

An eye for business success

Ferne Millen has turned an eye for beautiful images into a successful business, thanks partly to the Small Business mentoring service.

The Victorian College of the Arts visual and performing arts graduate started Ferne Millen Photography in 2004 after developing a love of photography as a 15-year-old work experience student. She had worked as a photojournalist for *Surfcoast Living* magazine for two years, and has a Bachelor of Creative Arts in painting, photography and drama from Melbourne University.

The skilled painter, designer, performer and musician – Ferne plays the piano and saxophone - combines her skills to produce striking images. Her shots of musicians, for example, show an amazing empathy with her subjects. Photography is clearly more than a job for this talented artist.

“My clients range from commercial, corporate and community based organisations to individuals and events,” Ferne says. “I tailor photographic services to suit each client’s needs and provide them with highly usable images for web, print, brochure and media. I have a friendly personality, which compliments the activities of my business.”



Ferne had her first exhibition at just 15, and has covered Lorne’s Falls Festival, the Port Fairy Folk Festival and Womadelaide. Her solo exhibition, *Rock On* at Revolver in Prahran, showcased several of those festivals. She was also invited by Paul Watson to photograph the 30th anniversary benefit concert for his Sea Shepherd Foundation in Los Angeles.

Other notable shoots include CD shots for *Daddy Cool* and book images for *The John Butler Trio*. *Daddy Cool* front man Ross Wilson says of Ferne: “We needed to recreate a particular pose for our album cover and Ferne captured it exactly and very quickly, allowing us to spend more time doing other shots. We ended up getting a wide range of poses which attained high acceptance by the media.”

Her painter’s eye and keen design principles saw Ferne branch into architecture and commercial photography. Clients include Alcoa, GPAC, Powercor, Barwon Water, Bethany, Universal Music and AIIA. While her business was gaining a solid reputation, Ferne felt she needed help to re-focus her business goals and develop strategies to achieve them.

Ferne discovered the SBMS at a Surfcoast Shire seminar, after which the shire sponsored ten businesses to be part of the SBMS program. She was matched with mentor Martin Shirley. Martin has more than 40 years' experience in the transport, logistics and freight forwarding industries and is skilled in sales, marketing and general management. His company, Martin Shirley & Associates, was purchased by corporate giant Patrick Corporation.

The SBMS is a non-government, non-profit organisation of volunteer expert mentors who give their time and experience to help small business. It is supported by Small Business Victoria, which refers clients to it.

Ferne saw Martin for four sessions over six months under the BAP4 Business Acceleration Program. They still have contact on an as-needed basis. Martin provided advice in a range of areas, most notably producing business and marketing plans. Other areas included:

- Producing long term agreements with clients for regular income
- Business to business management
- A website that works for the business
- Networking to obtain more clients
- Cost-effective marketing.
- Time management and delegating tasks that detract from her photography, like BASS statements and accounting
- Identifying her point of difference.

Martin also advised Ferne about following up all contacts to ensure her business became better known to potential clients. Since their sessions, Ferne has improved her understanding of short, medium and long term business goals. She has also developed her business acumen and better knows how to market and promote herself cost-effectively.

She now knows that to make her business marketable and profitable she must have continuous income streams and continue to market, promote and network. The business plan has helped her to organise and prioritise.

“Ferne is now much more focused on her business and what she wishes to achieve,” Martin says. “From purely concentrating on getting her business ready to sell, Ferne is now focussed on developing and building the business for the medium term to make it viable and a profitable business.”

Ferne says she is now managing the right things at the right time to achieve clear goals. She has a clear insight into where her business is going and can better focus on marketing herself to obtain corporate clients. Business has improved by about 10 per cent, and enquires have doubled.

“I’m more focussed on using my time productively to achieve goals and thus plan holidays in advance,” she says. “My new capability statement and revised marketing plans have helped to obtain new clients and to retain my existing clients. Also Martin’s recommendation to join the Geelong Chamber of Commerce has lifted my business profile and puts me in reach of clients I wish to get.”

Ferne has no doubt that Martin’s experience in business and life has helped her make choices that would save time and give her “steady direction with my key objective and services in photography” “It is important for me to continue on doing what I love, but with a steady base business to guide my creative ideas.”

Without Martin's help Ferne says she would probably not be properly focussed on what was needed for me to take that next step. "Having a clear idea of where I am going with my business has given me direction which allows for confidence in the business and thus the clients believe in you too," she says.

"It has been invaluable to have a mentor, as I am now able to focus with clear objectives about where my business is into the future. I believe I didn't have a very clear insight and plan for my business and have found having Martin's outside perspective was so important to guide me both as an individual and as a business. Thanks Martin."

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