



Into the Dragons' Den

Cream's Andy Evans talks to footwear entrepreneur Jane Rafter

Shoes. They're not really the most innovative product, are they? Exciting - yes. Confidence boosting - yes. But innovative - well, not really...

Not until now, anyway.

Jane Rafter is the brains behind Slinks, a new range of luxury, customised sandals that are revolutionising the market. The idea is simple, yet brilliant: sandals with individually designed, detachable uppers, which can be changed and attached quickly to a stylish handmade leather sole, leading to several pairs of sandals in one.

It's an idea that has always been close to Rafter's heart. "I have always loved beautiful things and creating something with my hands. I remember at the age of eight, we all used to wear these plain white canvas pumps. I used to sit for hours hand-painting them; customising a pair so they were unique."

Considering her background, it's no surprise that she displayed an inventive imagination. "I grew up in a lovely little house in Madrid; we never had a television," she says. "This encouraged us to use our initiative to entertain ourselves. I was always making



things, dressing up, collecting flowers, beads, dragonflies - and designing something from it all. My father is a theatre director and my mother grew up on a dairy farm, so there was always a mixture of creative and practical ideas around. This is something that I've tried to carry through my work."

Having studied at the National College of Art & Design in Dublin, before working in couture and high street design, Rafter was familiar with the world of fashion. But she was constantly aware that something bigger awaited her. "I always knew that I wanted to work for myself and start a company, but was never 100% sure doing what," she says. "I did a fashion show a few years ago where I made foot jewellery; a selection of crystals with beaded and interlinked rings to create a cover for the top of the foot. I used to delight in wearing them around my flat - and at house parties, friends loved them. They worked really well, and I thought there must be a way of combining them with a base so that they could be worn out and about."

However, like all budding entrepreneurs, she still needed the confidence to get her idea off the ground. The inspiration eventually came when "friends started getting married ... after the eighth summer wedding one year, I thought it was time to stop

finding new sandals each time and bring my idea to life."

At first, Rafter was cautious, working on her fledgling project during the evenings and at weekends. "I am not a ruthless risk-taker, and I wanted to prove to myself before I jumped fully in that other people would believe in the product as much as I did."

Eventually, Rafter was able to devote more time to Slinks, and the first year of trading saw £37,000 worth of sales, but she was still working part-time as



an office manager. Something was needed to launch Slinks into the big time, and that something was the BBC's Dragons' Den.

Jane Rafter faced the Dragons on 12th August 2009, and impressed them with her idea, even though she describes it as a "petrifying" experience. "It is more or less exactly as you see it on television. You walk into the den and the five Dragons are sitting there, stony-faced," she says. "I was in there for about an hour and fifteen minutes - all of it standing in front of the Dragons having them fire question after question at me."

So how did she cope with the pressure of being in front of the Dragons? "I started my pitch and just went for it. I tried to forget about the cameras, be honest about me and the business and do my best."

Rafter was hoping for a £75,000

injection into the business, giving up 20% of its equity in return. In the end, she had to give up 40% of her company, shared between Theo Paphitis and James Caan, but gained the full investment that she was hoping for; which is why people may be surprised to hear that Rafter pulled out of the deal before the paperwork was completed. Where she had previously been cautious, she was now taking risks - but Rafter has no regrets.

"Dragons' Den for me was fantastic - it gave me a huge amount of confidence

and proved that you can achieve what you want." However, she does point out that the Den "is a good route for business, but not the only one." She is still in touch with the Dragons though, and Rafter remains "on very good terms" with Messrs Paphitis and Caan.

Having been through the experience of entering the Den, she has advice for any budding entrepreneurs wishing to do the same. "Prepare, prepare, prepare! Know your pitch inside out. Think of every possible angle of your business - both the positive and the negative - and write down questions and answers for them all. Know your figures, but most importantly understand them. Think of everything you possibly can."

Although Rafter didn't take the Dragons' money, she did reap the benefits of appearing on the programme. She was seen by a Brand Buyer from John Lewis, who loved the idea. A few days later, Rafter was



invited to a meeting, resulting in Slinks finding their way into five John Lewis stores, as well as their online shop. Rafter couldn't be more pleased. "John Lewis is a fantastic shop to be part of. It is an established British institution, and having Slinks stocked by them has helped with the recognition of the brand. Both Dragons' Den and John Lewis have made many, many more people aware of Slinks."

Another advantage of the last six months is that Rafter has been able to shift her production from Spain to India, thus bringing her costs down and consequently increasing her sales. But she wasn't interested in those sales coming at a cost to her employees. Rafter demands excellent working conditions in Slinks' factories, and only employs workers who are at least 18-years-old.

"Working with the right people is very important to me," she says. "I have been to India a couple of times – firstly to visit the factory and be certain that the working ethos fitted in with my company, and then for finalising designs and sampling. I get on very well with the factory owner and I now stay with him and his family in their home, so it's nice to get a taste of real India rather than just staying in a hotel all the time."

Rafter has also been tasting success and recognition over the last twelve months, including the Exceptional Creative Award at the British Female Inventor of the Year Awards in 2009. But perhaps the greatest reward that Rafter has received is the fact that she is now working full-time on Slinks: a prize that she clearly loves.

In fact, she waxes lyrical about the benefits of finally being her own boss. "The flexibility, and doing a variety of roles. It is constantly busy and always varied. You never get bored of doing one thing. It has allowed me to meet so many different people."

The ultimate benefit, though, would appear to be "pride in achieving something that you have created", and one suspects that this will be the driving factor in the future of Slinks. Certainly Rafter has big ambitions. "With the first product on the market, we are on our way to establishing ourselves as an original, yet commercial design company. There are more plans for Slinks as a product and expanding it in many ways. I am working on introducing these into the next collection. I'd love to stock worldwide and continue to sell successfully from the website. I'd like to introduce more products that are both beautiful and innovative, and have started working on these."

This determination to continually improve upon a successful product is the reason that Rafter is reaping the rewards of Slinks' success, and if the early story of Slinks is anything to go by, Rafter should have no problem achieving her goals.

After all, shoes will always be her passion ("I love them all – a pair of shoes can change your whole look in seconds"), so there will be no danger of Rafter losing her enthusiasm for Slinks.

But it is her outlook for the company which suggests more than anything that Rafter means business. When she is asked what she would like to be doing in ten years time, Rafter has it mapped out. "Ideally, running a successful design company which is making women's feet sparkle all over the world – a company to be proud of," she says. "I'd love travel to continue being part of my work, and introducing design skills from other parts of the world. I'd like to have launched other successful products, and still have design involvement and be developing new products."

She then pauses, before adding: "An office in New York would be a bonus!"

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