



# withnell and i

We've wanted to write a profile of Jacqui Withnell for ages. No question about it; in the fruit salad that is the British contract interiors industry, Jacqui is one of the top bananas.

These days Jacqui's getting a palpable buzz at Nethercoats, of which more a little later. When it comes to selling design at the top end of the market this effervescent dynamo has few peers – and she's got the track record to prove it. Although Jacqui's not always been involved in sales, it didn't take very long to find her vocation.

'I was born and bred in Leeds. Mum was an auxiliary nurse at St. James Hospital. My parents divorced when I was six, but I can remember going to help my Dad who was a market trader. Standing on a box, hollering: a little blonde girl selling fruit and vegetables! I'm one of four brothers and sisters; we didn't have a privileged background. The others are more intellectual than I am; I've always been more streetwise and self-confident. When we were kids, if there was a problem they'd stand behind me and I'd sort it out. The black sheep of the family!

'I studied Textile Design at Jacob Kramer Art School in Leeds, and having got my HND was offered a placement at Manchester Poly to do a BA in Textile Design. Much to the disgust of my mother and eldest brother (who was mentoring me to follow his academic path) I dropped out of the course just as it was about to start. I'd met a guy▶▶▶





▶▶▶▶ thing imploded – which is a whole story of its own. From the ashes in October 1999 an ex-colleague and I created Work Inc in Leeds. I'm proud of what we did. As Managing Director of Work Inc's interiors business I developed top clients like Argos, DLA, Arthur Andersen, Royal Mail and Yorkshire Building Society until at our peak we were contributing two thirds of the group's £21 million turnover. It was a fantastic success story but the catalyst for change was when we lost the FM contract for GE to a bigger specialist FM company. We looked at all the options, including a buy-out, but in the end I realised I had to split from Work Inc – and I think it was the best thing to have happened to me. It was a difficult period that made me look hard again at the values I've always held, such as integrity and honesty. In a funny way it reaffirmed the importance of those values to me.

'So here I am at Nethercoats as Operations Director. Jon Stanger, an enterprising MD who has been involved in elevating the company to its present position, convinced me that my skills would complement the mix – and I'm so happy with the way it's turning out. I'm back to my design roots in the best sense: taking an architect's idea, 'designing' it for them and making it work. For me, making an idea real is an amazing feeling. Nethercoats is going through a metamorphosis – we're not really a joinery company, we work with all sorts of materials such as coloured glass, Corian, marble, stone, metal and wood. The diversity is about experimentation, exploration, looking for what's unique and being interpretative and flexible. Ultimately it's about delivery, solving the customer's problem with imagination.

'It's funny but sometimes I'm not sure some of the guys realise how much fun this is! We've got all this experience and talent and we put it in a mixer and out comes this fantastic...this is Masterchef and we're all involved in the tasting. I just say 'wow' – this is dynamite. My wonderful challenge is to capture that, because there is nothing, absolutely nothing like this in our industry!'

We've focused extensively on Jacqui's professional career as one of the foremost deliverers of design solutions in the interiors industry. This is someone with an unusual clarity of thought which helps her to have an understanding of what it is that her customers really need allied to a work ethic, integrity and a get-up-and-go attitude that's been ingrained since the beginning. Yet this is not a one-dimensional workaholic, Jacqui's a multi-faceted person – and we're sure that this is what has made her so successful for so long.

'For me it's about work/life balance. It's sad but so many in our industry get so stressed. For the last three years I've been studying NVQs in Pilates, Aerobics, Nutrition and other health-related subjects, and I also teach Pilates and Aerobics classes three times a week. I've also held a motorcycle licence for 10 years, and although I don't have my ZX6R any more (it's too dangerous for the insurers), I do still have my leathers! My husband, Bill, has also been a huge influence on my life, helping me to put things in perspective. He coaches me on the way I present myself and helps me see through the complexities of situations I find myself in. Another big influence has been a guy called David Baines who chaired a group I was involved in for a few years with a company called Vistage – it moved me from thinking like a Sales Director to thinking and acting like a Managing Director.'

Erudite, straightforward and with a sharp sense of humour, Jacqui Withnell is good company. We'd already gone way over time and a drive over the Pennines was beckoning, so it was time to go. Motoring along the M62 a short while later, the thought came about how this piece on such a personality should kick off. 'Top banana', we thought ●

