



FOR THE LOVE OF BIJOU

With regal looks, Serbian heritage and a luxury brand management MBA to her name, 30-something Zoja Mihic, a jewellery designer from Jo'burg, is travelling across the globe building her very distinctive business

Armed with a degree from L'Essec Grande École de Commerce in Paris and having worked for a luxury company in that city, Mihic left for New York, where she's now building her brand.

How's your business structured? It's spread over four countries, dividing the operations, production, back-end and sales offices. Over such great distances, we're forced to be agile and creative in our approach.

Tell us about your arrangement with Anthropologie, which retails your brand in the USA. Anthropologie picked up the line last season. It made a selection from the seasonal range, which was then put into its higher-end stores, as well as online. The range has sold well and we're now developing exclusive pieces for the store. I really enjoy these collaborations because they allow me to think beyond my own realm and delve deeper into someone else's to create something beautiful for them.

What was your initial business plan? I simply wanted to create things I loved and hoped others would love them too and buy them. Things have changed a lot since then – the idea remains the same, but much more structure and planning are involved.

How does design drive your business? It's the backbone of everything. I believe my line's done well because of the careful and thoughtful processes behind the designs. I'm in a market where there's so much of everything that only a distinctive design aesthetic will set you apart and get you noticed.

What were your learning curves in starting a business?

There were many – but, essentially, the best lesson was not biting off more than I could chew. I was over-ambitious at times and it came at great personal cost and sacrifice.

What's your expansion plan? Having established accounts in countries spanning from Japan to the USA, I'm now planning to develop an online retail space. I believe it's really the way forward. Ultimately, though, having both on- and offline stores would be ideal. An in-store experience allows customers to experience the brand's universe and engage with the jewels. However, online offers global access to clients and enables a brand to express itself in unique ways.

What systems have you put in place to run your business? Apart from the arduous administration that's required, our systems are really about people. Good employees, workshop managers and stone dealers are hard to find, so when I do, I invest time and energy in them to keep them happy.

How do Paris, New York and Johannesburg differ in terms of business operations? Different

functions of our business happen in these respective cities, which – by default – means the operations are different too. Also, customer tastes differ between the cities, so I always take that into consideration when developing a new line.

What excites you most about owning your own business?

The freedom it gives me to create, express and travel.

"The best entrepreneurial lesson I ever learnt was not biting off more than I could chew."

• For further information, visit: www.zojajewels.com