

Case Study

AA Lingerie

Small Sizes, Big Ideas!

Turning an idea into reality

Retha Queenan, founder of specialist online store AA Lingerie, said, "I set up the company as a result of my own frustration at being unable to find suitable underwear. I'm small and many stores just don't have anything in my size - except for training bras! Like most women I wanted to find underwear that fitted perfectly as well as looking fabulous."

There followed months of researching the market and visiting manufacturers all over the world from Turkey to Thailand. "I knew I had to visit them in person in order to persuade them to produce these special small bras," said Retha, "and I needed a range of diverse suppliers to satisfy the tastes of my clients."



Photography by Denis O'Regan



Getting started

When she started the company, Retha knew nothing about e-business. In fact at first she imagined running everything from home, packaging and sending out all the orders herself and growing the business organically. But early in AA Lingerie's development, Retha was given some invaluable advice. A friend suggested she use a fulfilment company and gave her a copy of *Catalogue & e-business*. This turned out to be an important step down the path to success.

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Choosing the right option

After looking through *Catalogue & e-business*, Retha picked out three or four fulfilment companies. She contacted them all and discussed her ideas, but only one of the companies stood out. That company was CoDEStorm PLC. Retha says, "They were professional but also approachable - they combined a friendly, family run atmosphere, with great infrastructure and they seemed to approach every job with absolute attention to detail. I instinctively knew they were the right fulfilment company for AA Lingerie."

The importance of planning

Over a few preliminary meetings with Retha, the CoDEStorm team formalised a business plan for setting up AA Lingerie as a viable e-commerce store. This involved an in-depth analysis of AA Lingerie's business requirements - a crucial aspect in designing the perfect website and fulfilment operation. Once these requirements were established, the team, together with Retha and James Baker of Sure Horizon, designed the look and feel of the site and developed the technology, procedures, structure and functionality.

Tailor-made

Retha was able to choose everything she wanted for the look and feel of the site which was then integrated with the back end functionality of Codestorm's Lynx_AM+ in-house e-commerce system. This also involved integrating the online payment processing with Retha's chosen merchant service provider and populating with all the relevant product graphics, description information, and related links. The site was built to be as versatile as possible to allow for infinite expansion in the future. After extensive testing and

training of all parties involved it was ready to go live.

Going live

At this stage, the application was ready for deployment and was put online utilising CoDEStorm's web hosting facilities. CoDEStorm's software experts had to ensure the availability of the site online by developing robust background architecture and ensuring site visibility through search engine optimisation. Now that the site is up and running, CoDEStorm continue to be responsible for maintenance and support, ensuring its reliability, updating general information, and working closely with Retha on producing ongoing promotions.

The perfect relationship

Here's what Retha says of her working relationship with CoDEStorm, "CoDEStorm is the public face of AA Lingerie - they manage all direct communication with the customer. I have an incredibly close relationship with them and we're in contact every day discussing promotions, updating the website, dealing with any transaction and product queries. They provide me with essential information for management, forecasting and

planning and I access their real-time information system several times each day to check stock levels and activity. It's an incredibly intimate relationship and is vital to my business. Everyone from the programmer who designed the back end functionality of the website to the girls who carefully wrap and despatch my orders - they all play an integral role in the success of AA Lingerie."

Putting the customer in control

As part of the functionality of the site, Retha is able to update and manage most sections, including product management, category editing and promotional codes. She has access to statistical information such as order histories and stock levels. The design of the site also allows CoDEStorm to access this data to provide Retha with regular reports detailing everything from stock levels to the type and frequency of purchases. This allows her to compare the success of various stock lines and to pursue alternative sources. Orders are picked, packed and posted same day in real-time with a gift-wrapping service to complete the customer experience. While Retha retains control over all the aesthetic

and stock line decisions, the rest of the business can be run for her by CoDEStorm.

Looking to the future

Despite trading for only eight months, AA Lingerie is going from strength to strength with exposure on television and in magazines complimenting the original marketing activity. Following a successful launch in June 2004, its turnover by December had increased 4-fold on that of July. Its aim now is to focus more marketing on its existing customer base as this is much more cost effective than continuing to track down more small-busted women! What else does the future hold? Well, AA Lingerie is continuing to develop new services and products: a new style of sports bra has just been commissioned and their range may soon include basques, as well as strapless and multiway bras. Whilst AA Lingerie is still in its infancy, it has demonstrated an admirable sense of innovation and attention to detail. The company is set to grow steadily, winning a larger audience both at home and abroad. From a good idea to a working reality, AA Lingerie has travelled the precipitous path to success. Now, the only way is up.

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