



TOP TEAM: Elaine Cooper-Willox, director of John Willox Kitchen Design, with her husband and business partner, John.

Customer service a key ingredient for success

Each week, we ask small businesses key questions. Here we speak to Elaine Cooper-Willox, director of Ellon-based John Willox Kitchen Design

Q. How and why did you start in business?

A. My husband, John, and I knew we wanted to eventually work for ourselves at some point. John has worked in the kitchen trade for almost 20 years. I also worked in it at the start of my career, before 18 years in oil and gas. John focuses on the customer experience and more front-of-house kind of things. My remit is more behind the scenes – organising, planning and co-ordinating. In 2015 we realised there was an opportunity in our home town of Ellon for a more bespoke-type service. Customers want a managed service, using local trades they know and trust, and with better quality than builders' merchants offer.

Q. How did you get to where you are today?

A. Over the past five years, we have built a reputation

for quality products and excellent customer service. We see around 80% of our business arriving via word-of-mouth; happy customers and joiners who like our products. More than 15 local joiners and builders have installed one of our kitchens in their own homes, something we are proud of.

Q. Who helped you?

A. We are lucky to have received valuable guidance from family who already run their own businesses. My parents have run our family farm since my father was in his mid-20s. They have worked through periods of high interest and unsettled inflation, and faced the impact of issues with importing and exporting, so they have a wealth of knowledge. When setting up, it was one of John's uncles we turned to. He suggested we used John's name for the

business. It was a great idea, as tradesfolk automatically knew who we were.

Organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and Business Gateway have provided valuable support and advice, and we dip into the network of people we have accessed through both on a regular basis. We have recently been working with Fiona Smith, of Delfinity (business management consultancy), who has helped us streamline some of our processes, and plan the way forward.

Q. What has been your biggest mistake?

A. Nothing major, thankfully. Perhaps jumping too quickly into things. When you set up a business everyone is suddenly at your door offering you deals. It's easy to say yes to something you later realise isn't what you thought or expected.

Q. What is your greatest achievement?

A. When we won in the 2017 Trade Awards for best new business. It was reassuring that we were perhaps doing things right.

Q. If you were in power in government, what would you change?

A. I would like some focus on simplifying procedures. Legislation is necessary but everything is over-complicated. Thankfully, via FSB we have access to guidance in layman's terms but it's a minefield, especially when things change – General Data Protection Regulation was a recent example. I dread to think what Brexit is going to bring.

Q. What do you still hope to achieve?

A. We hope to continue to slowly grow the company, focusing on the same values – good quality products and great customer service.

Q. What do you do to relax?

A. I'm obsessed with genealogy and have researched our family tree for about 10 years. If I have time, cooking, and I enjoy walking with my headphones on, listening to an audiobook or music.

Q. What are you currently reading, listening to or glued to on the TV?

A. It's been pretty hectic lately, so anything that's gloomy or requires too much thought has been cast aside. I'm reading *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, by Marie Kondo, and I'm addicted to the American reality TV series *Below Deck*.

Q. What do you waste your money on?

A. Jackets, shoes, boots and handbags. I'm struggling with the Marie Kondo idea that I may have to part with any of these to achieve a clutter-free lifestyle.

Q. How would your friends describe you?

A. Hopefully, that I'm a loyal friend, honest and perhaps a little sarcastic.

Q. What would your enemies say about you?

A. Maybe that I am bossy and never apologise, or perhaps that's just my husband who complains about that.

Q. What do you drive and dream of driving?

A. I drive a BMW 335 M Sport Touring, which I love. I quite fancy the new BMW Touring M3 that's due out next year but an M2 would do me fine.

Venture linking buyers to sellers launched

Inverness man Simon Fraser has launched a new service in the north to connect business sellers and buyers.

The former banker was inspired to become a franchisee of Business Partnership after being impressed by the way the broker handled the sale of a large commercial enterprise belonging to a close family member earlier this year.

The 29-year-old said: "My fiancée's mother was selling her indoor soft play business, Frankie and Lola's, in Inverness. Initially, I thought it may be more challenging selling the business during the coronavirus pandemic.

"But it sold within a matter of days – largely due to the professionalism, negotiating experience and the vast network of connections Business Partnership has across the UK.

"I have a number of years of experience in business sales and commercial property estate agency, as well as considerable local market knowledge, so becoming part of the Business Partnership network seemed like the ideal opportunity for me to offer this unique tailor-made service to clients in the north of Scotland."

Mr Fraser, whose new venture covers the Highlands and islands, Moray and Perth, hopes over time to be able to expand the business and potentially create job opportunities in the local area for others within the franchise.



Simon Fraser.