

I DISCOVERED WHAT makes me stop

Deborah Meaden, 54, star of *Dragons' Den* and *Strictly Come Dancing*, talks to Victoria Young about becoming a Dragon, her perfect weekend and stepping out of her comfort zone

Businesswoman Deborah started her first business at 19, then ran her family's holiday business, did a management buyout in 1999, and sold it in 2007 for £83 million. She joined *Dragons' Den* in 2006. Last year, she partnered Robin Windsor in *Strictly Come Dancing*, and is part of this year's live tour.

My first business didn't last long. I had no money so I had to find a business that wasn't going to cost me a lot. I set up an import agency for four Italian businesses. I was a 19-year-old girl who bounced into their offices and said, "I'll sell your product in the UK," and amazingly, they said "Okay". We were successful, selling in high-end shops, but then the orders started drying up.

I got myself into debt with £3,000 on my credit card. Then I found out they were selling direct and I thought,

"That's disgraceful, I have them under contract." But I decided to move on. That's very telling of my outlook – I'm very pragmatic.

It didn't knock my confidence. Although the business failed, there was enough in there for me to think, "Actually, my judgement wasn't bad."

At the moment I have 19 businesses, ranging from a textile mill in Somerset to a company that makes kids' activity backpacks. You don't have to love your product but you do have to be proud of it and love your business. It can be dangerous to love your product too much because it clouds your judgement. I don't work in any of the businesses but I'm very good at seeing the big picture.

I've never seen myself as a woman in business – I see myself as a business

person. The gender thing is totally irrelevant to me. Having said that, the business world can be quite a harsh environment, and when I started on *Dragons' Den*, I got a lot of pretty unpleasant flak.

JOINING DRAGONS' DEN
The big business love of my life was Weststar Holidays. Selling that was the deal that turned me from the person who was working into a Dragon. I didn't want to sell it, so it was a pure head-ruling-heart decision because I knew the market was ready. But if you'd told me the day after I left Weststar Holidays that I'd never look back, I'd have been astounded. I thought I'd spend the rest of my life regretting it, but I haven't.

I don't like failure, and I am highly competitive. I beat myself up for a bit, then I think, "Well, that's not constructive, is it, Deborah?" I learn. I file it away and think, "Don't ever do that again." And then



I get on with it. That is what gives me good instinct.

I got a phone call one day about being on *Dragons' Den* and I said no – twice! I'm quite private and I felt like I'd built up this very nice life and it wasn't lacking anything – I didn't need to be on television. So I thought, "Why would I? What's my reason?"

I thought, "I'll just go along and see how it works," and that's how I found my reason. At the screen test I met Duncan Bannatyne and Richard Farleigh, and we had a ball and I thought, "This'll be fun. I'll enjoy it, in fact I'll love it." And from day one I absolutely did.

Most people have a business idea. And lots of people tell it to me. I don't mind. I'd rather people have ideas, although sometimes I'm popping to the shops on a Sunday morning with no make-up on and I think, "Please don't ask me – my brain's off."

I won't work with anyone I don't trust. I think that gut instinct is in your head. I describe it as a row of switches, so when I sit in *Dragons' Den*, I'm asking a load of questions. Each one has to be answered and I'll flick each switch down when it is. The last question is, "What do I feel?" If I can't sit there with my hands down thinking, "I'm going to invest," then I struggle.

FAMILY LIFE

My mother always worked. She had it pretty tough when she was younger. She was divorced with two daughters but she's a strong woman, and just looked forward and got on with stuff. That must be part of what formed me.

I never knew my father, and the man I call Dad is my stepfather Brian. He and my mother founded an amusement park that went on to become Weststar Holidays [Deborah bought them out in 1999]. Our family was a very equal family – there was no hierarchical difference between men and women.

I have three sisters and we are best friends. I love them all equally but my older sister Gail lives close to me and we ride horses together, so see more of each other. We've both been in >>

the real me

business – she has holiday parks and is a very successful businesswoman in her own right. They are all very down to earth and if ever I had even the thought of getting ideas above my station, that would never work in my family because they'd say, "We know you!" They are my sounding boards.

My parents are absolutely amazing. My mum looks younger than me! They spend a lot of time in South Africa during winter but we get together at Christmas. When we see each other we talk non-stop but I don't like the phone. I don't get the whole chatting-on-the-phone thing.

I have two nephews, Ben and Elliot, and I get on really well with them. I try not to give them advice about money. I'm not a Dragon to them – I'm their aunt and it's nice to be off duty.

HOW STRICTLY LIT UP MY LIFE

I can't think of anything I'm scared of except being afraid, so the minute someone asks me to do something and I think, "Oh no, I can't do that," I realise, "I'm going to have to do it now, aren't I?" I have to prove that I'm not scared of it now. My sister said, "If you don't do *Strictly*, you'll regret it for the rest of your life." And she was right.

The experience was totally out of my comfort zone. The minute before I stepped on to the *Strictly* dancefloor for the first time, I don't remember ever feeling so much fear, mixed with excitement. I don't usually get nervous, so I had no coping mechanism. Robin is very good – he shot me a look as if to say, "Get up out of that chair!" because I was sitting on a chair at the start. Then all I did was focus on him.

The thing I loved most about *Strictly* was the dance. I used to enjoy dancing but life has a way of getting in the way and making you forget or

lose all the things that used to make you joyous. People used to think, "It's that scary Dragon, I won't speak to her." But strangers came up to me after I came out and said, "Can I hug you?" They were sad for me – they could see how much I wanted to stay in!

I don't take age into account. I'm not ageist – all that matters when I meet someone is that we get on

the person that my family and friends know, which is lovely.

I'm not going to let dancing out of my life. When I'm dancing I feel lit up, and I'd like all women of my age to feel this – it has awakened something in me. I want to remember what else was in my life that lit up my eyes, that has just gone.

I hope Robin and I will be friends for life. You could not have two more diametrically opposed people, but we have a right giggle. And he brought something out in me that I didn't know I had, which was dance, and he did it in a way that made me love it.

Also, Robin was the teacher. Usually, people are asking me for advice but when I was in that room he was the expert and I would empty myself of all responsibility. And Robin never asked anything of me. It's rare for me to meet someone who never asks anything of me. It's not just money – it's knowledge and experience. I'm not complaining because I love it, but it's lovely to be with someone who doesn't.

I have a lot of laughter lines. You don't get those without having a lot of fun in life. But it's inappropriate for me to sit in *Dragons' Den* and have a laugh. *Strictly* allowed people to see

I never take age into account. I'm not ageist – all that matters to me when I meet someone is that we get on. There is an age difference but I don't feel like Robin's mother. I feel more like his sister.

MY SOULMATE AND PARTNER

My husband Paul is a very generous person. He basically lost me for eight weeks when I was doing *Strictly*, but he saw the pleasure it was giving me. When I left the show I discovered he had a secret. He looked at me slightly crestfallen and said, "I'm going to have to tell you now." He'd signed up for dance classes and said, "I don't want to dance with you until I can put a good dance in." How amazing is that?

***Strictly* made us look at each other again.** We've been together for 28 years and sometimes you just don't look at someone in the same way,



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and I looked at him and said, "You're actually quite romantic, aren't you?"

We met when he worked for my father in the summer. He was tall, handsome and working there in the holidays while at university. I thought, "He's nice," but it's a bit of a no-no to go out with someone who's working for your father, so we waited until the end of the summer.

I was never getting married – I was too independent. Although in hindsight, it was actually fear of commitment! I had a nice life and I like my freedom, my independence. We split up because he wanted to get married and I didn't. I went to Venezuela and had an absolute ball. But then I thought, "Damn, I quite like him." I came back and then of course he played hardball because I'd disappeared off and he'd moved on.

But we both just knew. We get on so well and I looked into my future and thought, "I don't want it to be without Paul." But even on the day I got married – and he knows this – I thought, "I'm doing this for Paul, not me."

We got married in 1993 when I was 34. I wasn't sure I could find someone who could live with my level of independence. As it happens, I've found someone who enjoys my level of independence. But marriage made me commit more, and it's absolutely the best thing I ever did.

I think we might have thought we'd have children. But we didn't. There's usually a feeling of, if you haven't got children but you wanted them, then that must be sad, but I don't feel like that at all. I feel it would have been lovely, yes, but it didn't happen and life is lovely.

We are completely different but it works. Paul loves being in the country. I do too, but I also love being in London. We also have a lot of shared experiences – our big love is travelling – which is what holds us together.

I find everyday people doing extraordinary things to be most inspiring

Paul is a fantastic cook. I haven't cooked in 28 years. But quite often, I just want something basic. Last night he had couscous with pomegranate and veg, but I wanted canned tomatoes on toast. He was horrified!

HOME LIFE

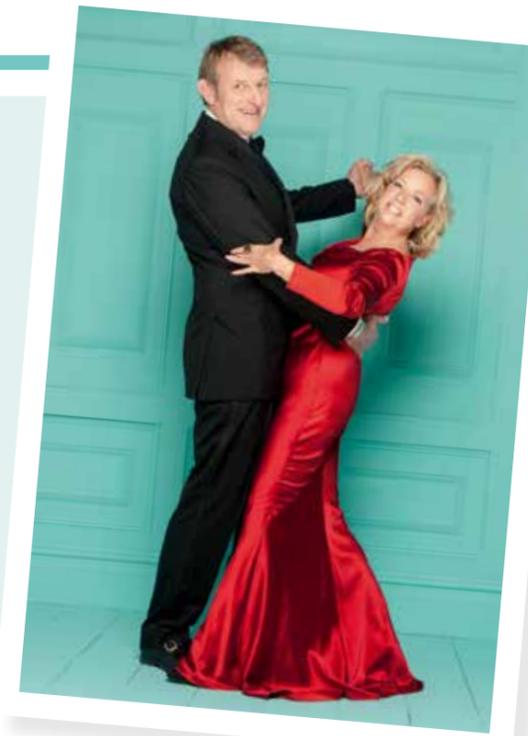
I like spending my money on what I like. There was a time, particularly when I first did *Dragons' Den*, when I came under pressure to have the right car, jewels and handbags. I thought, "I'm not playing that game. I'll buy what I like, whether it's cheap or expensive."

I like art, and I spend way too much money on horses. And I overcapitalised my house in Somerset. If I was advising somebody, I'd say don't spend that much money on that house, you won't get that back – but I love my house.

Our home is our sanctuary. My favourite room is my bathroom. It's very soft green with a lot of light oak. There are no taps in the bath because it fills from the ceiling, and I have an uninterrupted view of our courtyard, and it's all mine – Paul has his own.

PAUL SAYS...

"I would never have considered dancing before Deborah did *Strictly* – I was more of a rugby or cricket man but I loved watching her dancing on it, then I noticed that a dance studio had opened in our village, so I signed myself up. I thought I'd keep it up my sleeve for a bit, but when she was knocked out I had to fess up. Deborah was a bit gobsmailed! I've learned to Foxtrot and Tango, and it's a lot of fun but it's challenging too. The response from 99 per cent of my male friends has been, 'Good on you for doing it.' Hopefully Deborah will say yes now when I ask her to dance!"



I'm definitely a doer, not a dreamer. We've only ever had one holiday where we decided not to do anything. We went to a luxury villa with a butler, but I kept stressing out about how you keep a butler busy on a holiday.

My friends are very important to me. I don't particularly differentiate between girlfriends and boyfriends. There's something particularly lovely about being among people who've known you forever, and you can just talk or not talk, or laugh or not laugh.

Animals are a big part of my life. I've always loved them, and I do a lot with the WWF, Tusk Trust and The Brooke.

I have different role models. Everyday people doing extraordinary things are the most inspiring. One angel was Jill Farwell, who started the Children's Hospice South West. She was a mother who lost a child, and she got up and said, "I want to do more." Sadly, she died in 2004, but she was an extraordinary person who didn't know it until that thing happened to her, and she became extraordinary.

Deborah will be joining the Strictly Come Dancing Live Tour, on the road from 17 January to 9 February; see strictlycomedancinglive.com. w&h