

By Eugene Yiga

# Sow it grows and grows and grows Deliciously

Award-winning entrepreneur Vanessa Jacobs discusses overcoming the challenges of running your own business.

Most of us would love to cook with freshly harvested herbs from our gardens or serve a salad filled with home-grown, sun-ripened tomatoes. But although not everybody has a large space to turn into their own vegetable garden, almost all of us have a spot to grow a container garden. That's why Vanessa Jacobs was inspired to create Sow Delicious, a business which sells what she describes as "gardening goodies" suited to this type of vegetable gardening.

## What did you do before starting your own business?

I started my first business at the age of 19 and have only twice worked for other companies, so I suppose you could call me a "serial entrepreneur".

## Where did the idea come from?

I have always loved gardening, with food gardening being my absolute favourite. I get incredible satisfaction from the whole cycle of planting, growing, lovingly tending, and then the triumph of harvesting the plants you have grown with your own two hands and enjoying them around a table with family and friends. So after "semi-grating" from Pretoria to George in the Cape, I decided that my first project would be to plant my own patch of vegetables and culinary herbs.

## What motivated you to turn it into a business?

I made my first slab and filled each block with heirloom seed, added some water, and completely forgot about it until my husband came running up the stairs shouting, "They're growing!" To my amazement it worked, and so I made a few more slabs for myself and planted my whole vegetable garden that year. They grew beautifully. My friends popped around and saw what I was up to and wanted me to make some for them too and somehow it evolved into a business from there.

## How did you get funding to get started?

Well, like most other entrepreneurs, I was

completely broke when I started this business in my double garage at our home in Wilderness.

The fundamental difference from a financial point of view with Sow Delicious and all my previous ventures is that I purposed in my mind that I would not borrow a cent to start and if something needed to be bought I would save and pay cash. It stood me in good stead, especially in the beginning, because I was not loaded with heavy loan repayments in a season when you're barely making enough to pay the necessities. As a result everything Sow Delicious has, from equipment to stock to everything you see at our "chocolate factory", is fully paid for.

## How did you make your first sale?

I had launched my online business in August 2013 and had made the slabs around the same time. It took me another four months to create the variety specific boxes with detailed instructions, import seed for selling purposes, and get my licences and permits in place. And so I launched my first Slab of Seed collection in December 2013 and sold my first slab on 4 December 2013 from my online garden store. We hit our 1 000-day mark on 30 August 2016 and went on to win the Sanlam & Business Partners Emerging Business Entrepreneur of the Year two days later, which was a lovely way to celebrate this milestone.

## How many people do you currently employ?

Sow Delicious currently has three full-time "mud chefs" with a few contracted in during peak seasons and three full-time process and admin gurus. We are a powerful team with maximum output as each member is an expert in the role they play in Sow Delicious.

## How tough is competition in your sector, and what differentiates you from others?

Our trademarked invention is a world first and so there is nothing else like it on the market.

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of our revenue, cut our line overnight. At the same time the drought hit South Africa hard and so our nursery trade dried up overnight too in the high season of spring.



The Sow Delicious online store sells from seeds to gardening tools and books.

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But the challenge with this is to motivate people enough to actually try it because most people are afraid of change and trying something new. We have had to make many packaging changes to overcome mind barriers but it seems to be working. We have also tried to solve all the gardening dilemmas novice gardeners face to make it "sow easy". The Slab of Seed is pre-fertilised with organic fertiliser, filled with heirloom seed, germinates the seed two times faster, holds water three times longer than the soil you plant it in, and is designed to position the seed at the perfect planting depth. We like to say we have created the healthiest guilt-free chocolate on earth – because it grows into delicious vegetables.



## Biggest lesson learnt?

Don't put all your eggs in one basket. We had a company, which was bringing in about 50% of our revenue, cut our line overnight. At the same time the drought hit South Africa hard and so our nursery trade dried up overnight too in the high season of spring. Thankfully, we have three revenue streams – online clients, self-owned businesses, and bigger retail – so we could weather the storm and our other two client streams could carry us through. But because of that we diversified our client mix to be more varied and now we have clients from the gifting sector to delis to farm stalls to health shops in the mix. As our business is seasonal, going international will also counter any "down time" season-wise, as they are all in the Northern Hemisphere with opposite growing seasons.

## What have been the three biggest difficulties you've had to overcome?

I think there has only been one: myself. The problem with being an entrepreneur is that you have nobody else to compare yourself



with but yourself, because the nature of being an entrepreneur means that you are forging new paths and creating new boundaries in places where nobody else has been. You are the benchmark. A fellow entrepreneurial tribe member once told me that for the first five years of his business he thought "entrepreneur" was the French word for "lonely". The problem with this is that every time you fail, the benchmark drops and the fear increases and it takes more and more courage to get up and try again.

## What is the best business advice you've ever received?

It was mind-shift advice, which I suppose could be applied to many things in life. Like most, if not all entrepreneurs, I was driven by the "fear of failure". But at some point this becomes counterproductive because you are so focused on putting things in place to safeguard from failing that you become stagnant or, worse, decline.

## What are your non-work habits that help with work-life balance?

Non-work? What's that? We're only three years old so no time for play yet! Thankfully, I love what I do so much that I go to play (not to work) each day so I am perfectly one-sided in my balance.

## What is your three-year goal for your company?

Other than to have time to discover those unknown "non-work" habits you're asking about, it's to go international. We have our eyes set on the UK, then hopefully the rest of Europe, the USA, and the rest of the world. We had a breakthrough in our formula with regards to our ingredient mix a few months ago and so for the first time we are export-ready. ■ editorial@finweek.co.za