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## Breaking through the barriers

Fiona Clark's passion for  
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# Breaking through the barriers

Around 40 percent of New Zealand businesses are owned and operated by women. Meet three business owners, Fiona Clark, Virginia Stallard and Jo Kitchen, with a common desire for best practice; and a will to succeed.

—By Glenn Baker. —

**“S**avvy, entrepreneurial, clever, focused, born communicators”... *NZBusiness* is in the office of Fiona Clark, director of BreakThrough Business Solutions on Auckland’s North Shore, and she’s reeling off attributes she believes make women so well-suited to business ownership. She has identified those attributes in so many of her clients through her consulting business and her recently launched BreakThrough Women in Business Program.

“Women have many strong qualities including their ability to multi-task, to look strategically at their business and to bring their employees together,” she continues. “They are also more likely to ask for help faster, and to actively find people to bring the skills they need for their business.” But they have potential weaknesses too, she says. “There are many capable women who don’t realise how clever and skilled they are. So they can sometimes lack the confidence to really ‘ramp things up’.

“They may also take longer to reach the success they want, when they mostly have what they need already. They just need to take action and ‘make it happen’.”

Fiona says this is one reason why she launched her

BreakThrough Women in Business Program.

In 2015, she also believes that women still feel ‘guilty’ about working and having a family. “There is guilt that home life can be suffering at the expense of the business; that women are trying to ‘have it all’. That adds a lot of pressure, when women just need to find what works for them and their family, and focus on what’s important.

“Feeling guilty doesn’t benefit anyone, and doesn’t help women or their families. We need to be kinder to ourselves and look at all the good things we ARE doing.”

Fiona knows first-hand the pressures of business and family. Prior to launching her business she had worked extensively for corporates, often away from home, putting in long hours and it took its toll on family life (she is married with two daughters).

However, her corporate role involved working directly with business owners and getting results, which she enjoyed immensely. For a long time she had also wanted to own a business and realised that she had some great skills to share with SMEs (small and medium businesses).





# A BUSINESS AND A LIFE

Fiona Clark's BreakThrough Women in Business Program came as a result of constantly being asked 'How are we supposed to build a successful business and have a life as well?' Women were telling her they knew what they 'should' be doing, but didn't know how to make it all work with limited hours. There's a feeling of being overwhelmed, she says.

Her program teaches participants the business skills to get new clients, turn those clients into sales, to set up a strategy plan and systems for a smoother running business, "so you CAN have a successful company without working long hours each week".

Fiona has created the 'Start-up Success Program', 'Business BreakThrough Program', and 'BreakThrough Elite Program' to match each particular stage of a business.

Numbers are limited, she says, to ensure every participant receives the right amount of time, input, strategies and support.

Fiona's goal is to become one of the leading companies in New Zealand empowering women in business and helping them generate the growth and success they want. "To be recognised as one of the top companies savvy women choose to work with to help them leverage their business."

The premium consulting side of her business is another focus in 2015, "where I enjoy working with my trades companies and with men in business".

There're regular business seminars planned for the year too, including her sell-out BreakThrough Women in Business Seminars, and a new BreakThrough Business Bootcamp in August.

"The seminars are proving to be a great way for business people to source important information, learn new skills, and meet other proactive business owners."

"I was also asked by a friend to help a small local business," explains Fiona. "I provided some sales and marketing strategies and the business started to fly. I'd found my passion; help SMEs succeed in business, and enjoy the fast results we could achieve."

Going out on a limb financially, Fiona left her corporate career to launch BreakThrough Business Solutions and admits to loving every minute. She's also been a trainer for the Auckland Chamber of Commerce, presented at the International Coach Federation Conference, and is a key speaker at company conferences.

## On the rise

The number of women business owners in New Zealand has been steadily rising over the past decade – as has the ratio to male business owners. According to a 2013 MYOB Business Monitor survey it's estimated that just over 40 percent of SMEs are owned and operated by women. Furthermore, the same survey in 2014 reported that female SME operators were outperforming men in terms of revenue growth and confidence.

Fiona is heartened by such statistics. "When women are passionate and enjoy what they do, but also need to build a success, they will often find a way to make it happen. It's great to see that a large number are now making good money, and employing others as they grow."

**"There are many capable women who don't realise how clever and skilled they are. So they can sometimes lack the confidence to really 'ramp things up'."**

"I see savvy women running million dollar companies they started from scratch, and doing a good job of leading their companies."

However, there's no hint of gender bias in Fiona's thinking. "Both men and women can learn a lot from each other in business. Each have their strengths which contribute to the success of a business. Women tend to be good at collaborating and ensuring their staff work together. They listen, help resolve issues quickly, and focus on what the customer needs."

"I find men are very practical, results driven, good at being objective and addressing challenges one at a time. They find solutions to problems and are often focused on financials and profit."

"I work with both men and women, and think a combination of the two can be of great benefit for business and clients."



As for the challenges of business growth and dealing with them, Fiona says the key is often implementing proper systems. This is something she's had to master with her own business too, which also means she can 'walk the talk' to her clients.

Fiona has learnt that a person's professional and personal life are not separated. When there is stress, financial pressure, long hours, and so on, this impacts on the success of the business and the individual, she says.

"We set up systems so business owners work less hours. This has a dramatic impact on the business owner and translates to a happier personal life. It takes a lot of pressure off."

### Advice through experience

Having reeled off the attributes of women entrepreneurs, Fiona turns her attention to the advice she dishes out to start-ups at her seminars. The gist is that in business you need tenacity, you need capital backing and expert advice from day one, you need to be realistic about income, prioritise (and be strategic with) your time.

"I also tell my clients the first year is all about learning and laying the foundation," she says.

Learn from others, learn by observation, 'be a sponge', and remember that the people you meet can either be 'clients or connectors', adds Fiona.

"Nobody teaches you how to be a business owner. There's no sense in just muddling along, and hoping that results will come. I hear the word 'hope' a lot, even from people who've been in business many years.

"You must be organised, have that plan, take action and make things happen fast."

Fiona says it's her job to ask the tough questions and help owners identify their point of difference in the market; to look at the business from different angles. If they've been in business for a while, then I'll help them take the business to the next level. "They probably know they're doing well, but this is about how they can do better."

As for work-life balance, Fiona admits it's a subject that polarises people – one camp believes striving for it sets you up to fail; the other camp maintains it is achievable. She prefers the expression 'work-life mashup' – because there really is no perfect balance. "Just find out what works for you and your family."

Her final word of advice for women business owners who're keen to move on with their business is to act now. "Why wait? How bad do you want things to get? Particularly if you're an established business looking to cash out in the next five years. You need to be looking at that now. It takes around three years to package up a business for sale.

"Be responsible for your own success," she adds. "You're in the driver's seat, so what are you prepared to do to push things forward this year?"

# FIVE SIGNS YOU'VE LOST YOUR 'BUSINESS MOJO'

**1** You don't have a current business plan, or if you do you have not updated it for some time. Updates should happen every year; January's a good time to do it.

**2** You never get your staff involved in ideas generation or decision-making. Have regular staff meetings to learn what's going on with your customers and clients. Give them projects, encourage them to take ownership and express their talents.

**3** You take little notice of what's happening in your industry – nationally or internationally. Markets are constantly changing; keep up with the competition or you'll be left behind. Look further afield for ideas.

**4** You rarely review your products and/or services. Look at your offerings regularly. Don't wait until your business reaches a 'pain point'.

**5** You've given up setting business goals. Forgotten the reason why you got into business in the first place.

Source: Fiona Clark.