

Kids Emporium launches in the UK

Undeterred by Brexit, South African entrepreneur Lauren de Swardt launched her franchise, Kids Emporium in Guildford, England. While the store only officially opened in July 2016, it is already creating a stir in the UK.

Having learnt much along the way in getting to this point, de Swardt shares her insight into what makes a brand stand out in a foreign country.

There was much that went on behind the scenes in the months leading up to the launch, which led to the positive outcome. de Swardt, who pinpoints London as one of her favourite cities in the world, lived in the UK for two years and remains a regular visitor. In 2015, she spent time over a two-week period paying careful attention to the behaviour of the local market to get a feel for High Street shopping.

“I saw obvious gaps in the market, where there was a definite need for a brand such as Kids Emporium. The UK is certainly not short on baby boutiques, but I noticed that many of them stocked the same brands and often relied purely on those brands to make their businesses work. The difference with my business concept is that Kids Emporium provides shoppers with a good variety of brands from one access point, and is backed by excellent service.”



Partnership opportunity

Shortly after her visit to the UK, a Kids Emporium supplier and owner of Ruby Rabbit, Storm Copestake, contacted her about the idea of launching Kids Emporium in the UK. Originally from Zimbabwe, Copestake had likewise spent much time in the UK. She had always wanted to own her own store and, as a fan of the Kids Emporium brand, she jumped at the opportunity to initiate discussions with de Swardt when she, similarly, identified the gap.

“Storm and I spent hours talking through logistics and operations, I shared my research with her, we pinpointed our synergy and finally we agreed that it made perfect sense to run with the concept. Subsequent to our agreement, I went on two trips to the UK and I had weekly virtual meetings with Storm. A year later, here we are: Storm is the master franchisee of the UK store and I can say that this store – as much as I adore each of our South African franchises – has taken first prize in my eyes as my ‘dream store’.”

She believes that this is primarily because she and her team have learnt valuable lessons over the 13 years during which Kids Emporium has been operational and have been able to apply their knowledge to the launch of the UK store, ensuring standards match or top international standards. It is her ultimate goal to represent South Africa well and to display the country’s local design talent to the global market.

Understanding local conditions

However, the journey did not come without a hiccup or two. de Swardt realised rather soon after the development of the store had been initiated that landlords operate somewhat differently in the UK, which caused a slight delay in the process but she chose to accept this challenge as a case of “now we know for next time”. Other than this, she proudly reports that – although it was the business’ first export attempt – there were no glitches in this sense, and all the goods arrived in perfect condition and on time. This she attributes to thorough research.

“If I could give any form advice to budding entrepreneurs who wish to expand their businesses across borders, it would be: research, research, research! It is so important to understand your market. To give you an example, the customers that we target locally generally have one to two children, whereas in the UK it is completely the norm for parents to have three or four children, often very close together in age.”

One of the most prominent aspects of the Kids Emporium store offering that stands out in the UK is that it follows an owner-driven approach. While England is considered to be a pioneering, first-world country, de Swardt maintains that the ‘old world charm’ associated with the brand goes a long way in creating happy customers. Kids Emporium is known locally – and now, abroad – for its focus on customer engagement and its commitment to making its customers feel that they have been met with genuine service and an interest in relationship building.

“We assist expecting parents along their entire journey, from finding the comfiest and most stylish maternity wear to decorating their baby’s nursery and finding a lifestyle-compatible travel system, to name a few examples.”

She describes expecting parents these days as “forward-thinking, tech savvy and hungry for information” and says that the questions that franchisees are asked by parents are endless. This, however, is exactly what Kids Emporium is about: providing answers, showing customers various options in terms of the items they are looking for and assisting them to make the most informed decision that best suits their lifestyle.

“Parenting is tough, and at Kids Emporium, we tell it like it is. More often than not, our customers appreciate our honesty and – in light of the fact that most of our franchisees are also parents – they are warmed by franchisees’ willingness to share their own experiences.”

de Swardt already has plans to open stores in a number of African countries and she says that there has been much interest from Australia and the US, but that the focus will remain on the UK and Africa for now.

For more information, go to www.kidsemporium.co.za or www.kidsemporium-guildford.com.

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