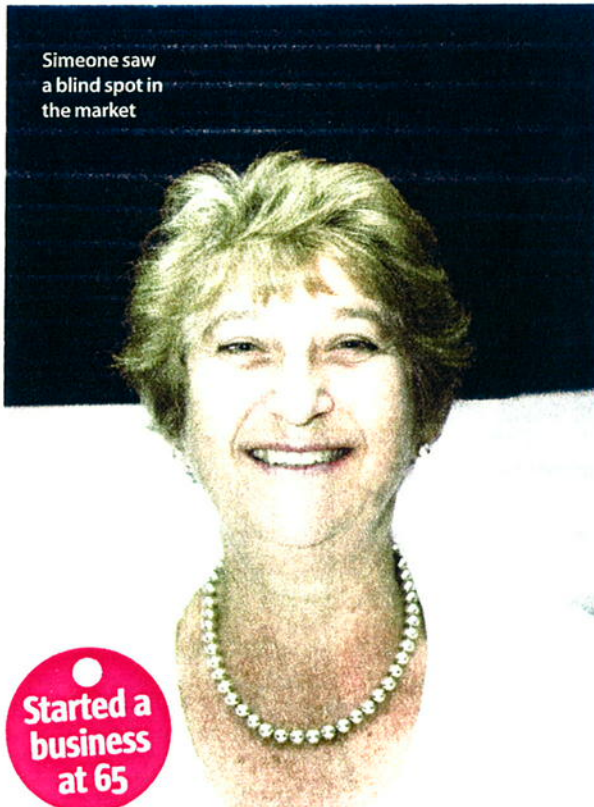


'We did it our

Not all entrepreneurs are 22-year-old whizz-kids. Joanne Finney m women who've set up businesses in their 40s, 50s and 60s

Someone saw a blind spot in the market



Started a business at 65

Simeone Salik, 68, lives in Hertfordshire with her husband, Gordon. She runs BlindsInABox. 'I had the idea for temporary blinds while Gordon and I were decorating our new house in 2003. We were waiting for our new curtains to arrive and needed something to cover the windows. I hunted high and low, and when I couldn't find anything suitable, I designed a paper blind that could be stuck to a window

frame. I knew straight away I'd hit on a good idea, but I realised what a big undertaking setting up a business was, so I got two partners on board, who have been fantastic. We each invested some of our own money (around £3,500) and set up a website. The business did well almost immediately, but when we appeared on BBC2's *Dragons' Den* and got the backing of Duncan Bannatyne and James Caan, it really took off. We're now stocked in Argos and have an

annual turnover of £100,000. I'm quite a dogged person and I really believe that you can do anything you want. I've never let my age be an issue. At first, I regretted that I hadn't done this sooner. But mine was an old-fashioned marriage — once the first of my three daughters was born, I gave up work and my main role was bringing them up and looking after the house, as well as helping out with the admin for my husband's optometry business once they got a bit older.

I now think this is the perfect time for me to have my own business. I don't play bridge or golf, so business is my hobby. It's definitely kept me young. I've learned so many new skills, including how to use the computer and text on my mobile phone, which has been useful for communicating with my eight grandchildren.

I've been invited to give a talk at the school one of my granddaughters attends and my picture is on the wall of my grandson's classroom. They're very proud of me.'
● BlindsInABox (020 8445 8699; www.blindsinabox.co.uk).

Simeone's top business tip

Get advice from people you respect. Most people are willing to help if you ask in the right way.



Bra-va! Sophie (left) and Maria fit their business around their lives

Maria Law, 47, and Sophie Law, 44, are sisters-in-law, from north London. Together, they set up Sweetling, a company making first bras for girls. Maria is married with four daughters; Sophie is married with two sons and two daughters.

Maria: 'It all started when Sophie and I took our 12-year-olds, Millie and Kitty, out for a celebratory girls' day to buy their first bras. We came home empty-handed — all the bras for their age group were padded, underwired and just too sexy. I knew that I couldn't be the only mum looking for pretty bras that were suitable for young girls, so one summer's day in 2008, Sophie and I sat in my garden and came up with a business plan for Sweetling. We had no retail experience, but felt we were in a good position because we have six daughters between us who could, and do, help us with the designs and sizing.

way!

ets four



Set up a business after having children

Two of the pair's colourful creations



Sophie:
'I've been dressmaking since I was little, and I'm

a costume designer by trade, so I knew about pattern cutting but I'd never made a bra before. I have felt out of my depth at times, but it's been very exciting. We got a bank loan to start the company, and our husbands and families have invested some money, but we've both stretched our credit cards to the limit and I went back to doing costumes for panto before Christmas to pay a few bills.

I love the fact that we've managed to fit the business around our lives — if we're really up against it, we wait until our husbands get home and come back to the studio. It's been satisfying starting a new career at this age, and especially working for ourselves. Eventually, we'd like the company to grow and maybe be able to pass it on to one of the children.'

● Sweetling (www.sweetling.co.uk).

Maria and Sophie's top business tip

Find an office space outside of the house if you have children — it helps to separate work from family life.

The company started as a real kitchen-table job, but after a couple of months, we realised that we couldn't keep working from home — everything had to be moved when the children got back from school and we kept losing bits. We found a little studio and it's well worth the £80 a week for all the family rows we avoid.

Our next step was trying to find a manufacturer. We had no contacts in the fashion business, and met with so many "no's" along the way, but we kept plugging on. We were determined that the bras would be made by adults in Britain, not by children in Asia. We eventually found a helpful, local manufacturer. We work from nine till three, so we can do the school run and take the children to swimming and cubs. My youngest daughter told me that she wants to be a business lady like me when she's older.'



Began a business as a career change

Nicola Lambert, 51, from Hull, runs her company, CherrypiPs, which sells felt brooches.

'I had to give up my job as a community health worker with the NHS a couple of years ago, because of a fatigue illness. I've always liked making jewellery, cards and mosaics as presents for people, so setting up a business selling my hand-made brooches seemed like a good way to earn a little money.

Initially, I got in touch with a few other craftmakers in Hull, and through one of them I heard about Etsy, an arts and craft website — like a virtual fair — selling everything from art to furniture. I'd already sold a few brooches at local craft fairs, but Etsy is on a much bigger scale. It's a brilliant site and it was easy to set up my own online shop. It does charge to list your item and a fee when you make a sale, but it's only a small percentage of the total.

The set-up materials weren't expensive and, as I work from home, my costs are low. I use some commercially-produced felt, but make a lot of it myself from 100 per cent wool scarves and jumpers I buy from charity shops. Each brooch takes around two to three hours to make. I love the designing process best of all; I'm always thinking of new ideas. I take a lot of inspiration from nature and I like Sixties and Seventies retro designs.

I'm really happy with how popular my brooches have

been — I've sold them everywhere from Australia to Japan, and the feedback I get is very positive. The business is still fairly small, but that suits me perfectly, as I get tired easily. It's nice that I can be at home and work flexibly. I'd quite like to expand, but at a manageable rate.

As a result of the people I've met through Etsy, I'm already helping to organise local craft fairs.'

● CherrypiPs

(www.etsy.com/shop/cherrypiPs).



Soft touch: Three of Nicola's designs

Nicola's top business tip

Get in touch with Business Link (0845 600 9006; www.businesslink.gov.uk) — it runs free workshops on all aspects of starting a business. I picked up lots of marketing advice.