

Surviving a recession - a case study

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CASE STUDY

SURVIVING A RECESSION: MRS ROBYN JONES, CEO CHARLTON HOUSE

Robyn Jones, co-founder and chief executive of independent catering company, Charlton House, established the business with her husband, Tim Jones, at the height of the last recession in July 1991.

Robyn had been made redundant from her position as General Manager with Higgs and Hill plc. She applied for a Government Enterprise Allowance of £50 per week for fledging businesses but in order to get it she had to invest £1,500 into the business to show her commitment. She used her redundancy cheque of £2,500 to purchase a second-hand diesel car (Peugeot 205) and a computer, leaving her with just £1,000 to fund the business.

As Robyn and Tim had just moved house and had taken on a large mortgage, to keep spend to a minimum Robyn used an old wallpaper pasting table as a desk and banana boxes as filing cabinets.

Armed only with a telephone, a telephone directory, (no marketing literature whatsoever) and endless enthusiasm, Robyn sat in her spare bedroom and began cold calling. For six months she sat at her desk from 8.00am until 5.00pm each day making cold calls. She wouldn't let herself have a cup of coffee until she had spoken to a potential client, or lunch until she had made an appointment. Apparently, she got very thirsty and very hungry!

Her vision for the company at that stage was to gain three clients. She said: "I thought to myself that if I could just get three clients, I would be made."

At the end of her first year trading (Sept 1992), her turnover was £340,000 and she employed 16 people. She had already met her long-term goal of gaining three contracts.

She wrote to her former boss and thanked him for making her redundant.

Today, Charlton House is one of the UK's most successful independent contract caterers. Annual turnover currently stands at £80 million and Charlton House has 150 clients and employs 2,000 people nationwide. Clients include The Law Society, The RIBA and the UK corporate headquarters of BUPA, Sony and Network Rail.

Robyn Jones started her career in catering as a school cook. She is a Catey winner (the hospitality industry's equivalent to an Oscar) and she was named the Credit Suisse Most Outstanding Woman in Business at the National Business Awards in 2006.

www.charltonhouse.co.uk

Photographs and further details are available on request.

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