

enhance profile

Queen of suds

Sassy, smart and a real soap star, Brigid Hardy is changing the way we think about cleaning products with her cool range of 'green' suds. **Jenna Moore** finds B_E_E means 'Beauty Engineered for Ever'.

"I think part of the influence of women in business is that we use the same rules with which we choose our friends for choosing the products we use and the businesses we deal with," says Brigid Hardy. "It's about integrity, values, dreams and aspirations."

Therein lies the philosophy behind Beauty Engineered for Ever – called B_E_E for short – the environmentally friendly range of cleaning products that has created a 'lovemark' in a traditionally grudge-buy market.

all sounds rather idealistic and pie in the sky but you couldn't be more wrong. Brigid can back her dreams with an incredible passion and intelligence as well as an education and career that would place her in the 'cream of the crop' executive category.

The education includes degrees in law and English literature from Otago University and a degree in international law and human rights from Harvard Law School (yes... the Harvard Law School). The business experience

how we could make cleaning products that would make the world a better place," she says. "I love the whole crusading thing. That's our real kernel. It's what keeps us going."

The seeds of the idea for B_E_E were planted when Brigid was at McKinsey and doing some work for Stephen Tindall and The Warehouse. They got talking about environmentally friendly products as The Warehouse was stocking them at that time and they weren't selling well.

"If people start to question where the things they buy come from, and where they go when they're finished, then one person can make a difference in the world. It's simple." And if you want to mobilise a cause, New Zealand's a great place to start.

Brigid wanted to "create beautiful things to make people's lives better and save the world". There's a paragraph on the B_E_E website that reads: "Our products not only perform, but are also better environmentally, ethically and sensually. These are things that nature would have designed if it could. To love our products is to love your world and love your life."

"With B_E_E I wanted to tap into the side of us that gets up in the morning and goes to yoga or the side of us that gets motivated to write a letter to parliament to try and make a difference to the world we live in," she says.

At this stage, you may be thinking it

includes being Sir Douglas Graham's right-hand woman when he was Attorney-General, Minister of Justice and Minister in Charge of Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations. Brigid also did a stint at the most elite business strategy house in the world – McKinsey & Co – where most of the employees are Ivy League or Rhodes scholars.

Brigid, however, clearly isn't enormously interested in talking about her academic and career achievements. She steers me back to B_E_E in the most charming way. It's her passion for her company that's the driving force of her energy these days.

"In the beginning I asked myself

"Of course, they don't sell at The Warehouse," Brigid told him. "They need to be inspirational, aspirational and cool."

The conversation lingered in both of their minds until the concept eventually morphed into Brigid's crusade.

Stephen was one of the original investors in the company.

"Stephen was interested in it as a business model and he wanted to see if it would work as a sustainable business idea," she says. Brigid has since bought him out of his seed investment and brought in a team of new investors.

"But he remains very proud of what we achieved together," she says.





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She began with the hard graft that is part and parcel of any start-up company.

“There are \$300 million worth of cleaning products sold in this country each year and, at that time, three large multi-national companies were controlling most of it,” she says. “I had to get a commitment from the supermarkets that they would stock my product before I could even get the money to make them,” she says.

She rose to the challenge and got the necessary documentation. “People took a punt on us when, at the beginning, it was this crazy dream. I had to convince everyone to take a leap of faith.

“The biggest challenge was getting the concept up and running,” says Brigid. “I had to ask myself, ‘Why aren’t people buying environmentally sound cleaning products?’ There was a real sense that it wasn’t for them. People would think, ‘I’m too busy, I’m too glamorous or it’s for ‘hippies’.’ I went to the cleaning aisle of the supermarket and watched people and I nearly cried. When it came to cleaning products, they just reached out and picked something up without even looking.”

At the end of 2003 B_E_E hit the shelves, destined to change the face of cleaning products forever. The culmina-

tion of the seed that was originally planted is, to steal a few words from Robert Palmer, simply irresistible.

“Talking bottles’ with pick-up lines such as ‘I’ll Make It All White’, ‘I’m Good About The House’ and ‘Trust Me With Your Delicates’ and romantic advertising images that are a take on quixotic Mills & Boon covers entice your interest.

Brigid then takes the experience further with the fragrance of essential oils, formulated by a top ‘nose’ (perfumer). (Yes, we are talking about cleaning products!)

The icing on the cake for Brigid, though, would be the information on the packaging that B_E_E are the only cleaning products in New Zealand accredited by Environmental Choice. This means they meet the most stringent global eco-standards and are endorsed by the New Zealand Ministry for the Environment.

“We actually lobbied the New Zealand Government to bring standards in as they didn’t have up-to-date doctrines for cleaning products,” explains Brigid. “Having had experience working in ‘The Beehive’ I know how fast the wheels of government can change.”

But perhaps what gives her the most

satisfaction is the fact that, as cleaners, B_E_E performs effectively – extremely well, in fact.

“The ingredients are some of the most expensive you can get, which is why the products cost a bit more,” she says. “It’s really about science and coming to respect nature again. With the natural ingredients we use I get as much information as I can on multiple fronts, but if they didn’t work we’d go under straight away.”

Like any great idea, particularly those which aim to change the ingrained habits of generations, the pathway to success is something of an obstacle course.

“At the start I asked myself why everybody else didn’t sell products in recyclable packaging that you can see through, because it’s so much easier and better,” she smiles. “Then I did it myself and thought, ‘Oh, okay, that’s why’ – it’s not easier at all and it’s so much more expensive! There’s been a million incidents like that, but it’s important to me that we don’t compromise on anything, particularly quality and efficacy.”

The B_E_E concept is working. Brigid says they get hundreds of letters from people all the time. “A lot of peo-

ple are saying, ‘How can I help? I want to be part of this,’ and we’re a dish-washing company! We’ve given out tens of thousands of samples and the majority have been distributed by people who believe in the idea,” she smiles. “It just might start people thinking, ‘I wonder what’s in this?’ or it might make them a bit more likely to put the bottle in the recycling bin when it’s finished. We’re causing people to ask questions and we can reach people of all walks of life – every single person uses cleaning products.

“Society has reached a point where there’s a knowledge that consumerism is hugely powerful,” she says. “If people start to question where the things they buy come from, and where they go when they’re finished, then one person can make a difference in the world. It’s simple. And if you want to mobilise a cause, New Zealand’s a great place to start. I feel a very strong sense that if we believe in something we really can get traction in New Zealand.

“It’s about small steps,” she says. “We’ll continue to develop. We’ve got a long way to go. There is such a thing as biodegradable packaging made out of cornstarch; it can be done with eggshells, too. That would be fantastic

for the packaging, but the infrastructure in New Zealand is not yet at a point where we could cope with it.

“Twenty-six percent of New Zealanders are concerned with health and wellness and the environment, and they are prepared to seek out products that have the same philosophy,” says Brigid. “We need to inform consumers about what really is ecologically friendly but, at the moment, we can only get a price display, not an information display in our supermarkets. At New World Victoria Park (in central Auckland) recently, they’ve had signs up saying: ‘Think about your decision when you buy your eggs today. Based on your decisions we’ll decide whether to only stock free range eggs.’ It’s so exciting that a retailer is prepared to get behind it.

“A lot of New Zealand supermarkets are privately owned, and ethical products tend to be premium products that work well for retailers when they sell. So supermarkets are starting to show an interest in supplying their customers with more information about the product than just the price.

“Things really are starting to change – as evidenced by what happened at New World Vic Park. I’d love to see

supermarkets highlighting things like Environmental Choice so people who care about these things would be able to work out easily where to find the products they’re looking for.”

B_E_E, it would seem, has been hugely influenced by Brigid’s past experiences.

“I’ve been very lucky. I’ve seen firsthand that great entrepreneurs and great business leaders are driven by their passion. When I worked for the minister (Sir Douglas Graham) he was voted New Zealander of the Year and it was very exciting,” she says. “I realised he’d done it by being passionate and by capturing people’s imaginations. I’d seen him drive his incredible personal commitment and get others to attain that passion too. From him I learned that you can inspire others.

“The skills I learned at McKinsey & Co were huge, too. I saw the potential I could bring to something if I was personally committed.”

That Brigid is passionate and personally committed could never be argued. And with her spunk and spirit you have a sense that B_E_E is on the road to becoming a ‘just-gotta-have-it’ item in every home. e

– Photograph of Brigid Hardy by Neil Gussey, hair & makeup by Aimee Graham.