

# 'I launched *The White Company* from my boyfriend's spare bedroom'

Chrissie Rucker talks to Victoria Young about how she started The White Company 20 years ago – and how it has grown into one of the most successful lifestyle brands in the UK

**M**y decision to start The White Company was quite impulsive – I didn't think it through in any structured way. I did write a business plan, mostly because my local council offered business grants of £50 a week and, to qualify, you needed a business plan. I was very lucky and was given a grant.

**Growing up, I wasn't very academic.** I was far more interested in horses than school, but I was given the cup for enterprising initiative when I was 15 for organising a charity fashion show with my friends as models. And I got an A in cookery and RE – so everyone used to joke that I was qualified to be a nun in a chef's kitchen!

**I went to fashion college and studied couture fashion.**

My first job was with Anneliese Sharpe, the wedding dress designer, but, after three months, she told me that she didn't think I was cut out for the world of fashion, so I went to work as a receptionist on a magazine, which was the best job in the world, aged 17, because it involved greeting a constant stream of male models.

**I worked my way around different magazines and was really thrown in at the deep end.** Once, I was sent to Paris on my own, at 21, to do a shoot with Carla Bruni. Having that kind of opportunity teaches you that you just have to go for it.

**I met Nick, my husband, at a friend's party and found his passion for the shirt business he'd created – Charles Tyrwhitt – inspirational.** I decided it would be really great to have my own business, and to have that passion and drive.

**I decided I'd give myself a year to focus on the business and if it didn't work out, I'd get another job**



## THE REAL ME

### Biggest ambition?

To expand into Europe and the US, although I didn't want to try until we were ready – and now we are. I'm very excited about going on the international journey.

**Bestsellers?** The Winter candle at Christmas is a bestselling item every year.

### Personal favourite?

I'm pretty attached to my pillow – in fact, I can't live without it. My mattress topper comes a close second.

**Mentors?** I've been incredibly lucky to have my husband, who was always two years ahead with his own business. He'd already gone through so many of the teething problems I experienced, and was always there as a sounding board

(with a stiff G&T at the end of difficult days!).

**Biggest triumph?** I'm very proud of what my team have achieved and I want to say a massive thank you to them. And my other triumph is to do the job I love and still manage to be an okay mum.

**The best bit?** I love the product – I'm absolutely obsessive about it. And nothing is more rewarding than meeting someone who loves The White Company.



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**Helping Nick furnish his first house gave me the idea for my business.** We'd been dating for four years and he was a very slow mover – it took me six months to get my first kiss! – so I was keen to show him what fantastic wife material I was. I went shopping for him, looking for plain white towels and china, bed linen and bathrobes. I found there were two ends of the scale: cheap and cheerful or designer names – but nothing in-between. It was an obvious gap in the market.

**One evening, we sat around talking about how great it would be if there was a company that just sold good quality white things at affordable prices.** I was so excited that I couldn't sleep. The next day I called up the

NEC Business Centre in Birmingham to ask for a directory of past exhibitors at their homes shows. To my joy, I discovered that it was possible to buy great quality white bed linen and towels at low prices. And that's how I started sourcing suppliers.

**I decided I'd give myself a year and if it didn't work, I'd get another job.** The main research I did was ring up some big department stores, pretending I was a journalist and asking what percentage of their bed linen sales were white – and the answer was over 50 per cent.

**The White Company's first brochure in 1993 was 12 pages.** I shot it in Nick's house and posted it to 800 friends, friends' mums, and friends of friends. I filled the postbox at the end of the

road three days on the trot. I had no money for advertising, but I wrote my own press releases. A journalist did a wonderful piece in the *Financial Times*, then things started to snowball.

**For the first six months, it was me, a computer, a fax and two phones.** I took two to 15 orders a day and packed the boxes myself. Then my sister, who was at college, came to help me. She had a Mini Metro, which we'd stuff full of packages, and we became a bit of a standing joke at the post office. It was slightly chaotic and very homespun.

**Poor Nick put up with murder.** I took over his house. First, it was just the top bedroom, but I gradually worked my way down and, after six

months, his house was bursting at the seams with stock. At the end of the first year, we got a warehouse. Two years later, we expanded again.

**From the start, I've been obsessive about quality.** In the past few years, lots of retailers have cut corners, but we have tried hard never to sacrifice quality – we sacrifice margin over quality.

**After six years, we were doing 300 orders a day and we got our first MD.** I knew I needed someone with financial and operational skills to run the business. As your business grows, the most important thing is to know your limitations. You need to know where you can add the most value – and then surround yourself with a wonderful team. Our next MD



Early days: the first brochure, left; and The White Company today

## CHRISSIE'S BUSINESS TIPS

**+ Have an idea you really believe in and that has a place. It's more and more important to be unique: today's market is very competitive.**

**+ If you believe in the idea, check there will be demand. Have a fantastic relationship with your suppliers and find the right people, so quality is consistent.**

**+ Make sure you have**

**the right team and structure to cope.**

**+ Go for it: I think it's possible to overanalyse things like business plans too endlessly.**

**THE GOLDEN RULE**

**The key thing when building a business is to put the customer at the heart of it – really listen, and do everything to give them a great experience.**

had strong retail experience and took it to the next level.

**At every stage of the journey, we have had challenges.** In the first few months, the roof blew off our factory, and our bed linen production came to a standstill. And two to three years in, we were very close to running out of money when we entered a small business award – and won £5K. My response to difficulties is to ask, "Where did we go wrong and what can we change?"

**By 30, Nick and I had married and had two children.** I worked up until the day I had Tom, my oldest – because when it's your own business, it doesn't feel like work; it's genuinely a pleasure. I have four children now – and The White Company is my fifth child. I am very strict with my

time and weekends are devoted to the children, but the eternal challenge of every working mother is juggling home and work. The beauty of having my own business is that I've always been able to put the kids to bed, then work later.

**The company's journey has been closely linked to my life.** New product ideas often come from things I want to find, and the Little White Company was born after I had my first baby.

**My youngest is now nine.** A year ago, on holiday, I asked the children, "Do you like what Mummy does?" Their reaction was really sweet. They said, "Yes, Mummy, you can't stop – we love you making our pyjamas!" After all these years, it was lovely to hear them say that. **w&h**