

Business



Rosamund Urwin

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Boxes line the stairs in Claire Watt-Smith's Shepherd's Bush flat. They are packed with the handbags, purses and keyrings that make up her fledgling fair-trade fashion business, BoBelle.

And, like many entrepreneurs starting out, Watt-Smith's living room doubles as an office.

"It does hit your sanity sometimes, when you get out of bed and trip over yet another box," the 27-year-old admits. "But I'd rather plough money into stock and trade shows than spend it on office space. I'm lucky my boyfriend George is so laid-back, though. It would probably drive other people mad."

Watt-Smith launched BoBelle two years ago with just £6,000: what remained of her student loan and a small sum of money from her mother.

Starting out without the help of the suits wasn't a choice, however.

"We were at the start of a recession — banks didn't want to lend," she says. "Plus I was young and I didn't have a mortgage. I quickly realised I had to be patient, to give it time and try to grow organically."

It is a strategy that appears to be working. Turnover has doubled in her second full year of trading, to £65,000.

What sets BoBelle's bags and accessories apart is that they are made of eel skin, which is softer yet stronger than cowhide.

"The skins are a by-product of the Asian food industry — they would normally be thrown away," explains Watt-Smith, who was named as one of Management Today's top 35 under 35 this month. "So it is recycled, but organic. Some ethical designers use recycled plastic, but that doesn't feel so luxurious."

She had the idea to use the material a few years ago after lusting after her mother's Dolce & Gabbana purse, which was made of the skin. "Top end designers such as [Alexander McQueen](#) had used eel skin, but no one had a more accessible range," Watt-Smith says. "So I spotted a gap for products at this price."

Her handbags sell for £163, while a wallet is £63. They are made by workers in [South Korea](#), who are now manufacturing around 500 BoBelle products a month. The brand's 60 stockists include department stores Fenwick in [Brent Cross](#) and Elys in [Wimbledon](#), as well as smaller boutiques such as Lipp in Holland Park and Odie & Amanda in [Denmark Hill](#).

BoBelle also has its own transactional website and this week gained its first international stockist, in [Amsterdam](#).

Building the brand was tough, however. Watt-Smith, who worked for a year at Monsoon in retail operations prior to setting up BoBelle, spent a year selling the bags on market stalls, trying to determine the strength of demand and seeing which styles and colours would be the most popular.

"I was fighting rain, wind and awful locations — at some points, I wondered what on earth I was doing," says Watt-Smith. "But without these initial tests, I don't think I would be where I am now."

She also built up her contacts book and approached Striding Out, a mentoring scheme for young entrepreneurs. Watt-Smith believes that this combination has given her the business nous that many entrepreneurs in the fashion industry lack.

"People often don't understand the business side," she says. "Particularly those, like celebrities, who are just doing it for fun. You've got to have a serious plan to succeed."



Handbag queen: BoBelle founder and managing director Claire Watt-Smith

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BoBelle has grown almost entirely through word of mouth. "Once, I had five orders in rapid succession from different parts of [Germany](#), having never sold anything there before," Watt-Smith says.

"It took me ages to work out why. It turned out my designs had been mentioned on a German fashion blog."

Although she has part-time staff to help with trade shows, Watt-Smith still does all the day-to-day tasks involved in running a small business.

She admits it can be frustrating at times, and wishes information was more readily available for entrepreneurs. "That whole tax doesn't have to be taxing' thing is codswallop, for ex-ample," she says. "I spent ages trying to find out about import duties from the [EU](#) and [US](#) recently. The information just wasn't readily available."

But at least she and her boyfriend won't be stumbling out of bed on to boxes much longer. She hopes to move to a new office in September to help the business grow. George, 27, who works in the City, jokes that he expects to be able to retire at 30, when BoBelle really takes off. Watt-Smith smiles. "He reckons my baby business could become an ethical empire."

BOBELLE BY NUMBERS

Founded: 2008
Turnover: £65,000
Staff: two part-time
Business idol: [Natalie Massenet](#), founder of [Net-a-Porter](#)



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