

# 'I know what women WANT TO WEAR'

Having helped to reinvent M&S, Pringle and Aquascutum, retail expert Kim Winser OBE talks to Victoria Young about why the time is right to launch her own label

**K**im Winser OBE started on the Marks & Spencer trainee programme after leaving school and was there for 20 years before relaunching knitwear brand Pringle. She then moved to Aquascutum before consulting at Net-A-Porter. She launched Winser London in March. Kim lives in Bucks with her 14-year-old son.

**Starting my own brand was all about building something that no one else was doing.** I felt there was a gap in the market: what's on offer is either expensive luxury goods or throwaway fashion. The mid-market brands have gradually moved their prices up without putting any value into the garments, and then there are the older brands, which are better quality, but often out of date.

**I wanted to make something really relevant for today and today's market.** My brief to the designers included a lot of tear sheets and drawings. The real focus was on what I think women really enjoy having in their wardrobes, the things that make them feel good, such as silk and cashmere wraps.

**Before launching, I pulled together a hit list of the ten top talents I wanted to work with.** Nine said yes. These are people that could all have any job that they want, so that was encouraging. Then I hand-picked suppliers around the world that I've worked with or admired. They all said yes – because they believed in it. That was the exciting part.

**When the first collection was finished, I did a fashion show in my home.** I took all the furniture out and set up a catwalk, brought in some models and invited 60 friends round of all ages.

I asked them to be really truthful. They were mainly really enthusiastic, although I dropped a couple of pieces, like one wrap dress with a drop back and front, which was a little too complicated.

**Age isn't a factor in our collection.** It's much more about a love of beautiful clothes and wanting to feel stylish. We've deliberately made the cut of our clothes generous. We do keep up with what's on the catwalk, but we are not targeting the fashion victim.

**I was determined to make sure that the website is an enjoyable experience.** I want our customers to feel like they are being styled, and they can actually click on a button to ask for a stylist's help.

**I still love shops.** I recently launched our first pop-up shop. I want to be in touch with the customer, and I want them to be able to touch and feel, and try things on, even if they go on and order things online.

**After school, I went straight on to the M&S training scheme.** I wanted to work in merchandising, but in the 80s, only men were allowed to sit on the board, and to work in merchandising, you had to sit on the board. I kept on applying and they kept on offering me different roles and promotions, trying to entice me into other departments. One evening, I bumped into the deputy chairman leaving the office. He asked if I'd had a good day and I said "not really" and explained my predicament. The following morning I was offered an interview with the board – and I passed.

**I worked hard, but I was also very lucky.** I was the youngest ever manager,

the youngest executive and the youngest director, as well as the first female director. I never forgot that what we were there to do was to serve the customer. If the customer was happy, they'd spend their money, and if they weren't happy then they wouldn't.

**I really loved working at M&S – it was a dream job.** By the time I was in my thirties, M&S was market leader. I started to think, lots of people are making lots of money here. It's a simple formula and I passionately wanted to take hold of my own company and grow it. Also, I had global aspirations, and M&S has always been a little reticent on the global front.

**Pringle was tiny when I took over.** I developed it into a substantial business that went global. After that, I moved to Aquascutum, another terrific British brand.

**Then I had the idea for Winser London.** I decided to put myself in the limelight after many years in the background. This is my passion so it makes sense to use my name. I'm lucky that Winser is a name that is well-liked globally, even though mine is an unusual spelling. It is globally recognised and for that I must thank my ex-husband.

**My son is 14 and I have always been a single mother.** But I'm always at home in the evenings and when he comes home from school, even if it means working again after he has gone to bed.

**I absolutely love what I do, so it doesn't feel like work.** I am so lucky that my job is my hobby. My next big ambition is to go global – although I am going to be paced about it. See [winserlondon.com](http://winserlondon.com)

*"The focus is on what I think women enjoy having in their wardrobes; things that make them feel good"*

## KEY PIECES TO DRESS EASY

Kim picks some favourites from Winser London



## KIM'S FASHION TIPS

+ Always invest in quality fabrics and yarns – it will show.

+ Everyone should own a little cashmere to add some luxury, even if it's just a delicious wrap.

+ Invest in staple colours: black, white, ivory and a deep navy.

+ Wearing one colour head to toe is very chic – whether it's all black or neutrals, this can be accentuated with a pop of bright colour for impact.

+ Try to find your signature shape. Your figure will dictate this – are you a "loose top, slim bottoms" woman, or "fitted top and relaxed bottoms", or a "waisted hourglass shape"? Find the part of your figure to emphasise and then work from there – I promise you, shopping will become so much more pleasurable for you.

+ When travelling or generally on the move, think about layering, particularly with clothes that don't crease. Layering always looks stylish and is practical, too, with our weather; a lightweight T-shirt, a sweater and a scarf layered on top in colours that tone – perfect!

+ Use different dimensions. Experiment with a longer T-shirt under a shorter sweater, or a small, fitted top under a generous-sized, boyfriend-style cardigan, sweater or tunic top.

+ Style is always about feeling good. If you feel good, you will look good, so invest in what you love and not what you think you should wear.

THE RECESSION is a good time to launch a business. People are being careful with their money so will only spend if the products are perfect, which makes us even more focused on the quality of the collection. w&h