



FACE VALUE

From hand-bottled products at the kitchen bench to global turnover of \$20m in just 10 years, Narelle Chenery is the epitome of the epithet: “from little things, big things grow”.

Story by Jeni Bone

It's not often a business conceived in a Gold Coast kitchen wins effusive praise from a head of a global company. For Narelle Chenery, a mum of three from Nerang and co-founder of the Miessence range of skincare, cosmetics and household products, the glowing comments from the chief chemist from Aveda at the Sustainable Cosmetics conference in New York came as a pleasant surprise and reassured her that she is doing something right. What began as one woman's quest for pure, chemical-free products for herself and her family has grown to become the world's first Certified

Organic Australian cosmetic, health and wellbeing company and multi-national eco-leader. “10 years ago when we started, organic had nowhere near the buzz it does today,” says this pioneer of the concept. Back in 1999, with a background in science, Narelle was perplexed that the skincare and cosmetics she was using were not as “natural” as they professed to be. Then there was the array of toxic chemicals she was using to keep her home clean. “I was pregnant with my third child and worried about all the dangerous substances I was exposing myself to. I started making my own, experimenting with formulae on the kitchen bench.”



Eager to share her discoveries, Narelle began giving her friends tubs of her concoctions for Christmas and Birthdays gifts, and they would always come back with requests for more. "So many people have allergies and reactions to skincare brands, shampoos and other household products, or the products just don't do what they promise. It became clear there was more than a small gap in the market for truly pure, organic products with integrity. Actually, it was more like a giant chasm!" Narelle converted her passion for potions into a profession. "I thought, if I could do anything in the world, what would it be? And I decided to throw all I had into it and take it to the world." Teamed up with husband Colin, business activist Alf Orpen and John Hunter to form the ONEGroup – Organic and Natural Enterprise Group – Narelle drew on her knowledge from an Applied Science degree and delved into the challenges of producing a diverse organic range. As Narelle recounts: "The main issues with organic are those of shelf life and emulsification. That's why the big brands and most of those who label themselves 'organic', rely on preservatives, anti-bacterial agents, anti-oxidisers and antibiotics. I researched heavily and read anything I could find. My background is maths and IT, so thorough research is my strength." After 18 months of research, Narelle revolutionised the beauty industry with the world's first certified organic skin care products, Miessence, launching in 2001. "The response to the certified organic Miessence range was enormous. Our sales grew by 2500% in the first 18 months in Australia and ONEGroup quickly developed in other significant ways too." The creation of ONEGroup was the beginning of a grass roots education movement about organics, green and healthy alternatives. Now, dubbed "The Green Goddess", Narelle travels the country and frequently overseas to spread her message of uncompromising passion for educating people on "green washing". "People need to understand that

89% of the 10,500 ingredients used in personal care products have NOT been evaluated for safety," she says. "The average woman is exposed to more than 130 different chemicals every day. My aim is to help them learn to read labels so they know if a product is as pure as it claims to be." Miessence products were the first certified organic cosmetics products in the world and are independently certified to international food grade standards by the world's most respected organic certifying organisations, including Australian Certified Organic (ACO), the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and IFOAM (Europe). Miessence is sold in more than 60 countries and operates with 50 staff. The business has reached an incredible annual turnover of nearly \$20m. The model, which relies on online sales and distribution via selected health food stores and beauty therapists, was built on the fundamental values of "long-term sustainability and integrity with nature". Ten years on, Narelle's inspiration is as strong. She has launched a range of baby products and is working on a certified organic range of fragrances, a nutritional range of whole food powders and freeze-dried foods, as well as a probiotic range of home products under the Mienviron brand – cleaning agents that actually increase the health of the home. "I have plans for a recipe book too, so people can buy the basics and for a few cents, make their own. That will free them from the toxic cocktail of chemicals most people use in their homes." She is an energetic educator and activist for social and consumer change, speaking worldwide to business leaders, entrepreneurs, cosmetic industry professionals and government bodies. Working from her semi-rural property at Worongary, Narelle keeps fit with Taekwondo and staying involved in the lives of her teen children and their friends. Tired is not a word in her vocabulary. "I have so much still to achieve. There's a whole world of people out there to make healthy." *iyi*

More at www.miessence.com

Q&A

• HOW DID YOU FIND THE CAPITAL FOR YOUR VERY GOOD IDEA?

• We grew from cash flow.
• I started small, really small. Think hand painted labels stuck on with sticky tape! Our first big break was a Federal Government Grant for \$110,000 that we pledged to match dollar for dollar.

• HOW DID YOU MANAGE YOUR GROWTH – DID YOU HAVE FINANCIAL ADVICE?

• We had accountants, who helped us make decisions as they arose.

• WHAT WERE SOME OF THE THINGS YOU LEARNT ALONG THE WAY, THROUGH EXPERIENCES, GOOD AND BAD?

• Trust your gut instinct. Don't believe everything you hear.
• Value yourself. Don't worry about your competitors, let them worry about you. Focus on what you do well, and find people to do the rest.

• WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY NOW THAT YOU'RE A LITTLE WISER AND THE BUSINESS IS 10 YEARS OLD?

• Not a thing! Everything up until now has been a perfect learning experience. It's what we do in the present that counts towards our future. No use lamenting about the past.

• ANY ADVICE FOR PEOPLE STARTING OUT WITH A GREAT BIG IDEA, NOT KNOWING WHERE TO TURN?

• Do your research. Know your market inside out.
• Be the best. And act!