

FROM SHOP FLOOR... TO TOP FLOOR

Debbie Lewis, MD of Clarins UK tells Victoria Young about her career with the company she loves so much she can't imagine working anywhere else...

Debbie, 50, lives in Buckinghamshire with her husband, Jonathan, who works in IT consulting, and their 10-year-old daughter, Georgina.

My story shows that you really can join a company at shop floor level and make it to the boardroom. I had two very important mentors, plus I was always keen to master what I was doing to the best of my ability and then look for the next step.

I decided I wanted to join Clarins nearly 30 years ago when I was working as a beauty therapist. I was working at Champneys in Tring and using Clarins products. I loved the way they felt and smelled so much that I wrote to them saying that Clarins was

my ideal brand and I wanted to work with them.

Two weeks later I had an invitation to meet the team in London. I was offered a job behind the counter in Selfridges as a Clarins representative, which I jumped at. And, after a year, I moved to Harrods.

Clarins has always actively promoted from within. And because I did well in Selfridges and Harrods, they were happy to promote me. Lesley Balls was the sales director at the time and a real mentor.

Want to be a woman on your way to the top? Here's Debbie's advice...

- + Never accept no for an answer.
- + Don't believe you can't, because you definitely can.
- + Constantly challenge things.
- + If you want to progress, always think about the next step, and make sure everything in your current role puts you in the best place to achieve that.
- + Prepare for success.
- + Make the most of every opportunity you get.

PHOTOGRAPH LIZ MCCAULAY



French Vs English women

The difference between French and English women used to be that French women viewed skincare as a must, not as a treat. English women used to see it as a luxury but now they take it more seriously. Women work incredibly hard and have started to say to themselves "I deserve this – I earned this". It's incredibly important – a gift from "me to me" and I urge women not to feel guilty about it.

She was a huge personality and very dynamic and successful at a time when the company was still male dominated. She would sweep in and out wearing a mink coat and had such charisma and confidence. She was a lot of fun – and very supportive of people with potential and people who were ambitious, which I was. She was convinced I had the skills to go further, which gave me confidence.

As a result, I held so many different roles at Clarins. After Harrods, I was a field sales assistant, going to salons and department stores to introduce the products and treatments to people. It was great fun. Now there's a team of 50 people – called Clarins Angels – doing a similar job. After eight months, I became an area manager and then, 18 months after that, regional manager. Three years later, I became national sales manager. The company was growing quickly and Lesley gave me that opportunity, convinced that I had the skills to do it.

The roots of Clarins are planted in professional treatment. Jacques Courtin was a physiotherapist who developed his own range of products made from pure plant extracts and essential oils. In 1954, he set up his first spa in a Parisian suburb, and his clients loved his products so much they wanted to buy them. He started selling them – and the business grew from there. By the late 70s, the company was such a success that Jacques added "Clarins" to his surname. It's his sons, Olivier and Christian, who now run the company.

Clarins UK was set up by Robin Vincent in 1983. I joined soon after, and Robin became my other mentor. He was so

generous with his time and knowledge – and so patient. He'd always listen, even if he didn't always agree. He really taught me to think from the other point of view, and to think through all options. He was a very supportive boss.

I became sales director for Clarins in my early thirties. I took on more responsibility for forecasting and strategy for the brand. I started going to Paris for budget and marketing meetings and I realised that strategic planning was the part I really liked. It was thrilling to get involved with the bigger picture of the company.

I like people – that's why I do what I do. I've always tried to be fair; I've never expected anyone to do anything that I wouldn't do myself. And if they are not sure how to do it, then I will help them until they have learned. I lead by example.

I never really saw myself as business minded – I just kept focusing on the next step. Last September, Robin decided to take some time out from the UK market and I was made MD, which was a great honour. But I'm very aware of the enormity of the responsibility.

As the company has grown, it has been predominantly female. It doesn't make much difference to me as it's all about the right person and personality for the job. My job is very much about empowering people and asking them what ideas they have.

Everybody at Clarins has a view and everybody has a voice. If someone is passionate about something, there's usually something in what they are saying. My view is that just because you've always done things one way doesn't mean you shouldn't challenge that. I always say, "Let's have a look, even if it's not broken."

women behind the brand

My family is a real leveller and keeps my feet on the ground. Jonathan and I married in 2002 and we had Georgina the following year. I chose not to take a great deal of time off work – I went back as commercial director when she was four months old, and I'm a better mother working than when I'm not. My mum is an amazing support. She picks up Georgina from school and they have an amazing relationship. The other core family member is our Tibetan Terrier, Murphy. He is 11, and so affectionate.

Family time is real quality time. Last school holidays, we went to the forest adventure Go Ape and, for three hours, I found myself 30 foot in the air, swinging from trees into cargo nets, which is a great way to switch off – there's no chance to think about anything else!

I've been empowered to be audacious and it's been an incredible journey

I don't sit down much. I do Pilates twice a week, and I like to swim and to power walk. I used to hate cooking – my fridge was full of Cristal Champagne and nail varnishes – but now I enjoy it.

My bath is my sanctuary. On a Friday night when I get home, Jonathan has run me a bath, poured me a vodka and tonic and lit some candles. I have a bit of chilled music like Nina Simone and it would be peaceful, except for the dog and Georgina wandering in and out!

People ask me why I have been at Clarins for so long. I say, "Why would I leave?" Why would I want to? It is one of the last family-owned businesses, and that really filters down; there's a real entrepreneurial spirit in the company. They are very open if you have an opinion or a view. During my time here I've been empowered to be audacious and it has been an incredible, fun journey. **w&h**

My favourite Clarins products?

- + **The Double Serum, £55 for 30ml, which works for the face and has 20 plant extracts that stimulate all of the skin's vital functions.**
- + **The Body Treatment Oil, £39 for 100ml, which is 100% pure plant extract, keeps skin toned and makes you feel terrific.**

