

Social conscience

Creative entrepreneur Tania de Jong runs charity choirs, leadership workshops and much more.

Entreprising women



Anne Fulwood

As a young girl Tania de Jong always had a lot of balls in the air – whether putting on magic shows for her parents, scaling new heights as an aspiring singer or running her own tennis coaching clinics.

Her working life has become a juggle of a different magnitude. As a self-titled serial entrepreneur, De Jong has founded and operates six entities under one umbrella, Creative Universe, which is a combination of her talents and passions.

If Creative Universe is the hub, De Jong is the centrepiece.

As with any creative venture, she generates income from some but not all of the business channels – including public speaking appearances, corporate events, talent management and social enterprises.

“I am a rainmaker and, like every entrepreneur, I want to make a difference,” she says. Revenues are never guaranteed and range, says De Jong, from about \$100,000 “in quieter years” up to about \$500,000. “I am not driven by money. What I do is risky, but it is worth it.”

The biggest recent driver of income is a three-day Creative Innovation Global conference, produced annually by De Jong in Melbourne since she launched it in 2010. The budget for last year’s event was more than \$1 million – about 50 per cent from sponsorships and the remainder from ticket sales – with “any profit ploughed back into the next project”. The next conference is planned for March 2015.

De Jong says the conference will account for about 60 per cent of overall revenue for this financial year.

Another 10 per cent of revenue is via her management company, Music Theatre Australia, a booking agency that represents a range of performers and speakers and provides national and international event production.

The other 30 per cent is from a mix of singing performances with her singing group, Pot Pourri: a series of leadership workshops called Inspiring Minds which recently delivered team-building programs for a national retailer for about \$10,000; and her personal public speaking appearances including, for example, a series of talks around Australia for a national professional association worth about \$18,000.

Pot Pourri has been the key to building De Jong’s confidence and appetite for public appearances. Founded 27 years ago, the group has done a mix of festivals, concert hall shows, Opera under the Stars and corporate events. The group costs from \$3000 to \$15,000 depending on the number of performers in the group – often up to seven – whether it is customised for the client and

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Tania de Jong

whether travel away from their Melbourne home base is required. Her Pot Pourri co-founder, Jonathan Morton, is now COO of Creative Universe.

A recent “customised” performance was for a recent World Congress of Endometriosis in Melbourne, where De Jong and the group, in front of about 600 obstetricians and gynaecologists from around the world, sang “Supercalifragilistic-extonetrisios”!

The band has released seven CDs over the years and at \$25 they do not make much money but are a useful entree card and marketing tool, says De Jong, who is about to release her own CD in August.

She admits the vintage years for Pot Pourri were from the late 1990s through to the GFC in 2008 where they might have done about 120 performances per year, averaging \$4000 an event. “Companies are more



fiscally conservative now and even if they had the money they are choosing entertainment which is more low-key,” she says. “It has been harder since 2008.”

Inspired by the success of her singing, De Jong established The Song Room in 1999, a charity offering music programs to more than 300,000 disadvantaged school children around Australia. She stepped aside to make way for new management about 2007, by which time funding had grown to about \$2 million.

Keen for a new challenge, De Jong launched her second charity, Creativity Australia, with a key program called With One Voice to inspire people not only “to find their voice but their meaning and purpose in life”. The organisation now runs 15 “choirs of social inclusion” each week, 13 in Victoria, one each in Sydney and Brisbane, for people

Tania de Jong helps others find their voice. PHOTO: ERIN JONASSON

aged nine to 90 “from all faiths and backgrounds.” Usually the participants are a mix of migrants, jobseekers, and people with depression and disabilities and funding is generated through corporate and government contributions. The charity has its own management team, and De Jong chairs the board.

It is housed with De Jong’s other enterprises, in a building she leases in South Melbourne. “It is important to have a social element to all I do and give back to the community.”

The drive for entrepreneurship could come from her grandparents, among the flight of Polish refugees from war-torn Europe in the 1940s. Her grandmother reportedly invented the foldable umbrella, and her grandfather was a sculptor. The instinct to win has likely been passed on by her mother, tennis player Eva Duldig, who played the Australian Open and Wimbledon tennis championships during the 1950s and 1960s.

De Jong won a tennis scholarship to the US after completing high school in Melbourne and upon her return, studied law at University of Melbourne, graduating with honours. At the same time she launched a private tennis coaching business, earning about \$40 an hour and at the same time would teach singing and run soirees in private homes. She recalls the satisfaction of becoming self-employed as a singer, proving wrong a teacher who told her she would “never make it past the chorús”.

Singing remains a focus for future work, alongside speaking engagements where De Jong hopes to pursue more themes in leadership. She claims a rise in her speaking business in the past five years is due to business people feeling “trapped in their box and wanting to break out and unleash their creativity”. “We have to acknowledge that everyone is creative and it’s a talent not reserved only for artists,” she says. “We need to unlock creativity and foster innovation across the business community.”

In the end, the perfect denouement for de Jong, in her 40s, would be the statement on her headstone: “She helped me find my voice.”

As long as she can continue to keep all those balls in the air.

60

per cent of income for this financial year comes from the three-day Creative Innovation Global conference

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