

Mermaid Sister - A tale of a trade mark ...

The tale of Gill Milligan and Louise Alders' Mermaid Sister business venture is a great story about youth, belief in yourself and passion for what you do. Oh, and the benefit of a registered trade mark.

The Queensland girls have come a long way from the early days. Says Louise, "Back then, after selling the range and making the production, we would spend days tagging and bagging all of the stock ourselves. We would begin in the early hours and invite our friends and family over for coffee and cake to help, it all felt like a pyjama party!"

A year after they started though, Gill and Louise lost that party vibe and nearly went out of business due to a lack of funds. Every dollar Mermaid Sister made was put back into the business, and, even though neither Gill nor Louise was taking a wage, they were running very low on money and somehow needed to keep the business going.

After relocating to Sydney, Gill and Louise applied to various banks for a business loan, but because of their age and lack of assets, the banks refused their applications.

The girls' registered trade mark on the name, 'Mermaid Sister' and Mermaid character Logo, together with their constant, brand awareness marketing strategy saved their business. How?

After approaching numerous fashion houses, Gill and Louise met with Wassim and Ziad Gazal at Hot Springs Pty Ltd. Wassim and Ziad were impressed by the girls' enthusiasm and the reputation they had built up under their registered trade mark and as a result, Hot Springs decided to invest in 'Mermaid Sister'. Basically, Gill and Louise sold some of the equity in their brand, (their trade mark) in exchange for the security to allow them to focus on what they do best. With Hot Springs providing the much-needed money and logistic support, Gill and Louise are relieved of the time-eating duties of administration and finance and are now free to get on with designing, selling, marketing and producing of their clothing range.

Part of the deal with Hot Springs covers Gill and Louise's right to autonomy - autonomy over their designs and their brand name, Mermaid Sister.

Gill and Louise were very smart. They knew that a great brand could be incredibly powerful. They also recognised that a brand actually comprises many elements; IP, advertising, knowing their market, the look - it's everything the customer perceives of a company. With this in mind, they set about devising ways of marketing their clothes to sales staff and customers.

They did this by personally keeping in touch with their buyers, salespeople and their teenage customers. They made posters, stickers and gave free Mermaid Sister T-shirts to the staff in stores selling Mermaid Sister. To keep in touch with their customers, they developed a unique approach called a 'fanzine'. Basically it's a catalogue of their clothes, wrapped up in a teen magazine, filled with interviews, giveaways, and book and CD reviews. Says Gill, "As well as being a magazine, it's also a great opportunity for us to show off our clothes, connect with our customers and have our fanzine sitting on their coffee table".

Hot Springs was attracted to the brand. Without the foresight to protect, develop and nurture their brand name, Mermaid Sister, Gill and Louise would probably have gone out of business. To Hot Springs, they might have represented a couple with great clothes, but little in the way of assets. Their brand provided the asset they needed to attract the capital.

For now, that's the end of this trade mark tale.