



the secret of success

In the first of our series on inspiring entrepreneurs, Richard Hopton meets the vivacious Suzanne Aaronson, founder of the exclusive lifestyle website, Suzanne's Files

There is no secret so closely guarded that it cannot be shared. Suzanne Aaronson founded the eponymous Suzanne's Files, an internet-based business providing 'a lifestyle resource for like-minded individuals worldwide', to unlock the delights of la dolce vita for her clients.

Suzanne, a dark, vivacious American who has lived on three continents has long been fascinated by travel and the opportunities it affords for discovery. She started as a teenager keeping files of cuttings on countries, cities, hotels, restaurants, indeed (almost) anything that could heighten the experience of travel. Graduating from the American University in Paris, she subsequently gained a strong grounding in the nuts and bolts of the media business while working at the American broadcaster CBS. At first Suzanne used her accumulated knowledge to help friends plan their holidays; by the time she was 27 she was making her knowledge available, for a fee, to a select band of private clients. The hobby had become a business, albeit a sideline; Suzanne's Files was born.

In 2004 Suzanne decided that the time had come to convert her passion and its bulging files into a business proper. After two years' hard work developing and refining the business model, Suzanne's Files went live in the summer of 2006. Initially, she funded the business from her

Suzanne's clients are well-heeled professional types with ample disposable income and rather less disposable time

own resources but has now acquired the backing of three 'angels'.

Suzanne's Files aims to provide its readers with the information that allows them 'to live in a place like a native' when visiting. Suzanne's clients are predominantly busy, successful and well-heeled professional types with ample disposable income and rather less disposable time. Somewhat coyly, she will only reveal that she numbers among her clients the heads of some of the world's largest banks, some heavy-hitting hedge-funders as well as the odd media mogul and a sprinkling of CEOs of fashion houses. Her client list also includes exactly five celebrities, a definition that betrays an intriguingly precise definition of that modern form of sainthood. Suzanne's Files aims at 'maximizing your time and minimizing your disappointment.'

Suzanne's Files covers a vast range: it offers advice on everything from golfing weekends to beauty treatments, via buying art and choosing the most rarefied music festival or the most mouth-watering chocolates. It also covers the more conventional aspects of travel: tours, hotels, and restaurants. The moving spirit of Suzanne's Files is, according to its founder, defined by the words 'niche' and 'bespoke'. The website is easy to use, slick, visually attractive and smoothly navigable. The content is put together by Suzanne and her team of eight staff working in a mews house in South Kensington. It is written with a snappy immediacy which might irritate stylistic purists but, as Suzanne puts it, 'we are not trying to win journalism prizes'. Suzanne is fiercely protective of the Files' independence; there is no paid-for content and no advertorial. The material is provided by 'an international network of discerners', a group of about 50 people whose experience and judgement Suzanne particularly respects. This resource underpins the whole ethos of the Files, namely to cater for people who are 'looking for advice from someone who lives their lifestyle'. A senior banker does not wish to take advice on where to stay and eat in a strange city from the sort of callow youth employed by many of the concierge companies.

In July this year Suzanne launched a Premium Membership scheme, in addition to the free-to-web service (which is supported by advertising). Premium Members pay a mere \$250 a year – a sum that one could spend in an evening in any restaurant in London without batting an eyelid – to receive by email a weekly update of her recommendations. The weekly updates are geared to the seasons, so offer a constantly changing range of recommendations. Premium members will also receive exclusive access every week to a number of plums, considered too tasty for the free-to-web readership. The weekly delivery is a format ideally suited to the fast-changing industry that it covers: we have all discovered to our cost the hotel or restaurant recommended in that guide book or newspaper article that was no longer up to scratch.

Suzanne exudes an enthusiasm and ambition for her business which, when combined with her innate charm and approachability, appear to be yielding results. The business became revenue positive in January, after six months trading, not something of which many dotcoms can boast. The free-to-web readership has increased from 900 to 50,000 in just over 12 months and is now growing at 11 per cent a month. If the newly launched Premium membership experiences this degree of growth, the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow cannot be far away.

From next month, Suzanne Aaronson will be unveiling her secrets in a monthly column exclusively for *Country House*.