

Interview with a successful entrepreneur Wendy

Wendy Paintsil founded [@sixtyseven communications](#), a PR and social enterprise in Wrexham (North Wales) two years ago after being made redundant. @sixtyseven is now a successful PR establishment that helps community cohesion projects as well as taking on PR projects. Their most successful project to date is The Wrexham Community choir, aimed at breaking down barriers in the community; the multicultural choir has over 160 members and has performed at music festivals all over Wales.

1. What made you choose to start up @67 communications? I had thought many times about setting up my own business but when I was made redundant in 2009, I decided to give it a go and put my effort in to making it work. I had worked previously in the field of social affairs broadcasting, media training, community development and press office work and wanted to combine all of these areas of interest into a company which worked to break down communication barriers and give access to the media to voices which are not usually heard or to those who find it difficult to do so. As a social enterprise, I wanted to create a company with a difference – one that sole's objective was not pursuit of money but had people had its centre. I also aimed to provide training and create long term job opportunities to people living in Wrexham who have incredible talent and skills who often have to leave the area to find work. I wish I had started years ago!

2. What were the difficulties? The main difficulty in setting up a business without capital is that there are no financial resources available to assist new start ups based in Wrexham town centre. Funding is available to areas in convergence areas of Wales and to businesses in rural Wrexham but not the town centre – this puts many new businesses at a disadvantage and is very frustrating. Whilst there are a plethora of government funded agencies that advertise services to assist business – unfortunately, these are mainly sign posting services and in reality fail to deliver real support. I spent many months visiting many of these services to find myself back at square one. I felt I had wasted a lot of time and the main thing I learnt was I was taking time and energy away from focusing on developing the business and doing actual work. I also realised that many advisors had no experience of setting up their own business, did not understand what a social enterprise was and could not give real advice. For example – business advisors always tell new businesses they need a good solid business plan. I agree – however nobody could give me a real critique of my plan. I wanted solid advice and benefit of expertise but it appeared it was more about these organisations justifying their own existence by asking for completion of evaluation forms rather individual support etc.

There is a personal financial sacrifice to be made which does impact on your family life. Working to create a successful company means you learn to do without what you were used to, sacrificing holidays and other things which it used to be easy to waste money on. It also means you never switch off from work, being ill is something you have to work through and there is always something to do. There is a plus side though, it means you can work to drive forward what makes your heart sing, you keep your integrity and whilst some jobs are mundane – you set your own goals, you meet fabulous people, have the opportunity to act on your ideas and work on fantastic projects and there is never a day which you dread seeing your boss.

3. What is special about @67s approach to PR? I set up @sixtyseven as a social enterprise with strong social values and to provide an alternative to the more traditional PR and communications agencies – with the objective to work with people and organisations who are trying to change things

for the better. Whilst atsixtyseven does generate an income, our work is not all about money and I work to bring a more ethical, values-driven approach to business. Profits go back into the business and to support people and organisations who share our values which include supporting social and economic progress, equality and community cohesion. My approach to PR is that good communication can break down barriers. Whilst atsixtyseven provides usual PR services, we are also specialists in the field of multi-cultural PR – engaging with many organisations and issues which affect the diverse communities living in area. Alongside this we translate the written and spoken word into over 20 languages, are involved in community cohesion initiatives and work on community and cultural projects. In recent weeks we have run a PR campaign for a theatre company, provided translation for leaflets in Portuguese and Polish and established a culturally diverse community choir which brings people together to break down barriers through song. As a social enterprise, we work with people who share our ethos and aim to continue to develop creative and cultural projects. Any revenue we generate in the future will help us to create long term job opportunities.

4. In your opinion, what are the main challenges facing freelance PR today? This field is very competitive and unfortunately, a difficult one to establish yourself in. Even though I have many years of working for others – my portfolio had been built up in their name and not my own. In order to raise my own profile, I have, in recent years, done work for free – for causes I feel I believe in. However, it can be easy to be taken advantage of – so I am now wary of committing myself for free to projects where people have the resources to pay but don't want to. If you specialise in certain areas of pr then this is an advantage and you can build a name for yourself. However, it is a hard slog as there are so many ways for people to get messages out there themselves – twitter, blogs. Also during this recession, many companies have put their pr budgets to one side. PR also has developed a bad reputation associated with spin and manipulation and I hope that my work with atsixtyseven demonstrates that things can be done well.

5. Tell us about one of your clients you recently worked with. What was the company's brief, your approach and the result? Atsixtyseven was commissioned to develop the PR for New Gold – a new performance piece by critically-acclaimed dance theatre company Signdance Collective during its two week theatre run at the Warehouse Theatre in London, as part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, a cultural celebration inspired by the Olympics and Paralympics. NEW GOLD is a playful, witty and completely irreverent look at competition and winning as four unlikely characters explore their search for gold. The production challenges the notion that Olympic values are true and whether competition is necessary at all. On the surface it is a hilarious romp to the finishing line; if you look deeper the performance questions what has come to be regarded as valuable. The show has already toured in the UK (pr campaign managed by atsixtyseven) and from London will be performed at European City Of Culture in Maribor, Slovenia, a tour of the USA and performances at Paralympics Games sites. NEW GOLD's cast includes David Bower, who starred in the Hollywood blockbuster Four Weddings and a Funeral, Cuban dancer Isolte Avila, and actor Dexter Hamlett, American actor who starred in 1970's police series CHIPS. Our brief was to devise a press campaign and create awareness of New Gold, create and distribute press releases and produce a marketing pack to develop and generate interest in the work: and for the marketing pack to be utilised by Signdance Collective to create ongoing opportunities for future performances of New Gold.

Atsixtyseven worked closely with Signdance Collective to develop key messages of the work in its early stages, focusing on the main themes, including: The history of Gold and what gold means to us, and ultimately its value to the aspiring Para Olympic athlete The significance of Gold in

contemporary times Perceptions of winning and attitudes to winning the gold. Concepts of attainment The idea of being “number one” in ... ‘something’ ... Anything! and finding success in original ways. The athlete compared to the artist in terms of winning and losing and how losing can in certain situations, paradoxically sometimes becomes another way to win. @67 created a comprehensive media pack which included profiles of Artistes. Identified key media contacts to raise awareness of New Gold at a local, regional and national level and driving opportunities to perform at other venues @67 utilised social media to promote performances including Facebook, Twitter – promoting performances to a wide audience. For performances we circulated the press release and marketing pack to local, regional and national radio, television and newspapers. We followed up all emails with telephone calls to ensure the information had been received. Our press campaign generated much local, regional and national media coverage which led to five star reviews for the performance, there was also extensive on line coverage and substantial feedback.

6. How do you build and maintain strong relationships with journalists? I have developed contacts with local, regional and national press over many years of work and experience. I always provide good material which requires little re-working by journalists which ensures much of my work is published. However, people move on and it is important to keep up to date with changes. Local newspapers tend to have a high turn over of staff – once a relationship has been built up with a journalist – they’ve gone. So it’s important to read the papers you want to see your material published in! If you email a press release – don’t assume the job is done. It may have gone into a spam box or got lost in a large inbox – so follow up with a phone call. By providing good accurate copy, targeting the right journalist who is interested in your subject matter – you stand a much better chance of getting your story picked up.

7. What is the best piece of business advice you’ve ever been given? Tough question as I have been given so many pieces of advice by business advisors followed them and realised that I’ve been sent down the wrong path. I think one piece of advice given to me many years ago was that “it’s better to regret the things you’ve done rather than regret those things you never did”. So whatever the future holds – I had a go!

8. And what would be the best piece of advice you would give to anybody that would want to go freelance PR or start up their own social enterprise company? It is not for me to advise anyone – I can pass on my experience but anyone who insists that there is only one way to do something is probably someone I’d ignore. You are the best person to advise yourself. This is what I try to do but know there is always room for improvement – Treat people well. Trust myself. Be open and be willing to learn. Never thinking my job has more value or significance than someone else’s – I’m lucky at the moment but never take it for granted – we are ore than a job title. Take time to think and plan. Take a walk every day and have time to switch off even for a short while – it’s amazing what great ideas I have when I’m away from sitting at a computer screen. Laugh. Talking to people and being engaged and aware of what’s going on around me. Being curious and never forgetting the importance of my family and friends – they’re my biggest support for when things are good or bad – why I am who I am and why I do what I do.

Here is the link to a one minute video clip of Wendy answering the question – ‘In what ways did you generate an income to help you first start out in freelance PR?’:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZWTq8Yz5cg&feature=plcp>