

When she launched Not On The High Street from her kitchen table in 2005, Holly Tucker became the poster girl for female founders. Ahead of the publication of her new book, she tells Rosamund Dean why there's never been a better time to start a small business – even in the post-pandemic world

Photography  
JAKE BAGGALEY

'I'D NEVER CREATED a spreadsheet before I started Not On The High Street,' laughs Holly Tucker. 'I didn't understand the lingo. I faked it till I made it. That's why it's important for us women to share the truth about our business journeys.'

Sixteen years on, Not On The High Street has pumped a cumulative £1 billion into a once-hidden army of small businesses, and the company was sold to a US investment firm for an undisclosed figure earlier this year. Holly, 44, has also launched a small-business consultancy, a podcast, has been awarded an MBE, and now she has distilled her wisdom into a new book, *Do What You Love, Love What You Do*.

'Women feel like they need to be experts in



# 'I faked it

Right Entrepreneur  
Holly Tucker



until I made it'



order to do something,' she says. 'For so long, "business" has been run by men who have tried to make it look like a dark art. I want to change the narrative to make it inclusive.'

The timing of her book couldn't be better. More Britons than ever became entrepreneurial during the pandemic, with a record-breaking number of new start-ups being registered last summer. According to the Centre for Entrepreneurs, the number of new business formations grew 47 per cent in June 2020 from the previous year, with London and the West Midlands leading the way.

What's more, female entrepreneurs appear to be at the forefront of this boom. One print company reported that of the hundreds of orders received from start-ups between April and September, some 78 per cent were from women. 'Isn't that amazing?' says Holly with a grin. 'I love that people are reassessing their values and leaving corporate jobs to start on their own.'

It's not entirely good news. Many of those starting new businesses may not have left their previous jobs by choice. Women are more likely to have been furloughed than men, according to the Office for National Statistics, and globally women's job losses due to Covid-19 are 1.8 times greater than men's.

Losing your job, even during a global crisis, inevitably knocks one's confidence. Holly's advice? 'Understand that you've got a purpose,' she says. 'Then identify what's the worst that could happen. Know the thing that's stopping you doing it, and look at it in the face. Once you do that, it stops being so scary.'

'And, by the way, the worst never happens. Then it's just doing it, and knowing that we have very little time on this planet and we should be living our fullest life.'

Holly knows what it is to juggle life challenges with running a company. When she launched Not On The High Street with her friend Sophie Cornish in 2005, she was 28 and had a young baby. She had previously worked in advertising before leaving to launch Your Local Fair, running craft fairs around London. But she quickly realised that the small brands she was working with needed an online marketplace, and so NOTHS was born.

Looking back, she admits to being naive early on, but points out that was also a strength. 'We went in all guns blazing, with no clue what we were doing,' she laughs. 'We ran out of money within six months. And that led to the long process of trying to get funding.'

After a precarious first year, Holly and Sophie managed to raise venture capital which, she admits, 'saved our bacon'. In 2009, her

boyfriend Frank (now her husband) took early retirement from the police force to be a full-time dad to their son, Harry, now 16.

Of course not everyone has that level of support at home, and the pandemic has triggered something of a crisis in domestic equality. 'Emotional labour is a real issue,' nods Holly, 'I know there are statistics about how many years it has taken women back. But I [know a lot of] women whose partners have been at home [during the pandemic]



Holly at her first live podcast in 2019

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and, actually, I don't think those homes will ever be the same again, because the veil has been lifted. All the things that women did invisibly are suddenly very visible.'

Four years ago Holly started a consultancy, Holly & Co, to advise small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – and within two days of the first lockdown had launched SME:SOS, an Instagram platform on which she interviewed experts and demystified Government advice. 'I'd never put my face in front of the camera before,' she grimaces. 'But I did an Instagram Live every day for four months, to help this small-business community know that they weren't alone.'

Many small businesses folded during the pandemic, but plenty thrived. Holly says the ones that failed did so largely through no fault of their own. The success stories, mean-

while, came where SMEs adapted quickly to what people wanted during lockdown, including food-delivery services and mail-order gifts. Indeed, NOTHS revenues rose by more than 50 per cent over the past year, as it attracted almost a million new customers and brought on 500 new small-business partners, fuelled by a boom in online shopping.

Women business owners often ask Holly for advice. 'Their questions are always about confidence,' she sighs. 'Whether that's how to harness social media, or if anyone is going to be interested in what they have to say. And there's such a lack of confidence around finance. I get women talking about not being good at maths at the age of 40. I say to them, "If you want to become good at maths, do you think you could? Because you've got four children and you're running a company, so I'm pretty sure you can!"'

On her podcast, *Conversations of Inspiration*, Holly has interviewed many successful entrepreneurs, including Chrissie Rucker, founder of The White Company, and Beauty Pie founder Marcia Kilgore. One standout episode was with Julie Deane, founder of the hugely successful Cambridge Satchel Company. 'She spoke about how she designed her logo in 10 minutes by herself – on Microsoft Word,' recalls Holly. 'Often women think, "I can't say that, surely that's not how you do it." She was just like: "That's how I'm doing it."'

To those building a new business today, Holly advises them to get to grips with social media as a priority. Instagram has many marketing benefits and can provide a great sense of community, she points out. 'I wish we had Instagram when we launched Not On The High Street. We didn't even have smartphones then,' she sighs.

'But you've got to put yourself out there. It doesn't cost a penny to test an idea, to introduce yourself to the community, to give the background of your product or service.'

'The brands of the future are the ones where founders are part of the story. It doesn't have to be perfect. My followers know I write every post even though I'm dyslexic and I mess up on IGTV because I get tongue-tied, but it doesn't matter.'

She believes the trend for shopping small is here to stay. 'What we're seeking now is an authentic connection,' she adds. 'For small businesses, it's your greatest superpower.'

*The conversation with Holly continues with a Stella Live Bitesize on Instagram TV @telegraphstella at 8pm on 12 May; Do What You Love, Love What You Do is out now (Virgin, £14.99). Order at books.telegraph.co.uk*

## Holly's five steps to starting a business

**1 Identify your passion.** Ask yourself: what could I bore someone to tears about? What could I read every book on and still want more of? What podcast could I listen to over and over?

**2 The 'business plan' is a myth.** Have one, of course, but it can be fluid. I think of a plan as coordinates; if you know you want to go south, then face the ship in that direction but take each day as it comes.

**3 Don't be afraid of marketing.** There are many tools, like social media, that can help. Also keep in mind that 'emotional marketing' is one of the most important elements of starting a business.

**4 Stop feeling guilty.** I get it! I missed my son's first steps. But he is who he is because of what I do. You're giving your kids a hands-on education by letting them watch Mum build a business.

**5 Do good.** Remember that the future of business is serving a higher calling than the bottom line. Make a change. Giving your business that soul allows people to tell the story of your brand.