

Taste of success



Guts and a clear focus helped LENA BJORK achieve her goal

Lena ... running a successful catering business (above and below)



Some of the world's greatest feats were accomplished by people not smart enough to know they were impossible." These wise words have their living embodiment in Lena Bjork, the founder of the Inn or Out catering firm.

Where we may pour over the books on how to start a business, on whether we should require specialist education to start in business or on a career path, Lena Bjork has one thing in common with many of the entrepreneurs featured



in Women in Business in that she is a determined and self-motivated individual – the essential DNA of any entrepreneur.

"I have absolutely no education. I left school with the worst grades you could possibly imagine," she modestly notes, but what she does possess, not taught in academia or university degrees, is an instinct for the possible.

Lena left Sweden when she was 17 and I went to the US to work as an au-pair. Leaving the US she travelled around the world working variously as kitchen porter and a waitress. Then in 1994 Sweden joined the European Community (EC) and Lena arrived in the UK to work as a banqueting supervisor in one of the five-star hotels. While this was not necessarily her idea of a career move, it inadvertently helped to define her life's path.

QUESTION OF SERVICE

While all hotel staff are taught that "service is king" and that the customer is the most important person, many of us have seen this fail to materialise in practice.

Lena noticed this for herself and felt frustrated that such a poor service attitude was endemic in the industry that she chose to work in.

"I just found that the people who were working in the service industry in this country in general, did not like serving people, it was just a job for them," she says. "You have to be motivated by the top person to understand how important the customer is, because without the customer I don't have a job or a business. If they want something that isn't on the menu and we can do it, let's do it with a smile, that is my kind of attitude."

Lena felt that she had something to offer so she quit her job and without – in her words "a pound in my pocket" embarked on what many business advisors would have warned as a futile task or a mission impossible.

Her mission was fraught with difficulties from the word go. Not only was she daring to go into a catering business without any finances in sight, her difficulties were compounded by the fact that the basic infrastructure like a delivery vehicle and a computer to work from and last but perhaps the



Clinton ... stately testimonial for Lena

worst her culinary skills were abysmal. And the fact that she arrived London just three months earlier so knew absolutely no one certainly did not help. But Lena saw all of these as difficulties to be overcome.

Making light work of these problems Lena "phoned up some friends in Sweden who sent over menus by post just so I had something to show potential clients and I delivered food for the first functions commuting on the tube and bus because I could not afford to take a taxi."

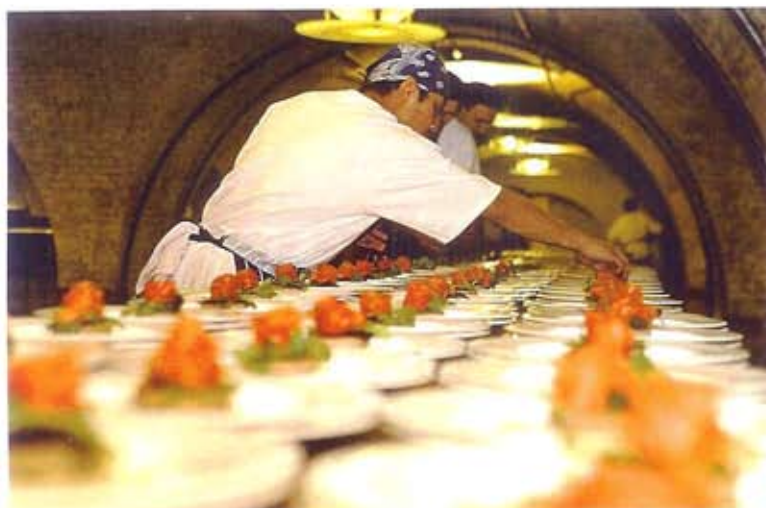
As far as cooking was concerned she simply called her mother and concentrated on producing food of very good quality. Lena is very modest in the way she overcame these challenges. What she did do was to work 24 hours a day

by herself to overcome the challenges that crossed her path.

FIRST BLOOD

Her first client was Swedish Banks based in London, which she pitched through her membership of the Swedish Chamber of Commerce. "I still remember the membership fee was £230 and I was thinking how was I going to find this money but I just had to, so I was working extra hours as a waitress in the evening to make that £230 to pay the membership fee."

Her sales pitch to the banks was very Bjorkian: simple and direct. "I basically said 'I have got nothing to prove, I have got nothing to show you, but please try me,'" she recalls.



It worked and she won a few contracts. Following on these initial trials she started to get regular work. It was time to streamline her delivery methods and invest in buying a car.

Lena's experience is mirrored by many businesses – her request for a loan was refused. It is the irony of the banking system that when you need the help of a supportive bank it is very difficult to obtain without a track record; yet with a track record banks get offended by your refusal to accept their support.

"When I went to some banks to try to borrow some money they laughed in my face and then I got involved with the Princes Trust," she says. However, the Prince's Trust also declined to offer a loan because Lena was too capable and therefore did not meet their criteria. Unlike conventional institutions the Prince's Trust offers a more personal interface and Lena was allowed to appeal to a panel. What they had let themselves in for was coming face to face with the determination and commitment that is the secret ingredient of all entrepreneurs.

Lena decided that she would not take no for an answer – which was probably not the last time that she took this approach. "I thought that I have got to do something to make those guys give me some money," she says. "So I made Swedish deli cake beautifully decorated

put it into a box turned it upside down and shut the box so it was completely ruined. So when I brought this cake along with me to the panel, I made my presentation, did my speech and then I explained to them: 'This is what it becomes when you travel on the tube, please help me,' and of course they lent me the money. They lent me £2,500 and

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that was just enough for my first delivery van. The van proved to be the good luck talisman for the business."

ULTIMATE ACCOLDE

Two months later she won a contract to cater for the-then US President Bill Clinton.

In suitable modest terms Lena underplays what must have been a very difficult tender for the contract. "It was somebody who new somebody; I had a call from the White House asking if I would like to quote for this event. Then I found

out I was up against the American Embassy's own in-house caterers and one of the big catering companies wanted to do the event free of charge. I didn't even have a computer to write my proposal on, so I had to do a hand-written proposal and fax it to the White House, but I won the business."

The event catered for by Lena won the ultimate accolade. The White House wrote to Bjork commending her efforts as being the best the White House had ever received on a foreign trip. High praise indeed.

"That was the starting point, as we had only been up and running just a few months. But this letter of commendation did wonders for our business as people read the letter and remarked wow if you were good enough for Bill Clinton then it is good enough for me, but you only get one chance though, you can't live on a reference."

The reality of the company was that Lena was still a one-woman band. From the first two months to three years into the company she worked single-handedly to carry out all the functions of the company. "For seven days a week I got up at 4 am, went to the meat market, vegetable market, fruit market, fish market ... you name it, so that I would get the absolute best quality," she says. "Then I would go home, I lived on the second floor without a lift. I had to carry all the products upstairs, then cooked everything carried it all down to the van. Go to the functions and then

