

THE BEAUTY OF IT...

SHELLEY MARSDEN *chats to experienced beauty educator Yvonne Sullivan, who runs a successful business from her Harrow home...*

Modest, self-effacing and with a gentle, natural warmth, it's not hard to see why people feel comfortable at Yvonne Sullivan's home-based beauty salon, something which is borne out by her high client retention rate.

As the Mayo-born beautician crosses her spacious kitchen (a corner of which doubles up as a training room, complete with whiteboard) to put on the kettle, we get chatting about her business, London Beauty Training Harrow, the training she offers and the prospects for future beauty trainees.

She says, "Here At London Beauty Training Harrow; I do fast-track training. You just come here for the day, learn the skill and go away. It's a proper, insurable, VTCT certificate – it can be a refresher for someone who has done a course before but never got a start on it and is reluctant to go into the workplace."

And that's when Yvonne isn't doing her own beauty treatments with clients, or giving talks on a career in this field at local schools and colleges. Even today, she tells me she has treatments booked in for the rest of the day, into the evening. She never stops – but she seems unflappable!

"It's great, and it's very busy. The amount of effort that goes into even replying to emails from clients consistently is difficult. I'm actually working harder than I've ever done before... mmm, I probably need to get somebody in to help!"

The kind of people that come to Yvonne's home-based business in Harrow, North West London for training are varied; from young women working in salons with experience but perhaps no qualifications, to mothers with families who necessitate the flexibility of working for themselves.

"A lot of people want to do manicure and pedicure", says Yvonne. "Mums that work and have children can come for their one-day training and then fit the work into their lifestyle. In the evenings, say when dad is home, they have a room where they work out of and have clients in.

"It works really, really well. I had a lady back the other day that I taught, and she was talking about the excitement of getting paid for this, and getting people ringing to make an appointment!"

It sounds pretty tempting. But are there enough jobs to go round in the beauty industry, particularly as the country is only just picking itself up from recession?

Yvonne is both practical and encouraging about employment possibilities, and says her philosophy on most things spills over into her ideas about prospects within the beauty industry.

“My motto is, and it goes for any aspect of your working life, if you’re good enough and you commit yourself 100%, you can achieve what you want to achieve. It just depends on you, on your inner self.

“I hear lots of people saying they can’t get work, but on the other hand, I have a student who has opened her own salons in Uxbridge, another in Slough and is now opening another two – all in the matter of two years. There are so many success stories!”

Yvonne doesn’t class herself as particularly ‘driven’, but believes (in what I soon understand is her typically modest way!) that because she enjoys what she does, things ‘snowball’, one success leading to another.

But she does insist there are certain key attributes needed to make it a successful beauty therapist: “You have to have a nice personality; a desire to please people”, she says. “You’ve got to imagine yourself in that chair; how would you like to be treated if it were you?

“And you must always remember that a person has maybe saved up money especially to come to you, and you need to look after them, be accommodating and flexible...”

“Goodness, I sound like ‘Saint Yvonne’”, she says with a giggle. “I’m not at all - I just believe in looking after people and offering the rounded package! People want something, and you deliver.”

Certain businesses find themselves not only hanging in there but thriving in times of economic hardship. Yvonne Sullivan’s is one of them, in both the numbers of people wanting to train with her and those booking in for a fake tan, a manicure or a relaxing facial .

Firstly, she believes it has made us think outside the box about the working world. “People have realised that you just have to have lots of strings to your bow, myself included. I teach, but I also work in my salon and do outside events. You need to make yourself as employable as possible, and accumulate extra skills so you have the edge on others in your industry.”

Secondly, she is convinced that the tougher the times financially, the more people feel they deserve a little indulgence. It might not be a flash car, an exotic cruise or a new house, but they feel they should be able to treat themselves on the latest beauty treatment, and frequently do.

Says Yvonne, “I’m not making this up but, as I said before, in the last few years I’ve been busier than I’ve ever been in my entire life! Normally, you see people coming through that are going on holiday, or planning something very exciting, but now it’s a bit calmer in that sense.

“People still come to me for their little treats. Women especially. All women like to be feminine and keep up appearances. It’s important to feel good, and if that little £30 or £120 can make the difference, people are still happy to spend that.”

Yvonne explains it by comparing a facial from a beauty therapist to having your teeth and gums cleaned at the dentist – you feel like a million dollars afterwards and, hard as you try, you can never quite do it as good as they can!

And feeling good is what it's all about. As she explains, Yvonne gets more than a professional satisfaction out of her job – it's been a big part of her social life since she got into the business, some thirty years ago now (“now that is scary!” she gasps).

As a single mum who couldn't get out of the house as much as she would have liked, it was a link to the outside world.

“It's going to sound so corny, but it's just lovely. I didn't know back then what this would all come to mean to me.

“When my son was in bed or at school, I could work. I had regular contact with people, and it has been such a positive thing. And generally, when people come to see me, perhaps out of two hundred clients, only one will be annoying.

“As much as I have the happy pill, there'll always be that glass half empty kind of client. But as far as ratios go, that's not bad, is it?! People are coming to me for something they want, to feel pampered and looked after in my care, so they normally come with a positive outlook.”

The downsides would seem to be the irregular hours, but again it's Yvonne's choice and hers alone. Last night, for instance, she was treating clients until 10pm. But she's reluctant to complain, arguing that it's hardly “stacking shelves somewhere – if I was working in a retail store at that time of the night, I'd definitely throw a hissy fit!”

“I really enjoy it, but it's not just in monetary terms or for the independence it offers,” she adds.

“Emotionally, too, you get out what you put in. I haven't woken up on a Monday morning and felt awful about going to work in a long, long time. I suppose I'm a bit of a workaholic, but I've no problem with that at all!

“When I go on holiday, I do actually manage to completely forget about work. I have family in three different parts of America, so I go to that part of the world a lot, and we have a ball.”

She works hard, but she loves her job and it shows- isn't that the ultimate dream for any working person? And perhaps, it's the real secret of Yvonne's success.

For more, visit the website www.beautytrainingharrow.co.uk or call Yvonne on 0208 8206 2930 or 07725 943 810. You can read Yvonne's new blog at www.beautytrainingharrow.wordpress.com.

PROFILE

Who? Yvonne Sullivan, originally from Belmullet, Co Mayo, now living in Harrow, London.

Business? London Harrow Beauty Training.

What jobs did you do before this? I came to London at the age of 18, with a friend who I worked with in the civil service in Dublin. We decided to travel the world, and kind of stopped in London! Like many people from any nationality going to another country; I couldn't settle emotionally, work would be the same. I worked in retail, secretarial jobs before I arrived at what I do now.

How did you start out in beauty therapy? A friend of mine suggested it, just when the whole concept was beginning to get popular. I always liked looking after my hands and nails (you wouldn't think it looking at me now!), so I warmed to the idea. I saw there was a course at Greenhill College in Harrow and started training there part-time in the evening, and every year just added to that qualification. Even now, I'll do CPD every year– if you're in this industry, it's all about continuous development. There are always new things on the market. At the moment, I'm getting my qualification in microdermabrasion.

I hear you'll be involved with the Feis and Hop Farm festivals? Yes, and I'd love some girls with experience to take part. I'm going to be hosting a 'mini' salon with signage leading to it and people giving out leaflets on site, so festival goers knows it's available. I was just approached to get involved and I think it's a great idea. The Feis is returning after many years, and the whole image of festivals has changed so much since I went to them – there were no facilities then as such. Organisers are trying to make the experience as comfortable and professional as possible. It should be great fun!

What would your last supper consist of? Oh, it would have to be 'death by chocolate!'

Your own favourite beauty treatment? Micro Dermabrasion [diamond] to help keep the skin fresh, or hot stones for relaxation.

Best holiday you've ever been on? The family get-togethers we have every Christmas in Florida.

What car do you drive?
A BMW.

What would you do if you weren't in this business?
See the wonders of the world!

TREAT THE VIPS AT FEIS AND HOP FARM!

Yvonne Sullivan is looking for experienced beauticians to work at Vince Power's London Feis on 18th & 19th June, and the Hop Farm Festival, Kent on 1st-3rd July. For a few hours work per day, they will gain free entry to the festival and invaluable on- the-job training. Call Yvonne on 0208 8206 2930 or 07725 943 810!