



| MORRIS KAPLAN

Making the next big thing by hand

The pursuit of growth can pose tough questions for artisans who become business people

In a world dominated by huge, global corporations, is there still a place in business for the artisan? For someone who makes their products by hand? In the British television series *The Next Big Thing*, host and retail entrepreneur Theo Paphitis follows both buyers and suppliers as they experience the highs and guaranteed lows of bringing a product to market – from initial pitch to shop shelf.

It's a compelling program, showing just how tough it is to take an idea to market – and to make money out of it. Once selected, the successful entrepreneurs get into the business of, well, becoming business people. Many are genuine artisans and will be challenged by the need to industrialise their backyard operations.

Retailers are always on the lookout for “the next big thing” and in this series the buying teams of high-street giants Boots, Habitat and Liberty eschew conventional supply chains, asking members of the public to pick the next bestselling product. Unknown designers and artisans pitch directly to the retail industry's power-brokers and have the chance to get their product stocked in these prestigious stores.

The charismatic Paphitis

says retail is challenging today, but would-be suppliers should know stores such as those on the show are keen to differentiate themselves. For the pitching exercise, department store Liberty opens its doors to more than 600 people, who queue around the block for the opportunity to spruik their product to the buying team. They have just three minutes to do so and very few get to take their products further.

Whether they create a fine fabric or fine produce, the artisan has a story to tell. And that's powerful in marketing. A potter is selected to sell merchandise at Liberty. His cups and plates are carefully merchandised; he makes a presentation to the sales team, who listen attentively to his story of how the products are made. The team is “sold”. A brochure is written up (by hand, of course). And it's easy to see how a premium-price product can work when the sales team supports it.

Australian cheese maker and artisan Kris Lloyd relates to this old-fashioned, yet powerful approach to marketing. The Adelaide Hills-based producer and founder of Woodside Cheese Wrights says there will always be a place on the retail shelf for high-quality local produce. One of the

challenges she has faced is balancing the pursuit of growth as a business owner, while at the same time hand-crafting her product. There is often a perception that products from smaller producers are “cottagey”, she says. “It's false. We are sharp, we're modern and we want to excite our customers. That's the contemporary artisan.” Employing several cheese makers with ancillary staff, Woodside produces about 70 tonnes of cheese a year. Hardly industrial scale production, but at the premium end of the cheese market, it generates handy revenue. Lloyd makes a point of travelling far and wide to meet distributors and stockists and “tell her story”.

“I tell them face to face what we're doing, about our new varieties. Being a local producer has to be a selling point. I did not have a vision of being the biggest. I wanted people to see Woodside Cheese Wrights and think quality.”

She says success in cheese making at the quality end is about working closely with both the dairy farmers and the distributors. “Their success is my success. It's one of the most important things I learnt. If you develop good relationships, you can work through issues.”

As with the artisan speaking to the Liberty

salespeople, Lloyd spends time at the retail coalface. “I support them with marketing material, tasting notes, posters and my website is a great tool for buyers and restaurant chefs who want to see what is available. I give them the tools to sell my product.”

Artisan-based business is different to conventional, scalable business. A hand-crafted product enterprise is unlikely to become an international giant. But a well-managed cheese maker with a recognisable brand is still worthwhile in terms of both personal satisfaction and commercial opportunity. Indeed, an artisan-based product is a strong point of difference in the fine art of building a brand. “It's something our distributors like to point out.”

As noted by the Liberty and Boots buyers, new products are the lifeblood for retailers. Lloyd is well attuned to this and invests in supporting the artisan image. “When do you stop being an artisan and become a business person? For me, it's not about quantity. Quality defines the artisan.” ■

Morris Kaplan writes for Friday's Entrepreneur section in *The Australian* (mkaplan@bigpond.com).



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