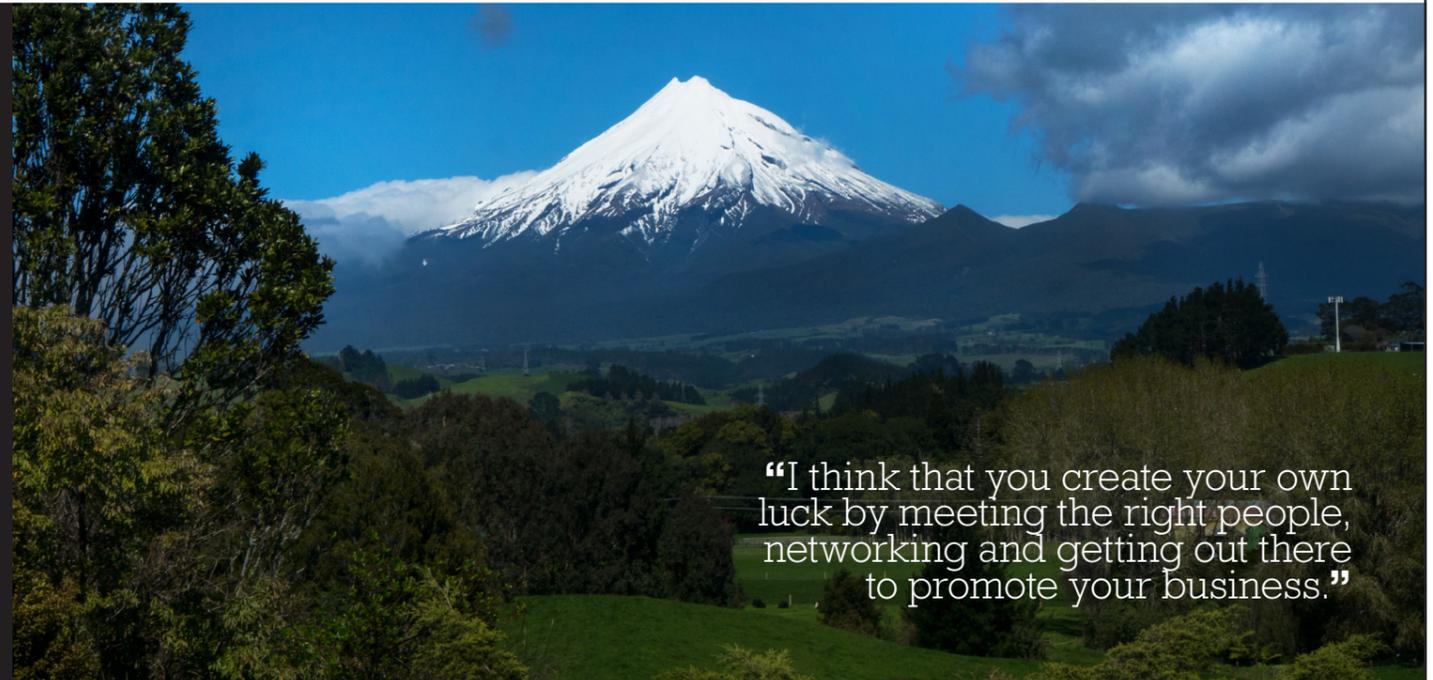


HELLO POSSUMS

NATURALLY TANNED POSSUM PELTS ARE THE USP FOR PENNIE AND LAURIE SANDS' TARANAKI-BASED INTERNET BUSINESS ENVIROFUR. THEIR PRODUCTS ARE IN HOT DEMAND BY CUSTOMERS WORLDWIDE.

BY KEVIN KEVANY



“I think that you create your own luck by meeting the right people, networking and getting out there to promote your business.”

A Taranaki husband and wife combination has turned New Zealand's war on possums into a highly desirable range of environmentally-friendly clothing and footwear products. In the process they've been exciting a global market – using pelts from a unique, natural tanning process and creating local jobs and work for professional hunters.

That combo is Pennie and Laurie Sands. Envirofur is their dynamic Stratford-based family business, some 40 kilometres south of New Plymouth, on the sheltered side of Mount Taranaki, and connected to the world through the Internet.

The summer season draws vast numbers of foreign tourists to their retail tannery shop. The couple have tied-up referrals from local tour and accommodation operators to ensure this important aspect of the business continues to thrive.

“No one in New Zealand is tanning possum pelts like us,” says Pennie, “so we don't really have any competition, either locally or nationally.

“Everyone else uses chrome and alluvium, but we have developed our own secret process using no poisons, solvents or chemicals. Sorry, I cannot reveal any part of the process,” she whispers.

“But I can assure you the

process produces high quality leather which is strong, supple, windproof and showerproof, yet lightweight.”

Pennie and Laurie saw a huge potential in Envirofur by adding the creative and design side, while developing the onsite operation and outlet over the years, with their own ideas.

“We don't really advertise, we rely on word-of-mouth leads across the globe,” says Pennie.

Laurie had a farming, butchery and insurance background, but nothing remotely involving the processing of pelts. He knew nothing about the tanning business, but loved a challenge and was always looking for something different.

They purchased the existing Environmental Products (Envirofur) business in 2003.

Pennie, significantly, had been in the rag trade and had a stint in administration and running the shop at the Army Museum in Waiouru – which possibly accounts for their huge success in selling and shipping goods to international and national tourists who pour through their store, especially during Taranaki's famous Rhododendron Festival.

“International visitors, in particular, like the whole natural process, and getting rid of a pest while doing something for the environment. And they like everything New Zealand-made.

“We have a full-time machinist, 'outworkers' and two part-timers who help when they are busy,” says Pennie, adding that both she and Laurie work full-time in the business.

GROWTH STRATEGY

Buying into an existing business can be fraught with hidden costs and challenges. So what strategies have the couple adopted and adapted over their 14 years of growth?

“We've been fortunate not to suffer any real setbacks and have just gone ahead and done our own thing,” says Pennie, “taking advantage of the uniqueness of what we can do in the tanning process and the leather that produces.

“We've learned to adapt the furs and skins into suitable products and always listened closely to our customers as to their needs and what we could change in terms of fit and colour, for example.”

It's about being adaptable and talking and listening to people; being open to change, she explains.

“Consequently we've focused on making more classic lines that look great and last, and not just fashion items. And, as always, we go for quality New Zealand-made products.

“Exclusively, we're able to turn the pelt inside-out, so the hats and footwear are not lined, just reversed. Everyone else lines them to showerproof them with, say oilskin, for hats.”

ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS

What is so special about opossum fur? And does the environmental aspect concern Pennie and Laurie?

“We realised the destruction of our New Zealand native bush could only be significantly reduced by creating a perceived value for opossum fur, to give it its proper name,” says Pennie, who also says the opossum population is estimated to be more than 30 million.

“The only other creatures with similar fur characteristics are Arctic polar bears and the wolverine. The fibre has a hollow core and is hydroscopic. In other words, it allows the moisture to be drawn into the centre of the shaft. So it keeps heat from the opossum in the Australian Outback and prevents the polar bear from freezing in sub-zero temperatures.

“The hollow core, however, also means it doesn't dye readily,” says Pennie. “Our yarns, which are a blend of opossum, merino and silk/nylon, have a distinctive dark undertone. This is due to the merino [content] and the 'core' thread, taking on the introduced dye, while the opossum [content] remains relatively unaffected.”

Pennie is quick to acknowledge the contribution

professional hunters make to their success. “They supply us skins which are salted and frozen. It is important the skins are removed immediately the animals are killed,” she explains.

“The colder the climate, the better the furs. We only buy in the winter as these skins are the best and have the thickest fur.”

Hunters understand fully what Envirofur requires in skin quality, says Pennie. “It's a sound relationship built up over many years.”

Within a couple of weeks the skins are processed, tanned and ready to use. The result, says Pennie, is products that are original, environmentally-friendly, fashionable and practical.

“Soft possum fur garments are warmer, easier to dry and much lighter to wear. It is warmer than wool or feather-down; does not matt; and uniquely does not generate static electricity caused by movement,” she says. So it doesn't attract dust, dirt or odours through sweating.

Naturally tanned possum fur products are ideal for sensitive skin and have a therapeutic effect when it comes to circulation, especially for the elderly and diabetics, and those suffering from arthritis.

So has luck played a part in the business's success?

“I think that you create your own luck by meeting the right people, networking and getting out there to promote your business,” says Pennie.

“Always be positive, just keep going and be there for your customers. Employ the right people and create a great atmosphere to work in. Enjoy what you do. We both still do after 14 years.

“It all takes time and long hours. But there's nothing better than seeing where our products are going in the world and having the business grow.” **NZB**

KEVIN KEVANY IS AN AUCKLAND-BASED FREELANCE WRITER. EMAIL KEVWRITE@XTRA.CO.NZ

