

How Tania Austin built her retail empire

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Julie-anne Sprague

When Tania Austin walked away from Cotton On, a company she grew from just a handful of stores to a retail powerhouse alongside former husband Nigel Austin, she had three children under the age of four. She could be forgiven for taking time out to regroup.

Instead, she bought five women's fashion stores under the Decjuba (pronounced De-Cuba) banner, throwing herself into the business that 15 years later is one of the country's most successful retailers.

Boasting 140 stores across Australia and New Zealand, it's turning over more than \$170 million a year. Her success has made her a fixture on the Financial Review Rich List.

Austin, who's held a job ever since she was 12 years old when she'd lick stamps and send envelopes with concert tickets at Perth's former Entertainment Centre, tells *The Australian Financial Review's* Female Founders podcast that she was given a rare moment to figure out what she wanted to do with her life. And working was critical.

"I thought, 'what sort of role model do I want to be for my children?' And what are the role models I've had around me, and particularly female

ones? I'm going to be a single mum for the foreseeable future. What do I want that to look like?" she says on the podcast.

"And I think that, for me, working was really a big part of that puzzle. I wanted my children to know that I am many things, a mother being one of them, and that it's important that they could see that I had other aspects to me and that they know growing up that that's the life they can choose as well.

They can bring to the surface whatever they want to be as well."

Austin grew up in working-class Perth suburb Warwick. She studied psychology at the University of Western Australia, before moving to Melbourne to build Cotton On. In the early days, it

was all hands on deck – she was sweeping floors, buying and unpacking stock and driving it to stores.

These days, Austin is pushing the limits, challenging her 165-strong head office team (plus more than 2000 people employed across the store network) in the pursuit of growth.

Growth has come with a razor sharp focus on the company's bottom-line and operating with a small business mindset.

"We have never grown at a rate faster than we can finance," she says.

"There's been a huge discipline



Tania Austin maintains strict financial discipline as she manages Decjuba: "We have never grown at a rate faster than we can finance." PHOTO: EAMON GALLAGHER

about that. But what it has meant is that when we're doing those leasing deals, there is not an extra cent to give, there just isn't.

"In many ways, we have quite a small-business mindset in the way we operate. We don't look for the flashy

option. We've never spent on marketing along the way. I'm a big believer in that the brand, and the product need to stand on its own two feet. We've never spent money that we've never had."

That doesn't mean the 51-year-old isn't a risk-taker. During the depths of

the pandemic, when her fellow retailers were riddled with fear and pulling back, she doubled-down.

"Lots of retailers were closing down and I saw that as an opportunity to go and open stores and double the footprint of our stores. The team were really nervous about that. I had to push them on that and challenge them and explain the 'why' behind it.

There was just a huge opportunity through that time, while everyone was sort of thinking they needed to shut stores. It was going to go one of two ways. The world was imploding, or there was going to be a recovery at some point. And life was going to emerge in a different way, but it was going to happen."

A retail career spanning three decades has given Austin perspective. She tells the Female Founders podcast if she could go back 15 years to when she started she would tell herself, "do you".

"You're going to be judged anyway, whether you're divorced or single, have three children or no children, have a business or not have a business," she says. "Who I am, how I show up, what I do and what's important to me, is what I would tell myself to focus on because you're going to be judged whatever you do."

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