



Funding helps expand maternity clothes business



Lisa Balakas, left and Kate Beaconsfield surrounded by their maternity clothes. Starting on a shoestring budget, *Ripe Maternity Wear* now has an annual turnover of almost \$10 million.

Lisa Balakas struggled during her pregnancies to find clothes that she enjoyed wearing and didn't cost a fortune.

She teamed up with friend Kate Beaconsfield and they took a punt in 1996 to start *Ripe Maternity Wear*.

Both had professional backgrounds. Lisa had finished her studies as an interior designer and Kate was running a physiotherapy business.

They set out on a shoestring budget with little capital. They had even less fashion industry experience, but since then there has been no looking back.

In 2005, *Ripe* won the Telstra and Australian Government Small Business Award for a company with five to 20 staff.

Ripe now employs 25 staff from its Melbourne office and warehouse and has 600 wholesale accounts worldwide, generating an annual turnover of almost \$10 million.

Ripe has recently opened a second Melbourne store.

"Results have been beyond expectation," Kate said. They have two Perth stores under licensing agreements.

Pivotal moment

Product is stocked throughout Australia in boutiques and selected department stores.

Signing a contract with Myer to supply the national chain with maternity wear was a pivotal moment.

Ripe Maternity Wear received a \$390,000 Textile, Clothing and Footwear Strategic Investment Program grant from AusIndustry.

“The AusIndustry funding was instrumental in the development of our new designs.”

Until then, the business was operating lean out of Kate’s physiotherapy office.

They had been designing and producing inexpensive yet stylish maternity wear and juggling home life.

Ripe exports to 15 countries, which accounts for 45 per cent of their business. North America and Canada dominate exports, with accounts there worth 35 per cent of *Ripe*’s turnover.

They also have 40 accounts in Great Britain.

Financial assistance in the form of almost \$390,000 in *Textile, Clothing and Footwear Strategic Investment Program (TCF SIP)* grants from the Australian government was vital to *Ripe*’s growth.

Purpose-built headquarters

These funds were invested in plant and equipment and to develop innovative maternity wear products.

Ripe used the money to help move their business to purpose-built headquarters and install equipment, such as commercial sewing machines.

“The funding enabled us to invest at a higher level than we could have otherwise,” Kate said.

“We needed state-of-the-art equipment to be more efficient and improve our capacity to develop innovative products.”

The innovative products assisted by the *TCF SIP* grant included:

- a waistband that places less pressure on the unborn baby
- built-in bust support for tops and dresses
- button hole waist adjustment built in to garments so they can be worn during and after pregnancy, and
- a waistband that provides more support for a pregnant woman’s stomach and for women who have had caesareans.



Fashionable, affordable and proudly Australian-made clothes.

The funding allowed *Ripe* to spend more time trialling and developing ideas.

“We felt that it was important to design clothes that supported a pregnant woman’s changing body as well as the unborn baby, while being fashionable and affordable,” Kate said.

“The AusIndustry funding was instrumental in the development of our new designs.”

Another factor behind *Ripe*’s success has been using locally-based suppliers rather than going offshore to cut costs.

“We find we don’t have the quality problems often inherent in overseas manufacture and we can be more responsive to the market’s needs,” Kate said.

“If a style or fabric sells really well, we can order more and have it in our stores quickly.

“That’s a great deal harder to achieve if your suppliers are in another country.”

Contact

Kate Beaconsfield, Managing Director
Ripe Maternity Wear
03 9499 3111
kate@ripe.com.au
www.ripe.com.au

TCF (Post-2005) SIP

The objective of the *Textile, Clothing and Footwear (Post-2005) Strategic Investment Program Scheme* is to foster the development of a sustainable and internationally-competitive manufacturing and design industry in Australia.

Type 1 grants fund up to 40 per cent of eligible expenditure on new plant and equipment, trade showings and in-store promotions.

Type 2 grants fund up to 80 per cent of eligible expenditure for research and development, including innovative product development.

The *TCF (Post-2005) SIP Scheme* provides funding of up to \$575 million over 10 years.

AusIndustry is the business program delivery division of the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research.

It delivers more than 35 programs – including innovation grants, tax and duty concessions, small business skills development, industry support and venture capital – worth about \$2 billion to more than 10,000 businesses and 60,000 individuals every year.

Visit www.ausindustry.gov.au, call 13 28 46 or email hotline@ausindustry.gov.au for more information.