

High flyer is running hard

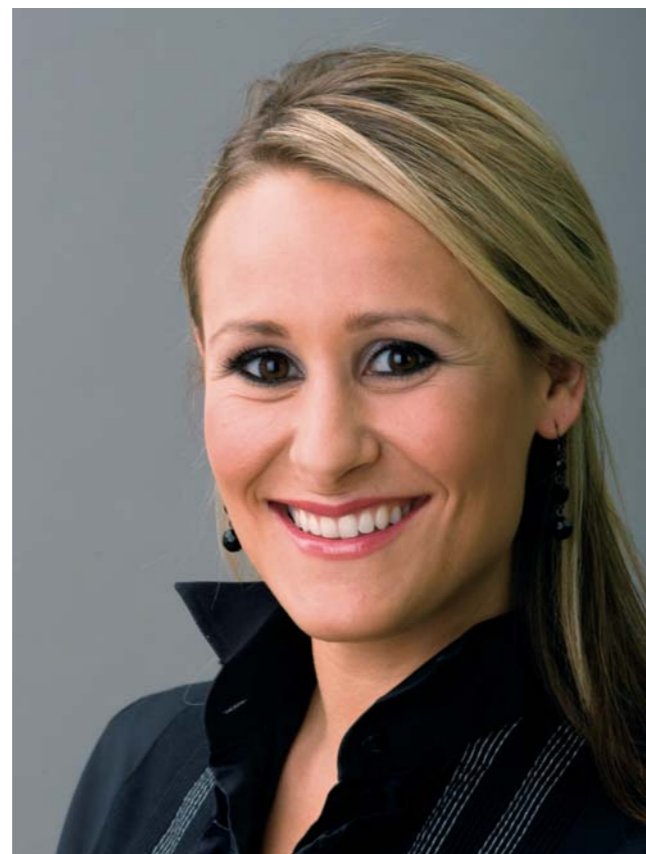
Yet to turn 30, Emma Isaacs is a serial entrepreneur who builds businesses on the run, and defies the conventional business stereotypes. **By Nicola Card**

EMMA ISAACS is a creative and hard running business leader who seems to have packed more in her first decade in business than most of us do in a lifetime. At the age of 24, after successfully running and then later selling a recruitment agency — which she had started at the ripe old age of age of 18 — she acquired the rights to a women's networking/mentoring group, Business Chicks, and has rapidly expanded it into a nationwide organisation.

"When I attended my first Business Chicks event I was blown away. I knew there was something very different about Business Chicks, and you could tell that everyone in the room thought the same. At the next event, the Business Chicks Marketing Manager addressed the audience saying they were axing the group. On a whim I approached her. My enthusiasm just took me up at that stage, and after eight months of negotiations I bought the business."

With a membership of 2000 and more than 22,000 on the database, Business Chicks is one of Australia's largest business groups for women, staging events in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide and soon Perth, too. Up to 970 attend breakfast sessions. The impressive figures have been gained by word of mouth — there is no external promotional budget. But Isaacs states firmly and proudly it's a lot more than a networking group.

"Although we run some networking events, Business Chicks is much more



Business Chicks' Chief Chick Emma Isaacs is comfortable challenging norms and is actively helping more people to discover opportunities

than that. We run educational workshops and mentoring programs, fundraising events, boot camps and sporting events and health retreats. And if a member is travelling interstate and has time to spare they may call a fellow Business Chick to arrange a lunch meeting or happy hour, or just call them for advice about a supplier or something else in the region.

"So it's really more of a community, designed to inspire and nurture women in business. Through Business Chicks they

can connect with others and for some it's like an instant family. I laughed when one of our members recently told me how she was struggling during a sales call with a prospective client. This new client was playing hard ball and our member was finding it hard to break the ice. For some reason, she got on to the subject of Business Chicks. The minute the prospective client heard those two words, she became instantly animated, and said 'Oh! You're a Business Chick? So am I!'

Business Chicks recently launched its own glossy magazine, *latte*, which has attracted the attention of high-profile businesses recognising the strength of this powerful demographic. "I'm so excited about launching *latte*," said Isaacs. "It's been so much fun rolling my sleeves up and learning about an entirely different industry. The world of publishing suits me as it's fast paced and always changing, and it's great to have a voice for the Business Chicks community. There are so many amazing stories to tell."

The group recently signed a major sponsorship with National Australia Bank. Members of Business Chicks range from 23 to 64, and are in all facets of business including finance, PR, HR, real estate, retail, medicine, fashion design, law, art and hairdressing. And at all levels; from part-time administrators to CEOs. Some are SMEs, others are tied up in the corporate world.

Business Chicks is a lean machine, with a small core staff and representatives in ►

each state. Isaacs herself is rarely in the office, preferring the freedom of laptops and BlackBerries. "I'm not one for conforming, or playing by the rules. I'm also not convinced about working in fluorescent lighting and uninspiring environments," says the entrepreneur who likes to stretch boundaries and challenge societal norms.

This way of thinking is evidenced in every part of the Business Chicks brand. "The brand has tremendous personality and we're not afraid to use it," says Isaacs. "It radiates colour in the often bland black and white of the corporate world. We encourage our members to have fun, not take themselves so seriously, look for opportunity everywhere, and support each other."

In purchasing the group Isaacs secured the IP, a data base, the brand, trademarks and a fundraising contract with children's charity Kids Help Line. The three-year rolling contract which is up for renewal this year is unlikely ever to be severed, due to Isaacs' steadfast loyalty. "When I bought Business Chicks, I appealed to Kids Help Line as I was less interested in the numbers of the business and more intent on helping the charity," Isaacs explained.

Surprisingly, however, it was the people behind Kids Help Line who invented the concept of Business Chicks. "Business Chicks gives Kids Help Line a segue to the corporate world. They realised that forming such a group would suit their donation demographics, so they set it up. It's an excellent vehicle for raising awareness about the charity in the corporate world."

"Each week thousands of young people aged 5 to 25 who may be confused or struggling at school, suffering physical, emotional, sexual abuse, or are on drugs and alcohol, turn to Kids Help Line. The 24-hour anonymous service is staffed by professionally trained and qualified counsellors, with whom they can discuss their fears and problems."

Profits from Business Chicks events are donated to Kids Help Line and in Isaacs' time more than \$200,000 has been raised for the charity. She is on record saying "I used to judge my success on what my revenue or profit was — now the motivator is how much money we've given to Kids Help Line."

Isaacs has acquired another business, the Last Thursday Club. The network is active in Sydney's CBD, holding monthly events featuring high-profile guest speakers for up to 250 "big thinking business professionals, entrepreneurs, innovators, business leaders, idea-makers and thought-leaders. It is a different product, we're crystal clear on our mission for Last Thursday Club, all we do is two things — networking and education." The club targets the corporate, SME and entrepreneurial sector and with Isaacs' energies and contacts it could well extend interstate.

Sydney-based Recruitment company Staff It was Isaacs' first business acquisition, purchased when she was just 18. After eight years as Managing Director — and in that time picking up Australia's Favourite Recruiter three times and

winning Westpac 2005 Small Business of the Year award — she decided to call it quits. A timely trip to India and Nepal solidified her decision, and that's when the opportunity to purchase Business Chicks arose.

Isaacs also finds time in her diary to give back and is on the board of the Entrepreneurs Organisation Sydney. Next year she'll lead the chapter as its President. A chapter in *Secrets of Entrepreneurs under 40 Exposed* is also devoted to her. Married to a like-minded entrepreneur (they met through the Entrepreneurs Organisation) the topic of business punctuates most of their conversations and, in her spare time, two personal trainers keep her fit for marathon runs.

For Isaacs, life is very much in the fast lane, with no concrete career path laid before her. "I'm comfy with change and I'm comfy with the unknown," she says. "My focus is on the here and now. At the moment, I identify as a social entrepreneur, but who's to say what my 30s and beyond will hold. As long as I'm opening people's eyes to see there are different ways of being, and teaching them that there are so many opportunities in life, I'll be happy!" ●

For more information:
www.businesschicks.com.au
www.lastthursdayclub.com.au
www.kidshelp.com.au