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**WINDOW
DRESSING**
MAKE A
STATEMENT

Marketing:
TWO DIY TOOLS
GO HEAD TO HEAD



Kitchenalia

The Kitchen Industry: From strength to strength



*DESIGNER, WHOLESALER, MOTHER:
Make Me Iconic fits it all in*

AUSTRALIAN
Gift & Homewares
ASSOCIATION

DESIGNED TO BE *different*

Kate Nicolson talks to Kirsten Wade about how the birth of her daughter inspired the creation of a unique and successful range of children's products.

KATE NICOLSON ALWAYS wanted to own her own business. Even as a backpacker in her twenties, Nicolson would sell bootleg jewellery and home made muffins to finance her travel and surf bug. After settling down with a job as a buyer for a successful Australian distribution company, the entrepreneurial young woman met talented designer Leesa Hallahan. Inspired by the birth of Nicolson's first daughter Eve, the pair set about creating baby toys to combat all the cheap, plastic, mass produced toys on the market. "The rest is history!"

Wanting to stand out from the masses, O.B. Designs created "fashionably unique, quirky and multifunctional products". Hallahan and Nicolson are determined to

offer products at accessible price points for everyone. "Affordability will always be key to standing out from our competitors. We believe our products speak for themselves once they hit the shelves."

The success of O.B. Designs' original toy, the DINGaRING, a three-in-one rattle, soft toy and teething ring, is still a source of satisfaction and pride for the designers. "We know our product is well received when mothers ring us in a panic asking for an express shipment of their child's favourite toy which may have been left behind at a grocery store or park," Nicolson says.

Starting O.B. Designs from scratch left no budget for marketing. Hallahan and Nicolson have depended on happy customers

spreading the word about their products. "We have relied heavily on word of mouth, online blogs and cool mags who seem to 'get' our quirky style!" O.B. Designs has also exhibited its colourful product range at trade fairs. "Marketing wise, we've found that trade shows are a great way to get our product into the marketplace." They also offer a valuable opportunity for Hallahan and Nicolson to meet with industry operatives and customers. "Maybe it's because of our products, in that they're fun, light-hearted, quirky and edgy; but people are really fun to deal within this industry."

BIGGER AND BETTER THINGS

O.B. Designs has come a long way since making its first sale on 8 August 2008. Starting with a core of eight DINGaRINGS, Hallahan and Nicolson made all their products by hand for the first year. But high demand for the company's unique range



Kate Nicolson (left) and Leesa Hallahan show off select pieces of their soft toy range.

soon made that impossible. The pair decided to move manufacturing to Indonesia to free up time and capital for product development. O.B. Designs now has over 100 items for customers to choose from, and the range continues to grow.

Following its success in Australia, O.B. Designs began selling overseas in mid-2010. The popular toys are now available in the European Union, including the United Kingdom and Netherlands, Africa, Oman, Egypt, Israel and the Middle East. "We've just got a distributor deal with the USA so we'll launch there," Nicolson reveals, "Which is really exciting for us." When O.B. Designs launches at the ABC Kids Expo in Louisville, Kentucky later this year, the new US distributor will exclusively showcase the O.B. Designs range. "We'll hopefully have a good presence there."

Hallahan and Nicolson at work in their studio. BELOW: Nicolson's daughter Evie shows off the Lola Ladybug Stufit backpack.



“When mothers tell us how much their babies love our toys, that is our biggest triumph

Despite their overseas success, Hallahan and Nicolson remain grounded, always remembering why they started the business. "Hearing from mothers who write to us directly telling us how much their babies love our toys will always be one of our biggest triumphs." While other businesses faced a downturn during the recent Global Financial Crisis, O.B. Designs went from strength to strength. "For us to have grown considerably rather than contract in this climate just reinforces our belief in our products," Nicolson says.

TOYS WITH A CONSCIENCE

An environmental and social conscience in designing, manufacturing and distributing products is at the forefront of the O.B. Designs decision-making process. "One of the founding principles of our business is to be as environmentally conscious as possible. We would rather be part of the solution and not the problem."

Wood used in O.B. Designs toys is sourced from the Rubberwood tree in Indonesia, a plantation harvested timber. Recycling also plays a large part in O.B. Designs, with swing tags, shipping cartons and its recent venture into greeting cards

all made using recycled paper. "We do our best to use natural products where possible and support suppliers who support their employees and communities". O.B. Designs toys are manufactured in Indonesian factories in line with Indonesian workplace regulations. "The toy factory that supplies us is in excellent condition. It provides state of the art equipment for employees and adheres to Indonesian workplace regulations, which sets a 40 hour work week with double overtime for workers who choose to work longer hours."

LOOKING AHEAD

With no plans of slowing down any time soon, Hallahan and Nicolson are looking forward to the future of O.B. Designs. On the back of their success so far, the pair of businesswomen hope to be able to attract more international recognition for their designs and for more people to discover the brand in years to come. Ever expanding, O.B. Designs is preparing to welcome Heartfelt Creations to their range of successful product lines. The 100 percent felt toys with bell, squeaker and crinkle fabric, which Nicolson assures "are very, very cool", are launching in August and are expected to be



on the shelves for customers to enjoy from late September.

The first priority in O.B. Designs' plan for the future is to maintain its ethical and sustainable business model. The co-owners want to be "an ethical employer who supports modern families and their demanding schedules". When Nicolson speaks of the brand's future, the notion of support comes up frequently. As they once were up-and-coming designers themselves, Nicolson says it is really important to her and Hallahan to support people in similar situations. "We understand the struggles designers face in breaking into the market."

As the 'Odd' and 'Bod' behind O.B. Designs, Hallahan and Nicolson have witnessed their original desire to create unique baby toys grow to become a successful business. "O.B. Designs, next to being a mother, is the most rewarding thing I've ever done in my life," Nicolson says. 