



In the SPOTLIGHT

Flexibility beats the big players

EcoSan director **SONJA WOOD** has been running a clean operation for 10 years

Sonja Wood smiles as she points out all the gadgets and gizmos she has fitted out in the ladies' toilet of her offices.

"Here's your different soaps and this is for sanitary disposal," said the director of eco-friendly "washroom solutions" business EcoSan, based in Hilton Business Centre in Ashford.

"People ask me what I do and I have learned over time to talk with an overview rather than specifics," she said as she pointed out urinal products and air fresheners in the warehouse.

"Sometimes you can see people cringing when you talk about sanitary disposal waste. Most businesses see toilets and washroom as low priority but if it goes wrong it is a major issue."

This summer, EcoSan celebrates its 10th anniversary since Mrs Wood and husband Carl launched the firm from their Ashford home.

She has been in business much longer, running a hair salon in Faversham for eight years before moving into the sanitary industry, first for Rentokil in London – where she became known as "Sanni Son of Soho" – and for other firms in Windsor and Edenbridge.

However, her world came crashing down when the company she worked for was bought by a national provider and made her redundant. Twenty-six weeks pregnant at the time, shortly afterwards she lost the baby.

"After everything being perfect, suddenly my world was turned upside down overnight. I decided to make something positive out of something negative and I said to Carl 'I think we could do this on our own'."

"That is when I took the big leap and started working from home. In less than a year we had gone from nothing to a £100,000 business."

While Mr Wood runs the operational side of the firm, Mrs Wood is very much the face of EcoSan. She learned her customer service skills from her time as Miss Faversham from 1987 to 1988. She went on to become Kent and Sussex Queen and has encouraged both her daughters to enter pageants.

She said: "As a young woman, people expected you to initiate conversation in all kinds of situations because you were the ambassador for Faversham."

"Good customer service is all about being able to find common ground. If you can do that, then you can provide the service they are looking for."



EcoSan director **Sonja Wood** in the company warehouse

The nitty-gritty

What's the secret to good customer service skills?

"When I meet someone it is not just about going in and selling the service we offer but about understanding their business and the people in it. When you're providing a service, if you have a better understanding of people you are selling to, you can tailor your service to what they need. That is where a lot of the big national companies go wrong because they don't have the flexibility. We sell what we think will benefit a client and when they can see the improvement they will tell others and that grows our business."

How do you run your business?

"I'm quite a hands-on director. I'm out there seeing what's going on in the real world of business. I'm not in an ivory tower in a big corporate building. Before I ran a business, if I met someone who was a director, I was afraid of them but now I realise they are quite different and often quite approachable."

What is the biggest error a boss can make?

"Sometimes people who have been in business for a long time think they have always done something a certain way and they are not prepared to change it. If you don't move with the times your business is severely diminished or, in the worst case, you can go out of business. Sometimes people moan when we come to a recession but the questions is 'what are you going to do about it?' You need to look at what you're doing and what you're selling. Running a business is a real rollercoaster ride."

What's the trick to running a business with your husband?

"Carl is the opposite to me. He's very shy and comes from an engineering background. He's very good with technical things which I have not got the patience for. I have always been focused on customer services, sales and business retention. We have our own areas, which gives balance, and we don't tend to cross over too much. Living and working together each day means we have an argument where we really cross swords maybe once a year. As a married couple it's a learning curve and I have had to learn I am not always right."

How do you keep staff happy?

"Carl's father works part-time in our warehouse, my sister-in-law also works in the business and I like to think we treat everyone who works here like a family member. If you look after people and make them feel valued they are more likely to go that extra mile for you."

Typical day

Every day starts with husband and business partner Carl bringing Sonja a cup of tea in bed as she is "not a morning person". After the school run, she gets to the office or heads straight to appointments. "I often look at my emails on my phone after dropping Mylie off at school and work out where I'm going or what I'm doing." She says every day is different and describes herself as the "queen of multitasking". Her day finishes between 4.30pm and 5.30pm when she may go to a networking event or take her girls to after-school clubs.



Sonja Wood is a former Miss Faversham and Kent and Sussex Queen

CV

Born: 30/1/1968 in Strood but grew up in Faversham

Live: Ashford

Family: married to Carl and has two daughters Sofia and Mylie, plus a cat and a dog

School: Lady Capel School in Faversham (now the Abbey School)

First job: Part time at Richard Shops in Canterbury

First salary: "I was on good money because I used to do a lot of overtime. I was earning £75 a week."

Salary now: "Over a hundred".

Car: Tesla

Book: Out of the Bottle by Graham Webb

Music: "My great, great, great, great grandmother is Giovanna Sestini, the Italian opera singer. I like Gilbert and Sullivan and also music in the charts like Coldplay."

Gadget: iPhone

Last holiday: Spain

Charity: Fields of Life, Headway, the Pilgrim's Hospice, Because I Am A Girl



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