

How I made it: Jane Stephenson

You've got to keep picking up that phone and put yourself out there, don't be afraid to use your contacts, says the managing director of Seminars.ie

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Stephenson began her business because she wanted to work from home (Fergal Phillip)

Jane Stephenson returned to Ireland in 1995, after a 20-year absence. Recently divorced and out of work, it was a difficult time.

“I moved back from the UK, where I had been working in design marketing, to a house in Bray and knew nobody. It was awful and I was so lonely. I'm sure it's better now, but at that time nobody invited divorcees anywhere,” she said.

With two children to raise, finding a job was always going to be tough.

“I knew if I took a job, I'd end up working from 9am to 9pm which, as a single mother, wasn't possible,” said Stephenson. “So I decided instead that I would try to develop a business from home. I knew I'd have

Today, Jane Stephenson Associates runs Seminars.ie, which specialises in bringing famous speakers to Ireland, often with a spiritual bent, such as Deepak Chopra and Tony Buzan.

“I’m a promoter, but of writers, not of rock stars,” she said. With some events drawing an audience of up to 3,000 people — at about €40 a pop — turnover is on track to tip the €1m mark next year.

Born in the UK to Irish parents, Stephenson came to Ireland aged two and lived in Monkstown in Dublin. She studied economics and social science at Trinity, and then left the country for 25 years. “I just wanted to see the world,” she said. Back in Ireland, she decided to exploit her greatest asset: networking. “I decided I would start making contacts and organising events,” she said.

“Initially my emphasis was on women in business because, as a would-be entrepreneur, I was very conscious of how few female role models there were.”

Stephenson’s first task was to secure sponsorship, which she did from companies ranging from Irish Permanent to the Examiner newspaper.

“Once I had that in place I picked up the phone and started calling anyone I could think of, from Moya Doherty of Riverdance to Gillian Bowler, then of Budget Travel, and Carol Moffett, of Moffett Engineering,” she said.

All agreed to speak for free, and Stephenson was off. She then staged breakfast briefings for business people, again with sponsorship. Speakers included Peter Sutherland, Anita Roddick and Warran Gatland, with up to 600 delegates paying to attend.

Stephenson’s events all aimed to provide inspiration for delegates. With that in mind, during the early 2000s she began to include speakers from the burgeoning “mind body spirit” sector.

Among her biggest events this year is a series of talks with Lorna Byrne, an Irishwoman who claims to be able to see angels, while Daniel Dennett, the American philosopher and atheist, packed out the D4 Berkeley hotel on his visit.

“I just went with the flow in terms of speakers I’d go after, just as long as they are inspirational or motivational in some way,” said Stephenson, in her mid 50s, whose two daughters now work with her.

Five years ago, she took the business to a new level with the launch of the Seminars.ie brand. As well as allowing delegates to book tickets online, it let her develop closer relationships with her customers through a monthly ezine.

A year later she turned her focus to the UK, organising events over there. “It is a bigger market, but it is also a more competitive one,” she said.

In the past year, business has grown 30% and is profitable, her biggest outlay going on speaker fees and marketing.

“I think in times of recession that actually people are looking for comfort, reassurance and inspiration,” she said.

“I also have a very loyal core database that provides good repeat business — mainly, I think, because people still want to be educated or inspired.”

She says that apart from formal education and reading, there aren’t many other ways for people to find the sort of guidance her service offers. “One of my events sits somewhere between the two, and is also a night out for people,” said Stephenson. “I’m conscious of that in my pricing, which is the equivalent of a few drinks or a dinner out.”

Her advice for others trying to start a business is to work on themselves as much as on their business plan.

always forge a partnership,” she said.

Don't be put off by knockbacks, either, she says. “You've just got to keep picking up the phone and keep putting yourself out there. Factor in time on top of the actual work involved in your business to be out networking.”

And when you have contacts, don't be afraid to use them. “Pick up the phone and ask for help, just as I did with those early speakers who spoke for free.”

Be sensible with costs, but don't be afraid to take a risk. “When it comes to starting a business, there are leaps of faith involved,” said Stephenson.

“I'm lucky perhaps in that I've never been afraid to take a risk.”