

Tash Hughes



# Donna

When asked what she does, Donna-Marie Coggins answers that she simplifies small business. It's that simple!

Nearly eleven years ago, Donna-Marie Coggins 'fell' into owning her own business, Jacaranda Business Support Services. She was working for Parks and Wildlife but found the travelling was too hard as a single mum of a child with some health concerns. Having already studied business management, Donna-Marie was keen to start a business for the flexibility of caring for her son as required.

"I really wanted to start a business, partly so I could be available to care for my son and my foster children – attending all those appointments was too hard with a traditional job," explained Donna-Marie. "I just couldn't think of the right business idea."

She had tried party plan when her son was very young, but the hours weren't what she wanted and she didn't really enjoy it. "It was more of a hobby than a business for me, so it wasn't what I was looking for."

While she was thinking of what to do, three friends already in business asked Donna-Marie to help them out. Suddenly, it clicked that business support was something she understood and could offer.

### Getting started

As part of her business course, Donna-Marie had to prepare a business plan so she used her business support idea in class. The key activity was researching the need for such a business.

"I spoke to many local businesses – they were all very supportive and answered my questions openly. It was before VAs were really around, but my research showed there was a need for external support, so I planned my business."

Having grown up around her Dad's business, which employed Mum and Grandma as well, Donna-Marie knew family and business can mix.

"I loved working in my old job and even stints of jobs I didn't like taught me skills for business. I learnt a lot from using systems in a Government workplace which has been really useful."

### Being a Mum

"I have always involved my son as much as possible in my business," said Donna-Marie. "He had a desk next to mine. I'd take him places – he gave out more business cards than I ever did!"

"At different times I had one to two foster children with us as well. It was harder to plan when I had more kids to care for because they had various appointments and I had case meetings. The hardest thing was not being able to plan ahead."

It is easier now he son is 16 as he understands the business and often gives his Mum "very good advice or a kick when I need it". He is also planning to start his own business!

"I think we business mums need to remember to not be too hard on yourself – we're never going to be perfect so don't put that pressure on. I started business to be here to look after my son – when things get tough, I stop and remember that reason."

### Business planning

Donna-Marie has helped a number of business owners prepare business plans and written The Easy-Peasy Straight-Forward Guide To Business Planning, available at [www.businessmumsguides.com.au](http://www.businessmumsguides.com.au) and the DIY Business Planning Manual. She started her business with a business plan.

"That plan has been updated every 6 months in the nearly 11 years since then, evolving into something totally different," said Donna-Marie. "I'm so glad I did my research and plan as the information I learnt, contacts made and contingency plans I put in place have been life-savers time and time again."

She sees a business plan as a tool for having a general direction and idea for your business. "It's also great for setting goals and having something to work towards. Changes and moving in different ways are okay – the plan just gives you a starting point."

### Changes

Over the years, Donna-Marie's services have expanded and the business has

# Marie's plan

evolved in different ways. Her current business plan is very different to the original one as she has changed direction a couple of times.

2008 was a big year of decisions and change for Donna-Marie. She had a lot of work coming in, including work she turned down or referred elsewhere, and wanted to change the way she operated.

During the year, she made changes and reset her goals and plan. Now in early 2009, everything is falling into place with Jacaranda Business Support Services catering for the business support group she runs in Brisbane and Donna-Marie Coggins offering the resources and tips for small businesses wanting to simplify. This change allows Donna-Marie to focus on helping people and building relationships rather than using individual skills for their businesses.

## The nitty-gritty

It shouldn't surprise anyone who knows Donna-Marie that she doesn't have a typical business day as she isn't a typical business person!

Donna-Marie is however, usually up by 7 and MUST start her day with coffee and emails. She has identified her own patterns so spends the mornings on projects that require concentration and the afternoons for 'easier' tasks as her 'brain switched off a bit'.

"I mostly work on the computer – I barely move away all day!" said Donna-Marie. "But I really like what I'm doing these days. I've become stricter about only taking on jobs I want to do, giving myself the freedom to choose."

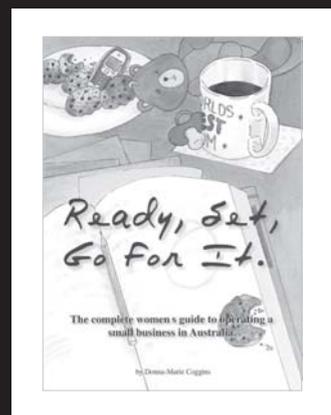
"I am currently enjoying not having the morning commitment of getting my son to school as he finished last year."

In business, Donna-Marie couldn't live without her computer ("it virtually IS my business") or her son.

On the other hand, she happily lives without an external office. "I began from a home office but in 2005 I moved to a professional suite for 12 months and it was great – for the first week. It seemed like a good idea at the time however I found it difficult to work there and lacked motivation."

"I like to work flexible hours, blending family and work, and that's really difficult when you have to drive to the office and back again. Then, of course, there's the benefit of being home of an afternoon or school holidays when my son wasn't at school."

*You can contact Donna-Marie Coggins from Jacaranda Business Support Services by email at [Donna-Marie.Coggins@jacaranda-business-support.com](mailto:Donna-Marie.Coggins@jacaranda-business-support.com) or visit [www.jacaranda-business-support.com](http://www.jacaranda-business-support.com) or [www.donna-mariecoggins.com](http://www.donna-mariecoggins.com)*



## Tips for other business mums...

1. Research, plan and go for it!
2. Don't be afraid of writing a business plan – once you have some idea of what's involved you'll probably find it's not that difficult at all. A business plan doesn't have to be a formal document, printed and bound. If your plan is solely for your own purpose, it may be something that stays on your computer forever and a day; or it may be a folder full of hand-written notes. That's quite okay.
3. Remember... at the end of the day only YOU can prepare your plan; you need to analyse the research and make the decisions. After all, it's your business. But you can seek help and guidance as to what should go into your plan, how to go about each stage, such as conducting the market research or creating a marketing plan, and get tips and guidance in making your decisions.