

## CASE STUDY

### Gemma Perkins

Institute of Humanities and Creative Arts  
BA (Hons) Creative Digital Media (2004-7)



Gemma Perkins

**Q: Tell us about your background. Where have you previously worked or studied?**

A: "I came straight out of Stourbridge College to the University of Worcester aged 18 and did my degree over 3-years full-time. I also got accepted at Wolverhampton but chose Worcester because I saw the Digital Arts Centre which was new and fresh and the groups that were being taken on were so small so that you could go and talk to your lecturers easily and you'd get to know other students. Worcester gave me the opportunity to do a general degree that covered every area of media as I wasn't sure at the time what area I wanted to go into. Because it was a broad degree it gave me the scope to cover the different areas first and then in the 2nd and 3rd years to specialise a bit more once I knew what I wanted to do. This was a very practical and hands-on degree and you had a lot of freedom in what you could do which was good for me because I'm a very practical person and not very academic. I decided to specialise in graphic design because I could sit in my pyjamas behind a computer and design all day!"

**Q: How did you get involved with enterprise at the University of Worcester?**

A: "I wasn't a very university-type person. I'd drive to University for my lecture and then I'd drive home, and I wouldn't get involved in anything else. One day I was on the website checking my results and I saw a little advert which offered a £6,000 grant and I needed a new laptop, so I thought I'll get onto that! I read into it a bit more and found that I got training and a mentor which would be really good for me. I was always going to grow my business idea with or without SPEED but being accepted onto the programme helped me do it much quicker."

**Q: Did your studies and enterprise activities complement each other?**

A: "My business idea was in direct correlation with my degree. I used my independent study to brand myself which I would otherwise never have had time to do properly. Also in my final year I chatted with my lecturers to get my modules changed to 'live briefs' because I already had a client that was paying me so this arrangement killed two birds with one stone."

**Q: What were your greatest challenges and how did you deal with them?**

A: "I wasn't ever afraid of hard work but I knew it was going to be really hard work and during my final semester I was running a full-time business alongside my studies. It was really interesting trying to time manage. It was also hard to make decisions about what I was going to do, how I was going to approach people, what type of business I was going to be, and these things all developed with time and experience. The University gave me lots of skills but if I'd left with just the degree it wouldn't have been enough. Because I did so much more and put the effort in to do free work and learn more about business I got so much more out."

**Q: What's happened to you since graduation?**

A: "I spent lots of time working out what type of clients I wanted – big corporates or small companies? Since June 2007 I've been working with smaller companies with growth potential on a partnership basis. One company described it as flying my flag from their ship which I thought was hilarious! One of them is Chokolit, an artisan hand-made

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chocolate company, based in Shropshire, which is run by Louis Barnett. I met Louis at the Festival of Innovation at the NEC last November and have worked with him quite a bit since. They've recently gone through a transition where they want to move out of supermarkets into artisan-type products to sell in delis and high-end department stores. I've also supported Louis on an awareness and fundraising campaign (through the launch of a new product called The Biting Back Bar) to highlight the threat to Borneo & Sumatran Orang-utans from deforestation. Originally I was going to be their designer, doing their packaging and their website, then the company caught on that I was good at marketing so now I'm doing a product launch for them at Chester Zoo on 29th May – Peter Jones from Dragon's Den has shown an interest in supporting Louis in this venture. We're just about to finish the artwork and then the initial 20,000 bars will be made. The MP for South Staffordshire, Sir Patrick Cormack loves the chocolate business and he arranged a meeting with the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and the Head of Catering at the House of Commons. Louis had to take down a leather box of chocolates to the meeting and they're very interested in taking this fairly traded chocolate into the House of Commons as a British made product that's from the heart of England. I designed and built the box, the wrapping and the presentation and all of the information that they needed to take. The great thing about their business is that they have such huge demand for their business but they've not got their packaging, or their website or even pricelists sorted so I've had to go there most days to help them out to get it out on time. It's a good problem to have – even if a bit mind-blowing! Since starting to trade I've not had to take out any loans or even an overdraft. The SPEED grant paid for my computer which was the only thing I needed to buy so from day one I was in profit and I've built up a bit of capital to give myself a bit of leeway in case anything went wrong. In my first year I turned over about £20,000 and my biggest contract was to build a website for Anglo Holt Construction which has led to similar enquiries from other construction companies."

**"meeting with the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and the Head of Catering at the House of Commons."**

**Q: What has been your impact on others?**

A: "I also do lots of work with national youth organisations helping them to organise events. I've worked with a local youth group since I was 16 which is linked to Calvary Church in Kingswinford where we get 150-250 kids on a Friday night. I also do lots of voluntary work for the Church. One is a monthly event that we run at the Copthorne Hotel, Merry Hill where 350 people came to see soul musicians play. I really enjoy marketing the Church. Also, Helen Holmes calls me up to be an occasional guest in her lectures that are about doing commercial briefs because I'm closer to the students' age and I've got experience of doing commercial work myself. I've also worked with a couple of the new SPEED cohort, Naomi Bilder and Carl Murphy, to mentor them because I like to pick out talent and invest in them like people have invested in me."

**Q: How do you measure your success?**

A: "I don't measure my success by what's on the cheque at the end of the job – I know I probably should! I measure it by how I've come through with a job for somebody. The contacts I've got, the people I've been able to work with and I think that's a success story in itself. So I measure my success by how much I've grown from a job."

**Q: On reflection is there anything you would have done differently?**

A: "I don't think so. I'm glad that I didn't wait to start to do free work to develop my portfolio until after my degree because I wouldn't be at the stage I am now if I'd have done that."

**Q: Where do you go from here (2-3 years)?**

A: "I'm really passionate about opening a design studio with similar minded people who'd offer a tailored service. After that it gets much bigger!"

**Q: Who would you like to thank for their support and encouragement?**

A: "I lacked confidence when I started University. People invested in me and were generous towards me and seeing that people believed in me gave me confidence. It was all about input from people who believed I could do something like this. Helen Holmes was just brilliant and I think she really saw a lot of potential in me because the lectures part-time and also runs a business. She invested a lot of extra time into me. Because I wanted to know more she helped me and even now, after I've graduated, I go and talk to her and she gives me advice on how to deal with people. She was really, really helpful."

**"coming to university how shown me that I can change direction in my life and do it properly."**