do one) will be your main costs.

Can I get a grant?

Both redundant building conversion and broadband installation may attract a grant. Try your local DEFRA office, regional development agency and Business Link (see contacts box).

Will I need training?

Yes, get trained in running a mail order business - catalogue layout, product buying, website design, direct marketing and financial planning for a mail order business.

Any useful websites?

Try www.royalmail.com and www.catalog-biz.com

Give me half a dozen secrets of success...

- * Sell a unique product or one often not easily found in shops.
- Or supply a niche market
- * Provide ultra-reliable customer service
- * Even if you have your website done professionally make sure that you can update it yourself easily
- * People using the internet expect a quick service. So get cover if you are going away for a few days
- * Find reliable couriers. Customers expect their order to arrive without delay
- * Provide credit card payment facilities - people don't want to be messing around sending in cheques

..and some reasons why businesses fail?

- * Not having enough customers
- * Not mailing their customers often enough
- * Not breaking even on catalogue/marketing costs
- * Failing to have a good enough supply of the product for the life of the catalogue/range shown on website
- * Info provided by Sandra Burgcr, Promar International, and case studies

Chris Morley joined his wife Susan's business after baby Edward arrived.



CASE STUDY

Chris and Susan Morley

HELMSLEY, N.YORKS

* Susan Morley had always felt the cold and was used to wearing vests when working on her parents' North York Moors farm. Even when she left home and was teaching English in Italy one cold winter, she followed the advice she had been brought up on and went in search of a vest. She found it at a local market.

"The style was so much more glamorous than vests I'd worn at home," remembers Susan.

The upshot was that once home mucking out the pigs on the family's 120ha (300-acre) farm she barely took it off.

Operating from the spare bedroom in the farmhouse, she began by selling the vests at coffee mornings. The business (called Bella di Notte) grew steadily and now has a £1.5m turnover, around 20 staff and purpose-built premises.

Husband Chris, meanwhile, gave up his job as sales director of a farm machinery dealership this summer to become a director of his wife's company.

He admits that the first few weeks working with his wife were a bit of a culture shock.

"I've gone from working with a 100% male staff to a workforce of nearly all ladies."

CASE STUDY

Sally Robinson

HELMSLEY, N. YORKS

* Like many farmers' wives, Sally Robinson had followed the well-worn diversification path of providing bed-and-breakfast accommodation. But it was a friend who, getting married and unable to find a glamorous bra in her size, suggested a mail-order bra business.

"I could see a gap in the market," remembers Sally. "Times were changing, with small independent specialist shops closing down - so I thought there was a need." She launched her Ample Bosom catalogue of bras in September 1999, with the accompanying website going live two months later thanks to help from her computer-savvy sons. She now stocks more than 177 sizes of bra, plus underwear and swimwear.

Redundant farm buildings have been converted into offices and warehousing, although Sally, who has 10 staff, is quick to point out the way the farm and bra business run side by side.

"We will go out to stand in a gap if my husband's moving cattle around and it's not unusual for me to have to go out and help inject a beast or lamb a sheep."

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Promar International

Offers independent advice on running an internet-based business

NW 08708 707 380

NE 08708 707 381

Yorks 08708 707 382

EMids 08708 707 383

E 08708 707 384

Susan and Chris Morley

Bella di Notte

08707706830

www.belladinotte.com

Peter and Julie White, Classic & Exotic Lingerie

01725 552 870

www.showall.co.uk

Sally Robinson, Ample Bosom

01439798388

www.amplebosom.com

Gillian Brown, Eloise Lingerie

08452255080

www.eloise.co.uk

Business Link

08456 009 006

www.businesslink.gov.uk

Mail Order Protection Scheme

www.mops.org.uk



CASE STUDY

Peter and Julie White
PENTRIDGE, SALISBURY

* 2005 marks the seventh year since Peter and Julie White started their classic and exotic lingerie business to boost the income of their 140ha (350-acre) livestock farm.

The business is totally internet-based, with the busy times (Christmas through to Valentine's Day) tying in well with the quieter periods on the farm, where it's run from a converted dairy. And busy it certainly is: One pre-Valentines Day they had 100,000 hits on the site in one hour - though 50,000 visitors a day is more normal. The couple admit they knew absolutely nothing about computers when they started and had to get clued-up pretty quickly.

As well as running the farm and helping with the internet business, husband Peter also acts as a consultant to help others setting up websites. "I suppose I've had the last laugh on those who ribbed me when we started the business," he says. "I've been called the Milky Bra Kid and goodness knows what else. But now there are farmers out there who want to sell cheese or beef on the internet that I've been able to help."

The couple's first thought was to sell dresses as a farm diversification, but it soon became clear that it was a difficult market as customers like to try on before buying. So they shifted the emphasis to the classic and exotic lingerie sector.

Business Link provided a small set-up grant and advertising is restricted to longer shelf-life magazines.

CASE STUDY

Gillian and Keith Brown

BURY ST EDMUNDS, SUFFOLK

* Gillian Brown has twice been a saviour of the family's farm. The first time was when the former nurse went back to working in hospitals after retraining as a surgical fitter of bras and breast prostheses.

The second time was when she developed her Eloise range of lingerie and swimsuits for women who have had breast surgery. Pockets were sewn in to accommodate different prostheses, a side of the business that has grown to such an extent that Gillian is considering letting somebody else take it over.

"It may well be ideal for another farmer's wife who enjoys using her sewing machine to take on as her own diversification," says Gillian. The business has grown fast, with the peace, tranquillity and



discreet nature of the farm playing its part in attracting women to come in for fittings and to look at the stock. Internet sales are at around 25% and growing, with around half a dozen part time workers.

Husband Keith has steadily become more involved in his wife's business. "The farm is still important," says Gillian. "But we have cut down on stock numbers

and specialised in some rare breed cattle and a smaller suckler herd to free Keith up to help me more."

Gillian is keen to think about franchising the business in another part of the country. "We are not getting any younger and it would be nice to see the Eloise name expanded and go on to help even more women," says Gillian.