

# a clean conscience

Cheeky labels and kitsch ads are getting a new cleaning brand noticed. But it's not all about suds and sales. Behind the clever marketing lies an even cleverer lawyer whose clean-up campaign knows no bounds

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Serious fun: Brigid Hardy and a product from her BEE range.

Tens of thousands of students have filed through Professor Mark Henaghan's lectures in the past decade. Even so, the Otago University Law School dean chuckles into the telephone at the mention of one name. Of course he remembers the larger-than-life student who graduated in 1994. You don't forget someone like Brigid Hardy. She had enthusiasm and was always trying new ideas, he recalls. And she had this way of carrying everyone along with her.

The description still fits perfectly. At 33, Brigid is the founder and general manager of BEE (Beauty Engineered forEver). Late last year, the company began turning out a range of fragrant, environmentally sound cleaning products and pitching them to the public in an audacious campaign. Billboards and glossy magazine advertisements tuck cheekily labelled BEE bottles into kitsch love scenes, while well-placed media figures have been sent dish liquid with a personalised label that shouts "I love you, Bob" or "I love you, Sally" in hot pink or vibrant blue.

But frivolity and laundry soap aside, Brigid's ultimate aim involves cleaning up the business world and helping to save the planet. The unabashed idealist has persuaded investors and her high-powered board of directors that it makes sense to combine lofty ethics and hard commerce. She believes that BEE's anticipated commercial success and moral superiority will enable it to become an instrument for positive social change. Then she backs up her convictions with fast-talking passion, obvious intellect, a detailed business plan, impressive research data and a mind-boggling résumé.

Her varied career includes a stint as legal private secretary to Cabinet minister Sir Douglas Graham and 18 months helping to reform domestic violence legislation. She has also worked for global consultancy firm McKinsey and Company, which has an international reputation for employing only the highest of high achievers. University records show she graduated near the top of her class, with first-class honours in English and law. She also nabbed a rare-as-hen's-teeth scholarship to Harvard University, where she completed her master's degree.

"But she was more than just a very good law student; she was actually a very good all-rounder," Professor Henaghan says, noting her skill with languages and excellent grades in English literature. "She did lots of things and did them all very well. Marvellous energy, great to be around."

An island away, it is Brigid's passion, capability and principles that impress prominent Auckland businessman Bryan Mogridge. The former managing director of Montana Wines

directs several private companies and chairs at least half a dozen boards, including BEE's. Even though he admits that Brigid's ethical business model is a difficult way to make money, he is convinced it will work.

"It's a very interesting concept and I like it," he says. "I'm in it because I believe it will be successful and I think it's a good thing to do."

As for the general manager, he says, "She's very thoughtful and very intelligent and strategically very good."

It was strategic thinking that led Brigid to launch BEE and abandon her long-held dream of working for the United Nations or another humanitarian organisation.

"I was wondering if I was a little too idealistic and if trying to develop a model for responsive and responsible business might actually have more impact," she says. "[In a humanitarian organisation] you're not playing in the place where the power's really held. People who control the economy control the power. Sometimes you have to understand the system to change it and then you can change it from within.

"I was really interested in how you could use the opportunity of understanding business to actually get some kind of social good. It's almost like an experiment in business and ethics together."

So how has Brigid applied this philosophy in a practical sense? For a start, BEE has employed a specialist to investigate the ethics of all its suppliers, which has led to some companies being blacklisted for their poor environmental or employment practices. Also, where possible, New Zealand companies are given preference, including the tiny East Cape firm that extracts kawakawa oil and sells it to BEE. Brigid visited the plant and was impressed by the owners' innovative efforts to create employment in an economically depressed region. Once her own company gets on its feet, she says BEE will use a portion of its profits to fund worthy projects.

Brigid is convinced that consumers, too, can force companies to be more socially responsible – treat workers well, care for the environment and so on – by boycotting products made by the bad guys and supporting the good ones. And BEE's marketing machine is working to convince people that, aside from being one of the good guys, its cleaning products work as well as (and smell better than) anything else on the shelves. Brigid says her company is tackling a \$300 million market largely controlled by three companies which, between them, sell products that date back hundreds of years.

"People have just been buying Jif or Sunlight forever and ➤

"You see, in law and consulting work, if you mindlessly drive away at particular careers you can end up quite tired and rich"

## profile

they don't think about it. We have to be different and fun."

The middle child of a lawyer father and a drama-teacher mother, Brigid grew up in rural Hawke's Bay. Her high-school years were spent at Woodford House, where she was moved up a year before heading to Germany as an exchange student. A year later, she returned fluent in German and keen to become a journalist.

"I wasn't really into law in the sense of learning the cases and how to apply them. I don't really like the idea of just implementing things. I have too many opinions of my own for that"

Law at Otago University was an eleventh-hour change of heart.

"I wasn't really into law in the sense of learning the cases and how to apply them; I was more interested in writing. I don't really like the idea of just implementing things. I have too many opinions of my own."

She laughs at the memory of her only summer job as a law clerk, which she hated. "I thought, *Surely they could ask my opinion on something.*"

By 23 she'd found a niche where her opinion *did* count: helping to reform domestic violence legislation.

Thanks to her scholarship, she headed to Harvard University, Boston. ("Harvard's where people go to university in the movies," someone once told her.) Soon, with her master's degree in international law and human rights in hand, she was busy making plans to work at the UN until a New Zealand boyfriend and other factors pulled her home.

"It had much more impact than a year would suggest," she says of the Harvard experience. "It totally opened doors."

One such door involved an unsolicited interview offer from McKinsey and Company while she was still in the US. She initially declined, having never heard of the prestigious management consultancy firm which is well known for employing more than its fair share of Rhodes scholars. When horrified friends insisted she rethink, Brigid blithely showed up nursing a nasty headache from the party she'd hosted the previous night, to discover she had to sit through a series of three interviews including one conducted entirely in German.

"I have since learned they have whole books and courses on how to interview with McKinsey." She told the firm she wasn't interested in a job with them, and they suggested she might reconsider when she was older.

Back in New Zealand, she was appointed legal private secretary to then Minister of Justice Sir Douglas Graham. "It was the most fabulous job I could ever wish for. I was by his side the whole time. Everyone used to think I was his daughter," she says, recalling her boss's integrity, sense of humour and compassion. "You felt like you were on the fringe of something great. It was a very exciting environment, exciting times."

But when Sir Douglas retired, Brigid remembered McKinsey and made a call. Her timing was immaculate as they were opening an office in New Zealand. She had a job within a week.

"I was never in it to become Brigid Hardy, Miss Big Business," she says of this abrupt career turn. "I was probably the least traditional, least business-oriented person they'd ever



employed. I wanted to stay in New Zealand but I wanted to travel. I wanted to learn about business but I didn't want to go to university. I thought, *If I want to have an impact, if I want to make a difference, I have to be able to speak the language the Treasury boys speak.* If you understand how the world is regulated you can better live in it the way you choose."

This was the start of what she describes as a frantic, stimulating, exhausting, exhilarating time in her life, with remuneration to match the demanding environment. "As soon as you have a job offer you get a huge box of finance books and an invitation to go to a six-week spa in Florida. I'd go to Australia for the day quite often or up to Hong Kong for a meeting or something. It's pretty full-on. They try to get people who've been top of the heap and put them with people who keep them interested and motivated.

"Everything's provided. If you're working in another country, they fly your partner over every weekend. It's very elite."

She is reluctant to gripe about any aspect of the firm – New Zealand McKinsey director Andrew Grant is a BEE advisor, after all – but admits that the job left no time for hobbies, yoga or catching up with friends. After two-and-a-half years, she handed in her notice and packed her bags for a brief "yoga and palaces" tour of northern India with a friend.

Home again, she began work on a business plan that evolved into BEE. She still doesn't get to see her friends enough, she says, glancing at the mass of photographs plastered over the fridge in her Grey Lynn sole-charge flat. Little wonder. "It has been quite all-consuming. You do think about it when you're not at work. It's an amazing learning experience... very draining but also energising."

Every aspect of every product has been minutely examined, from the shape of the bottles to the formula inside, from the manufacturing methods to the ink on the cheeky labels. The plastics had to be the right grade and colour for recycling (some so-called eco packs are not recyclable, they just take up less room in a landfill). Dermatologists worked with human guinea pigs who spent weeks with concentrated laundry soap taped to their skin. Chemists checked degrees of aquatic toxicity and a French-trained biochemist was employed to test fragrances. An artist was commissioned to produce Mills and Boon-style oil paintings for the advertising campaign.

As the project's catalyst, Brigid brought together left-wing thinking and business nous with enough cash, science and development expertise to create her ideal company.

"I'm not sure if I'm going to get rich. I don't get motivated by making money," she says. "You see, in law and consulting work, if you mindlessly drive away at particular careers you can end up quite tired and rich.

"This business is relatively rebellious, really. And it's small and reflects exactly what I want it to. We're based in a villa in Ponsonby, we've got a table with an umbrella outside. It's very



uncorporate. Already I've heard of three different courses at universities where studying BEE is part of the curriculum."

At the time of writing, almost 80 stores and supermarkets stock the products and sales have increased by at least 25 per cent a month since December. The success, she says, is due to a combination of youthful passion, idealism and hardcore research. "I think it probably worked to my advantage that I'm a woman. I have a lot of friends who are successful in their careers and they're very good at being completely charming. But they're sharp as a tack; they win you over."

Brigid is already talking about expanding and diversifying. Get her started on the subject of BEE and the conversation is likely to span several hours. Email a brief question and the reply may well be a fervent, thoughtful miniature essay. She tends to ask big questions such as, "Who's in control of the world and how do we make those people accountable to some kind of ethical system?" Then she provides the answers. "I've got so many pie-in-the-sky ideas, you probably shouldn't get me started. I've learnt the ropes of business, but I'm sort of undyingly idealistic and that's a challenge that causes you to be exhausted quite a lot of the time." ■

For more on BEE, visit [www.beautyengineeredforever.com](http://www.beautyengineeredforever.com)