

ENTREPRENEURS



Designs from
Claire Doyle's
2011
collection

Tailoring A Business To Working Women

It's difficult for professional women to buy a high street skirt that reaches their knees. That's fine for fashion designer Claire Doyle, who spotted a niche in offering bespoke clothing for female go-getters **BY DARREN O'LOUGHLIN**

Claire Doyle is a driven woman. With a certainty that she can trace back to her school days, the Kildare fashion designer knew that she wanted her own company, and she was prepared to put in the hard work to attain it. Doyle, 25, who operates the Elizabeth & Claire salon in Dublin's Smithfield area, offers a bespoke range of professional and formal wear for women. The location isn't accidental. Some of her best clients are barristers in the nearby Law Library who find that they just can't source suitable and elegant workwear in department stores and fashion boutiques. Doyle's design touch also flatters the shapes of middle-aged women, another reason why her clients include President Mary McAleese and former Tanaiste Mary Coughlan.

Elizabeth & Claire was established in 2009 by Doyle and Elizabeth Moore, who left the business last year. Doyle didn't wilt under the pressure, instead taking up the mantle herself and carrying the fledgling company forward. A decent business education, coupled with a past stint working for renowned designer Louise Kennedy, wasn't any harm either. Doyle has a business degree from DCU and a résumé that details previous positions in Google and the Revenue Commissioners. So she has a firm grasp of business fundamentals, as evidenced by the modest single room in the old Jameson distillery which doubles as her office and a showroom. Taking some time off from designing and managing, Doyle discussed the genesis and future prospects for Elizabeth & Claire.

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Claire Doyle: muted palettes

What's your unique selling point?

I design clothing that is primarily targeted towards professional women, who like tailored business wear and general styling advice. As professional women are often restricted in the colour choices they can wear, I offer a selection of designs with muted palettes in a range of options. We're a destination shop insofar as women who book appointments with us know us and what we offer. Our USP incorporates both the high quality that we offer and the bespoke services. We tailor and take care of alterations, offering private sessions with clients, sometimes spending two or three hours with them. We also offer an out-of-hours and weekend service.

What informs your design ideas?

Getting to know your customer is essential, so when I sit down to design I'll know that she'll want that type of sleeve or a particular colour. Functionality is also important, with barristers being a prime example. Many barristers want lots of pockets in their dresses or skirts to keep their pens and phones in when they're robed. There is a distinct etiquette when it comes to professional clothing, dictating skirt length, neck size, etc. Department stores won't give you advice on this, nor can they do the necessary alterations and tailoring required. Clients come here for the whole package.

How does the business work?

I design inhouse and then secure the fabrics to make the collection. I tried to keep the manufacturing in Ireland but I couldn't find anyone who could handle the sort of quality fitting we were after.

After a long search, we located a company in Poland, who also make clothes for Burberry. I also stock collections in the salon so people can buy off the rails too. A lot of designers don't want to get into tailoring and alterations because it's time consuming.

But since it's customer loyalty that we're after, working to a client's exact specifications is necessary. In the past few months our bespoke ordering has increased to 20% and is growing.

How did you get into fashion design?

While studying in college, I had the opportunity to work with Louise Kennedy and it was then that my love for fashion and design grew. I always knew I wanted to open up a business but I wanted to have the business skills to make it a success; hence my business education. Anyone can open a business but, especially in design, you have to be conscious of costs. If the figures don't add up, then you don't have a business.

When Elizabeth and I set up the business, we wanted it to offer a niche service and that's how the tailoring aesthetic came about.

How has the recession affected your business?

When starting a business, you have to be conscious of outgoings, negotiating credit

terms with manufacturers and suppliers and so on. Other designers tell me that during the boom times credit was freely available and sales rolled in. When the recession hit, they didn't know what to do. I started from zero and I think that it offered the best learning curve and grounding. When we come out of the recession we'll be in a much better place within the market to gain as a result.

Lessons learned?

I've realised that mistakes should be learned from, as there's always something in them that can be of benefit. Mistakes help shape the prospects of success. I have also learned that professional women are looking to buy 'investment' pieces rather than high fashion. During the Celtic Tiger it was a case of quick money, quick fashion. If you didn't like a piece, you threw it out and bought another one. That's all changing now, as women look for trans-seasonal attire – clothing that will last.

Biggest challenges?

Getting my name out to prospective clients was a big challenge for me. Traditional marketing methods didn't really work. Word of mouth and personal recommendations have proven to be highly beneficial for my business. I organised a fashion show earlier in the year in the Merrion Hotel, to coincide with International Women's Day, which I thought was apt, and the event generated new customers. Creating brand awareness is a continuing challenge but I've tripled my client base in just two years.

Future plans?

I have a name change for the business in the pipeline and my next step is to try to get into Belfast and the UK. There's a huge market for what we're doing there and I feel that I could replicate the success we've had in Dublin. **BP**



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