

Business Beyond Borders Episode #7 – Gemma Manning, Businesswoman, Author, Speaker and Strategic Marketing Expert

Presenter: Cynthia Dearin

Guest: Gemma Manning

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Cynthia Dearin: Hi everyone, it's Cynthia Dearin here. I am super excited to let you know that, throughout the month of March, to coincide with International Women's Day, we're launching the Girls Go Global campaign. And we're going to be awarding a full scholarship to the International Business Accelerator to one lucky female entrepreneur.

I created the IBA to help micro- to medium-sized businesses to speed up and de-risk the process of taking a company international, and along the way I've realized that there are not very many women on the international business scene, given the number of companies that are out there. And I don't think that's right. So I'm on a mission to change it. What we're going to be doing is awarding one female business owner a full scholarship to the program, to give her all the tools she needs to make her business an international success. We'll also follow her journey and let you know how she goes.

To celebrate the competition, and to help spread the word, I'll be interviewing a very successful female entrepreneur every week throughout the month of March on the Business Beyond Borders podcast. My guest will be sharing their insights about the highs and lows of taking a business international, and we'll be talking about the challenges that they've faced that their male counterparts didn't have to deal with. We'll also be talking about where they get their inspiration from, and their top tips for success.

My guest today is Gemma Manning, who is the managing director of strategic communications firm Manning & Co. Manning & Co has offices in Sydney and Singapore, and also runs an international personalized and highly-focused market accelerator, Gemstar, which is based in Singapore and has a growing

presence in other Asian markets as well. Gemma and I had a wide range of conversation which covered a whole range of things: pineapple tarts, Gemma's experience of working in Japan as an 18 year old gaijin, and how she started her own company with a one-year-old in tow. We also talked about the particular challenges of doing business internationally as a woman, and Gemma was kind enough to share some of her top tips for success with me.

Now Gemma is such an engaging and energetic storyteller, and a really, really determined person. She was fascinating to interview and I know that you're going to love this episode of the podcast.

- Cynthia Dearin: Gemma, it's great to have you on the podcast. Thanks so much for joining me from Singapore.
- Gemma Manning: Cynthia, thank you so much for having me, I'm delighted to be chatting with you today, it's a real pleasure.
- Cynthia Dearin: So I thought I might just start with a bit of context. As I said, we're chatting and you are in Singapore and I'm in Sydney, and the weekend that we've just had, people all around the world celebrated Lunar New Year. What does that look like in Singapore?
- Gemma Manning: Yeah, it's amazing actually, despite having been in and out of Singapore for the last five years doing business here it's the actual first time I've been here in Singapore throughout the Chinese New Year break, and I've experienced it from having lived in Sydney, and kind of have an understanding of it, but it's a different experience to actually be here through this period from a business side of things. I got to see what happens in business, so for example, to show that I'm very much immersed here in the local business ecosystem I celebrated Chinese New Year with my clients, I made sure I hand-delivered them goodies, there's a lot of different Chinese New Year treats that are a part of the custom and tradition here of celebrating Chinese New Year, so these kinds of things I never really understood or knew about in too much detail before living here. And my team are local Singaporeans who celebrate Chinese New Year, so I had a lot of insights from them as to, you know, "Gemma, buy these pineapple tarts, because pineapple represents this," and, "buy this," and "let's do this." So it was a very different experience for me living here and experiencing it.

The weekend was really quiet as well, so Chinese New Year's Eve was on the Thursday, and then Friday was Chinese New Year's Day, and then it was the weekend and it was dead here in Singapore. A lot of people go out of Singapore and travel to see their families, so it was a very interesting weekend just hanging here in Singapore. Even, it's very quiet today all around, because our office is just on the fringe of the CBD and a lot of offices are still closed today, so

we're kind of still into that New Year period. But it's really very, very interesting to be here, it's a great celebration.

Cynthia Dearin: So can I just skip back to what you said about pineapple tarts for a second. What do they actually mean? And why should you buy them?

Gemma Manning: They're a real delicacy, and they're very tasty, I actually bought some for home as well and my girls and I have been getting through them. They're very, very yummy. Pineapple, the word pineapple, in Chinese, is, I can't remember what it actually sounds like but it is to do with an auspicious kind of trait, so that's where they recognize pineapple, given it sounds close to this word in Chinese. You'll see, it's not just the pineapple tarts, there are big pineapples everywhere on display here in terms of decorations, and it's a real big thing, so even outside our office here there are these big pineapples hung outside to bring good luck, so it's very auspicious. Yeah, that was a new thing for me. I knew all those mandarins and oranges, that's also an auspicious kind of reference here, but the pineapple tarts are something very interesting. So I hand-delivered all these pineapple tarts to my clients.

Cynthia Dearin: That is totally, I had no idea about that so that is truly fascinating. Tell me, did you always want to be an international businesswoman?

Gemma Manning: Yeah, I didn't set out to be an international businesswoman, although when I reflect back on my journey, even to my childhood and things that I was very interested in, I guess it's no surprise that I've ended up here. If you were to speak to my family and close friends, it's not a surprise that I'm here doing business and I have developed or grown an international business now. I've always loved to travel, and I've always loved Asia. I've grown up around business, my own mum was in business, so I was exposed to business very, very early, from an eight-year-old type thing. So I guess if you look at business always being in my blood and my DNA, a love for travel and new experiences and learning new languages, and broadening my own horizons, it was probably only going to be a matter of time before in my business life that I wanted to experience that in my business life and bring it all together.

And I think where I'm at is, yeah, it's been a big journey but I'm obviously following my passions and doing what I love, and so being an international businesswoman. I do get to travel, I do get to experience these countries that I absolutely love, I love learning business culture in the countries I've travelled to, as well as the country itself, and food, and customs and traditions, and really embracing everything that I experience. I never thought I could do it given that I'm a mother with two children, I never thought I could do it on my own, but I am, and I'm delighted to have created a career path for myself that brings all of that together.

Cynthia Dearin: And I am really keen to come back and to dig into that, and to really hear your thoughts on how you go about creating an international business as a mother raising young kids. Before we get there, I want to focus on the past first. Now when I was doing some research for our interview, I noticed on your LinkedIn profile that you studied marketing and Japanese at the University of New South Wales. And I was wondering, what made you choose Japanese, and whether you think that that influenced the path that you chose later on?

Gemma Manning: Yeah, why Japanese? Maybe I'll start there. I mentioned earlier that I grew up around business and so as an eight-year-old we moved from Sydney to Cairns with my mum and my stepfather. And we moved to Cairns so we could start a fish farm, so that was the kind of first business that I was exposed to. Fish farm, well it was the '80s and growing fish, tropical fish and marine fish, it was a big booming business in Australia, so there was a reason we moved to Cairns for that business. So I grew up on this fish farm in Cairns during those years. And living in Cairns, it was during the '80s where, I'm showing my age here, but it was when there was an influx of Japanese tourists to Queensland, Japanese businesspeople were buying into Queensland and golf courses and all sorts of hotels, and it was the real boom, in Queensland at least.

So given that I lived in Cairns for those years, I studied Japanese at my school. And I was exposed then to, we had a sister school in Japan, exchange programs. I absolutely fell in love with the language, I loved learning the Japanese language as an eight-year-old, from eight to 12, to 13 roughly, in Cairns. When I moved back to Sydney with my family I really missed the language actually, and the language wasn't taught at my school, either my primary school or my high school that I went back into. So I decided to study it via Saturday school, so every Saturday I would go and learn the language. So that's a lot of commitment and dedication, because all my other friends were having the Saturdays off that I was spending a good half my day at Saturday school, studying the language and keeping it up.

I studied it for my HSC, and I felt like I had been so committed to the language and I loved it so much I set myself ... You'll probably get to know a little bit about me, I'm very goal-orientated and fairly determined about what I want to achieve, so I made up my mind to go to Japan. At the beginning of Year 12 I said to myself, "I'm going to go and live in Japan next year." And so that's kind of how I got to live in Japan, I did go and live in Japan for a year as an 18-year-old. So as all of my friends were getting ready to start university, I was one of the few who took a gap year. I remember at the time, I mean it's more common now, but back then I think I was kind of bucking the trend a little bit, I was doing something a bit different to everyone else. And it was hard, I was only 18, got on a plane after my final exams, flew over there on my own. So yeah, I lived there for the year, embraced everything that I could over there.

- Cynthia Dearin: What was it like? As a, you know, a white 18-year-old woman pitching up in Japan, alone?
- Gemma Manning: Yeah, it was a fairly interesting time, I guess. It was quite hard at first, I had a lot of homesickness. I went to work in a hotel that was south of Tokyo. So I lived on this little island, it was a tiny, tiny island off Atami, and the coast there. So it was about an hour south of Tokyo. I was fairly isolated, so I was the only gaijin, which means foreigner, on the island that I worked. And there were some tricky times, because there were a lot of businessmen from Toyota or Mitsubishi, or you know, the big Japanese companies, that would come to this island for their business conferences. And I definitely realized I was out on my own, that nobody was there to protect me, in that even my employer, I was the gaijin girl who would go and greet all the guests speaking Japanese, take them to customer service for check in. And there were some experiences that I just remember going, oh, I definitely feel challenged by some, in that, you know, it was definitely an awakening that oh my gosh, I'm an 18-year-old but I am in this foreign country. And yeah, there were those experiences that I had to come up against that I had to kind of teach myself some survival skills and be pretty resilient. It was an interesting time.
- Cynthia Dearin: So do you get to use your Japanese much now?
- Gemma Manning: Do you know, not as much as, oh actually. It's funny, in Singapore there's quite a big Japanese community, so I actually do find myself speaking Japanese a bit more here than I did in the lead-up to leaving Sydney and moving over here. But Japanese, because I studied so hard for the language, lived there, experienced all of that, when I moved back to Sydney I studied Japanese at uni, and that's where I guess this question started. I wanted to do a double degree with the communications aspect as well as Japanese. And then all my jobs were Japanese-speaking jobs up until starting my own business. So yeah, every job up until then I was speaking Japanese in those positions.
- Cynthia Dearin: And so how long was that period of time? You graduated from university, and then you went to the corporate sector before you started out on your own. How long was that period of time? Just tell me a bit about what that was like.
- Gemma Manning: Yeah, I think it was about four or five years before I started out on my own. I loved getting into the corporate scene. I was actually meant to do a five-year international comms degree with Japanese, but I just couldn't do the five years after already living in Japan for a year, so that's why I decided to do the New South Wales degree. I was quite keen to get out of uni to be honest, I've always worked as well, so I've always had part-time positions even from a 12, 14-year-old.

For me working's been in my DNA as well, so I was quite keen to get into the workforce and I was very lucky to have ... Well, I shouldn't say lucky, actually. My first corporate job was with a company called Covance, and I was going for the marketing assistant role, it was a Japanese-speaking marketing assistant role. And I was put through very rigorous tests in terms of my Japanese, writing, speaking tests. Did all of that and the person who was hiring me said to me, "Gemma, we're quite impressed with what you've achieved." I think I was 21, 22 at the time. So they actually created a new role for me which was not the assistant role. So they filled that role with somebody else, and they created a next level up role for me. I will never forget the person who hired me. I'm still linked in with him, and he really gave me an accelerated start, if you like, into my corporate career.

My corporate career was very accelerated, I was very young, but I think that my mentors and the people that hired me and I worked with could see potential, in that I would put my head down, I did always work incredibly hard, but I was never scared of a challenge and I was always up for a challenge, to be thrown anything and to take it and just run with it. And I think because of that, when I really stop and think about it, and look back, I was very young in big positions.

So I had been headhunted and I was appointed at the age of 25 to be the head of marketing for a startup in the financial management consulting space called Parson. And then I was also, at the same time they said, "We want you to manage both brands," so it was Parson and its sister company Proudfoot Consulting. And I remember being 25 and having a corner office, which sounds crazy. I know, it sounds absolutely crazy when I stop and think about it. I've always been in very male-dominated industries, so I guess moving from Covance into management consulting, it's a pretty tough industry. It's a pretty hardcore industry. Very, as I said, male-dominated, in that particular company I was at most people I would say were in their 50s or so, they say gray hair's a great thing because in the consulting game it does demonstrate industry experience and expertise to the clients that we're working with. I was this young female coming in and, not disrupting, but just a bit of different energy, I guess, into a very staid kind of male-dominated industry. And that was my last position, within Proudfoot Consulting, before I started my own business.

Cynthia Dearin: And that was in 2008, right?

Gemma Manning: Yeah, it was 2008. There is a story behind why I started my own business, which, I don't know if that's what you were going to ask me next.

Cynthia Dearin: Yeah, well look, you're on the record as saying that it was a decision that was motivated by your family, so I'd love to hear how much that played into it, and what else was driving you when you decided to strike out on your own?

Gemma Manning: Well, it's a bit of a bittersweet story, in that it was one of an early experiences or exposures to a bit of adversity and discrimination. So when I became a mother, again I've done things fairly early in life in that I was at a point in my corporate career, young but very much on an upward trajectory. When I fell pregnant with Charlotte, who you will hear about as we go forward, it was like I was an alien all of a sudden overnight in the company that I was working with. It was like I had just grown another head, and it was as if my career was going to be ruined. The reaction I got from so many people was like, "Oh, Gemma, you're onto this great career, and now you're having a baby!"

So I was 27 when I had Charlotte, and I did have a very supportive boss at the time, however unfortunately in the early stages of my maternity leave he had left the organization. So the person that came in after him, not very supportive at all of mothers, working mothers, and it was a real shock to me because I had won awards in this role, I had shown that I was very capable in my role. Even when I had Charlotte I was still doing work from home within six weeks of that. I did some of our most successful work when I had Charlotte as a newborn baby, so I was still kind of keeping on top of everything.

So they kind of made it very difficult for me to stay, and I was never going to sacrifice being a new mother to working in a corporate environment from 8 to 8 type thing. I was very clear that I wanted to manage my career, you know, I still have a brain, I still know my job, I could still do it, do it faster probably, be more efficient, but I wasn't going to put my baby in childcare for those hours. So I needed a balance, and that's kind of what was promised to me, but when it came to, "Okay well, you've got to do these hours, or you're not here at all," I decided I'm not going to be there.

So again an opportunity came up, actually it was my former boss who had left, and heard what had happened, and said, "Gemma, come and consult for my business." And that was my first springboard client with Manning & Co. So Charlotte was probably about 12 months old by the time I got started with consulting. People often ask me about the business name, Manning & Co, and to be honest I never dreamed that I would be here, running an international business, when I named the company Manning & Co. At the time I just needed, you know, the opportunity came up, I had to establish an ABN, get my business name registered, so I did all that quite quickly, and I started with my first office with an assistant with that particular client.

So it was a good gig to get. I was having to travel to Brisbane though, so this particular client was in Brisbane so again, I was still having to leave my baby, Charlotte, for a couple of days and do the commute. So it still wasn't like it was a walk in the park, it was still sacrificing to be able to juggle, but at the same time I've never looked back. I've often wanted to throw in the towel with my

own business because it's been a ten year journey with a lot of ... As I said, it's not a walk in the park. Anybody that thinks going into your own business is going to be easy absolutely has got rose-colored glasses on. But at the same time I've never looked back, and at the end of the day I love what I'm achieving, what I'm doing.

Cynthia Dearin: Tell me a little bit about what the early days of Manning & Co were like. So you've explained to us how that happened with your springboard client, and traveling between Sydney and Brisbane. What did a typical day look like for you at that time, and how did you find that experience, which a lot of people listening might have had, or might have in the future if they start their own thing of actually stepping out of the corporate world where everything is done for you, all of the supporting functions are done, and into the startup world where suddenly you're doing everything?

Gemma Manning: Yeah. It was a shock to the system initially, definitely, for the fact that I had to do everything, I had to become an accountant overnight almost, or at least understanding bookkeeping, and I had an assistant that started with me, so immediately I had an employee. I went into this going, I needed more flexibility to be the present mother that I wanted to be and still strive to be, but yeah, have this career, but I think I've never worked as hard before in my life because I'm juggling a baby, but also trying to start a business and service a client. So the time that I had off with Charlotte to be present with her, I had to make up.

So I found myself working weekends, working very long nights, into the evenings. So there was no switch-off from the very beginning, whereas in corporate land, even in a high-powered position, yes it occupies your mind when you go home but I find that there was a switch-off button. I could have my four weeks annual leave, go on holiday and know that at least I've got this week of no disruptions. When especially in those early days, yeah, I couldn't leave. I mean I could leave the business to a point, but it was still, the work had to be done. Again if I was off with Charlotte for a day, or if she was sick or something happened, I had to make up those hours, so I would work until, I still do work kind of crazy hours. Sometimes you work until midnight, 1:00am. Whenever you can fit the working hours in, knowing that when you do have your time off with your children that that's time at some point that needs to be made up.

I remember when I fell pregnant with my second daughter, Amelie, I had just decided that where my office was, my office was in a photography studio in Balmain, and it was fine for the time that Manning & Co had its first year or thereabouts, but my clientele were fairly professional businesses and corporates as well. So I determined that that environment wasn't suitable anymore, so I had to go and get my own office space. Taking on my first lease was quite a risk, quite a responsibility, and I just found out that I was having my

second baby. I remember signing the lease for my office in Balmain, which the Sydney office is still in that office today, so it's still got a lot of importance, I guess, the Manning & Co Sydney office. A lot of memories there. But I remember signing that with the news that I was expecting Amelie, and Amelie's just turned eight, so that's kind of how long ago that was.

But having then my second in amongst the chaos, because at that point Manning & Co was growing, word was getting out there. I had a very good network from my corporate days, so people were like, "Gemma's out on her own now." A lot of my work was, and still is, a lot of word of mouth and referrals, and through the network that I've built and nurture and care for. So the work was just coming our way, and I was growing the business, and having Amelie, my second, and that was a different experience again, having her. But having the business at the point it was, because there were even more demands on me when she came on the scene. So I actually was emailing a client, I kid you not, when I was going into labor with Amelie. And there's photos and things of me having her under the desk, and then Charlotte there. The girls have always, they are a part of my business life. That's just how it is.

Cynthia Dearin: So you got the company up and running whilst having two small children. When did the move into the international space happen, and can you walk me through how that came about?

Gemma Manning: So it came about in 2012, and it's interesting because when I started Manning & Co I did miss travel, you know, I've spoken to you about my love of travel, and I should have said, all my corporate jobs always had a travel component because I was part of global marketing teams, so even in those jobs I was traveling in the region, Asia Pacific, but also Europe and the US. So I was really missing the travel. But I knew that the girls had to get to a certain age before I could even dream of travel like that again. It just happened that one of my very good clients, my early clients, they were expanding themselves internationally and wherever they went internationally they took Manning & Co with them. And so in 2012 I actually went to South Africa to launch an initiative with one of my clients, and to the UK, and that particular client were also going into Asia.

So in 2012 I did my first trip, well my second trip actually. The first time I went to Singapore was in an earlier corporate role. There had been about ten years since I had been to Singapore. So I came to Singapore with my client, and then we launched them into this market. So my team in Sydney, we did the launch for them up here, we ran a big thought leadership event for them, which was very successful, but I was here every three months in the lead up to this big event that we were doing for them. That was when I really started to understand a little bit more about what was happening here in Singapore and then ASEAN. I'm quite a strategic thinker and so I kind of put a couple of things

together, I could join the dots with some things, and that's how I started

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Gemstar, my second business. So the Manning & Co business, we were here doing business in 2012, and then Gemstar, the idea for Gemstar came out of a couple of things that I saw at that time, and so I established the second venture, Gemstar, in 2012, although it wasn't incorporated until a little bit later. And we weren't officially set up in Singapore until 2015.

Cynthia Dearin: And what does Gemstar do? Tell us a bit about that.

Gemma Manning: So, I might talk about what I was seeing in a little more detail, and then you can kind of see where Gemstar comes to be. So I was trying to solve a problem I guess, with Gemstar, and that problem is that I had a lot of tech companies coming to Manning & Co. One of our strong verticals is IT and technology. So a lot of tech startups were coming to Manning & Co for our go to market strategy advice as well as to tap into our corporate networks as a way to accelerate their own business growth, but they were struggling with funding at the time. So again this was quite a few years ago, but the funding scene in Australia was pretty dire, very hard for early stage startups to get anything and I think it's still kind of that, very similar now. However, and it wasn't such a scene back then, obviously the startup and innovation and tech scene now has really matured a little bit more in Australia, but back then it was still very early days. But these companies were struggling with attracting funding and getting funding, and I saw a lot saying, "Gemma, we're off to Silicon Valley." So I saw a brain drain happening from Australia, all these companies going to Silicon Valley.

Spending a lot of time here in Singapore, I saw that Singapore's got a very strong innovation and entrepreneurial culture here, and an agenda that they were really promoting as a smart nation vision. A lot of funding up here, there is more funding available for startups if you know where to tap into. So my view was that, well if I don't want to see Australian talent and good companies going offshore, but if we can tap into our regional next door neighbours and look at the untapped market potential and look at growth opportunities, I felt that we could grow home-grown Australian businesses still in Australia but tapping into the regional opportunities that exist, and know that in Australia we're in a strategic position to really take advantage of this region that now I proudly call home. But it is amazing here, and not enough businesses are tapping into it. And we can maybe talk about that later.

But Gemstar basically, I wanted a different kind of feel to Manning & Co, so Gemstar had a strong call to mission which is to send a message to Australian businesses to prioritize South East Asia in their growth plans, and Gemstar will be the market access partner, and the partner to help really launch Australian businesses into the region. We have a very strong entrepreneurial and innovation offering with the series of programs under Gemstar, but we do, the

two businesses Manning & Co and Gemstar are interrelated in a way, in that we have built off now the ten year business of Manning & Co and all the

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methodologies that we've created within the Manning & Co business to produce a marketing ledge approach to commercialization for Australian startups and innovators under the Gemstar banner. So we do work quite closely, the two organizations.

Cynthia Dearin: Okay. So, Manning & Co, then Gemstar, and then last year you kind of took things to the next level and you moved the family to Singapore. Why did you decide to do that, and what was it like? Because when we were talking off air a few weeks ago, we talked about some of the crazy stuff that had happened around things like banking and also schooling.

Gemma Manning: Yeah. It's been a very hard decision, and a couple of reasons why, but I guess I got to the point where I had to move for the business. For the Gemstar offering, I'm sitting in our Innovation Center of Excellence, so I did take a bit of a risk here rather than just setting up a Manning & Co or Gemstar office, like a desk in a shared space or a serviced office. I've actually got a fairly sizeable space here in our own right that's our own landing pad for our Australian clients coming in. Taking the risk of opening up a center like this, I felt that as the driving force for the business and the founder and CEO I had to show my commitment to the region and to the business here by physically being here. There is a thing especially in Singapore, there's only so long you can fly in and fly out, and I guess I'd been flying in and flying out for four or five years. My Australian business is far more established, so I felt that it was time for me to give my love and attention, and more of my time to the Singapore venture, and to our opportunities up here in South East Asia.

It was hard because it took me about a year actually to make the move, so my move was delayed for a year, and that's because of me being a mother with two young children. Well, they're not so young anymore. However, schooling is quite an issue, so up here, you've got international schools mainly, you can't really get into the local school system as an expat unless you're a PR, which is a permanent resident, which is quite hard now to get that visa status. So because I'm doing this on my own, I don't have the big, if I was an expat, or if I was a trailing spouse, or if I was here with my husband, or here from being employed by a corporate, international school fees are usually covered in your salary package. I didn't have that luxury to be honest, although I've been in business for ten years.

I think to be honest, a lot of people think, oh, she's a businesswoman, running her own business, she must be doing well. Hello, no, it's one of those myths that need to be address, because everything I make I do put back into my business. I'm still at that phase of international growth with doing that on my own

without investors and partners, it's all been organic. So I put a lot of what I make, I put everything back into the business. So I didn't have the money, to be

honest, to send my children to the top international schools here which cost an absolute bomb, it's crazy. It makes it quite hard to access.

So education for me, I was really in a pickle, it's like, I need to be in Singapore for my business, but I have two children to put through school, and I can't do the international schools. So I decided to do distance education for my girls for the first nine months of last year, which I can't tell you how many meltdowns I've had last year. So moving one country, trying to settle on so many different fronts, and then trying to manage their education for all of last year through distance, it did take its toll on me. I was tearing my hair out, the pressure. Worrying about, oh my gosh, are my children going to get behind because we don't have this project in on time, or there's this, so my long working days became even longer where at night times I would have to check all, and it wasn't even just one child, it's two, two lots of different projects and assignments. It was mental. It was absolutely crazy.

This year, I have found an alternative solution, so they are in what's called a no frills international school here, which an entrepreneur, funnily enough, started to address this problem in Singapore. So this is a South African entrepreneur who runs his own business here. So I think that there are people here in a similar kind of situation, but I've not come across one female who's done it and had to bring children. I'm yet to find my soul sister up here. Hopefully I will.

Cynthia Dearin: That is absolutely huge stuff.

Gemma Manning: It is.

Cynthia Dearin: Like, I run my company, I have a small child, but I'm not sure how I would go if I had to move, for example, to Dubai or New York and take my son with me, and do it by myself, and keep the business running. So I think that is incredibly impressive.

Gemma Manning: Thank you. Thank you. It has been a bit of a whirlwind, to be honest, the last year, it's coming up to a year that I've lived here. My girls' dad still lives in Sydney, he's in Australia, so that was the other complication, so we've had to work around making sure everybody's connected and all of that. And there's also a lot of travel, what's come with me moving here, is making sure that my Australian business, I think some people do take their eye off the ball with growth into international markets, and I've been very mindful that I love my Australian business, I love my Australian clients, I'm more in love with my Australian business probably than ever. And I need sometimes, you know, distance makes the heart grow fonder.

I'm very proud of the Australian business and the team, because they've really stepped up and they're absolutely on board with me and the vision, and they

have been remarkable. And I have shown my clients the commitment by traveling back very regularly, to make sure I have face time with my clients, to make sure I've got face time with my staff. Face time with family too. I think last year, I over-travelled almost the other way back from here despite making this my base, just so that I was kind of mitigating any risk, anything that might fall out from me moving here. So I'm happy to say that now that's all paid off and that the clients, they know that I've got a great team, that I'm still here, I'm on the phone with them, it's not like I've deserted them. I do go and see them for strategy meetings and for anything that's important to them. I'm absolutely committed.

Cynthia Dearin: I wanted to switch gears a little bit now and talk about your experience of, I guess, traveling this path and experiencing this fairly incredible journey into the land of international business that you had, from the perspective of somebody who's done it as a woman, because as you know we are airing this interview as part of our Girls Going Global campaign that we are running throughout the month of March. And so I'd love to hear from you, whether you think that being a woman has had an impact on your international expansion, and whether you think it's been harder for you to actually grow your two companies and take Gemstar into Singapore than it would have been had you been a man.

Gemma Manning: Yeah, it's an area that I'm very passionate about, that I do speak about quite a lot, and write about it a lot. I definitely think it's been harder, and there are many things that have happened along the way, examples I could give you and share with you, but I definitely think it might not have taken me ten years if I was a man. I think where I see, there's a couple of great men I'm connected to up here who have been in business the same amount of time, ten years, and I've seen, I mean I'm very proud of what I've achieved and where I'm at, but I know what they've achieved during that time coming into an international setting, and I hope that I can continue on the journey now, and really keep escalating and accelerating the growth.

But I do think, it's not been easy, I've had many times where I think people in the business world, especially businessmen, will underestimate maybe, me being a female. I'm fairly petite and I'm known as the Pocket Rocket in that I punch above my weight. But I do think there's this, oh, she's a cute little businesswoman, thrown at me quite a lot. We do a lot of events for Gemstar, we host companies coming into the region, and it's really interesting sometimes, well, quite regularly, how I'm mistaken to be the PR event manager at our events. And people will come up to me, and especially if I've got male colleagues with me, assume that my male colleagues must be the CEO and founder of Gemstar. So when I'm introduced as the founder and CEO, I can't tell you how

many people just almost fall off their chair, or kind of go, "Oh. We thought she was the event manager."

Cynthia Dearin: I can totally relate to that experience.

Gemma Manning: Yeah. It makes my blood boil. But I have even had, more recently unfortunately, I was thinking to myself, okay, maybe I think about it too much, about how the difficult journey that I have been on being a mother of two children, being a woman. But even very more recently, a couple of things happened to me which I probably can't disclose all the details because I shouldn't make it public just at the moment, but I will get my point across at some point in time when I can.

But I definitely, in a business negotiation, was totally underestimated, I think somebody was trying to steamroll me in this negotiation, probably thinking, "Oh, Gemma's, I don't know how, I mean she's there in Singapore, she must be doing something right, but hopefully she'll be so keen to get into this arrangement that she probably won't look into the detail, she probably won't do the due diligence." And I think when I stood my ground on what I felt were the fair terms of this, they obviously weren't expecting for me to stand my ground around this particular issue, and that's a clear example when I look at how I was treated during that. Somebody was trying to appease to me being the mother, and trying to connect with me and my children, and trying to do all that to get a business arrangement that would suit them more than me, yet me putting my foot down with what I had to stand up for.

I think it was another very recent example I've got, oh my gosh, like people are trying to push me around, or steamroll me, probably thinking, "Oh, she's so nice, Gemma. She's a lovely businesswoman. She's so friendly, nurturing." And I do, I have a very big heart, and this is one of the things I've struggled with. I am a very nurturing person, I am a very caring person. I have a big heart. I treat my clients like family. I treat my staff like family. And then you could go where, people do take advantage of that in business though. And I have to, it's this balancing of wanting to be myself and not be too cold and clinical, and not being myself in business because I think what I bring is a good leadership quality, and I know Jack Ma talks about the love quotient in his business success, and leading with the heart, and bringing that into business. But I've also been exposed to the dirty end of things, where that can be taken advantage of.

Cynthia Dearin: How do you balance that up? How do you balance your instinct to sort of care for people and be generous with them, against making sure you protect yourself when people are out to give you a raw deal?

Gemma Manning: Well, it's something I still am working through. I think I'm actually going to write a blog post myself in the coming weeks around collaboration, or is it deadly

competition? Because I feel, yeah, up here actually, what I've probably been exposed to since growing the business up here, I do feel like I'm in a different

era of the business. It's cutthroat. Many smiling tigers, I refer to a lot of people around. People who want to get close to you, want to learn everything you're doing, pick your brain, and then package up what you're doing and put it ... I've just had so many examples over the last year. That's why, I'm a fairly resilient, strong-willed, determined individual, but I've had to really, really dig deep, in amongst the craziness of trying to get my girls settled, and trying to do the school, and sort out, and make sure they're happy, trying to deal with another level of business up here and the dirty tactics that go on. I mean, I've been amazed, after ten years of being in business, seeing some of the stuff I've seen in the last year, with people like trusted partners, or again these people who, I don't know. It's unfortunately soured things a little bit for me, and I feel like I have to watch my back quite a lot.

Cynthia Dearin: Yeah. That's kind of a segue into what I was going to ask you about next, we all make some stuff-ups when we run businesses, particularly when we take them international. You've done some amazing stuff. I'm sure you've probably made a couple of errors along the way as well, and I was wondering whether you could just share with our audience, you know, what's some of the key mistakes that you made as you expanded internationally that, looking back, you think, "Oh, I wish I had managed to not do that"?

Gemma Manning: It's hard, because I was going to say, I think my example of going into partnerships, you've got to get that right. So I've managed to dodge some bullets along the way, I think. I've dodged them, but at the same time they have opened up my eyes to how careful you have to be when you decide who to work with in an international market. And again, you've got a lot of people, so me coming into this part of the world, I had a lot of people going, "We just want what she has." So we want to take her business, because we know she's doing the legwork in Australia and she's bringing these companies into the region. We want to push our consulting services, and we're going to try to pretend that we can be some investor, or some partner to her clients, but we'll try to take her out of the equation, for example.

It's just, as I said, it's been an eye-opener, and that's why for my clients, and I think why especially our young entrepreneurs feel quite safe with us, I want them to feel safe, because we try to protect them. We try to teach them about what things to look out for, but I'm also trying to guide companies to avoid the sharks out there. And I think in international markets especially, they do think of you as a foreigner, and they can take advantage of you even more-so. So I do think to be really careful about who you decide to work with, and doing your due diligence, and having that trusted partner is absolutely key. And as I've said

I've had a few near-misses, but I guess I live to tell the tale, but I am more mindful of that going forward.

Cynthia Dearin: That's some great advice. Gemma, you've successfully grown and expanded two businesses over the last ten years. Success leaves clues, I would love it if you could share with us some of the habits that you followed that have helped you create that success. So, for example, what does a typical day in the life of Gemma Manning look like?

Gemma Manning: Typical, well-

Cynthia Dearin: If there is such a thing.

Gemma Manning: No, every day is quite different, and quite crazy, really. What does it look like? Well usually, I do check, and I'm terrible I know they say you shouldn't, but I do check my emails pretty much the moment I wake up to see what's come in overnight in Australia. So now that I'm here in Singapore there is a time difference factor and I know my team usually need me as soon as I'm online, so there's an element of, there's nothing more that can wake me up quickly than looking at my emails in the morning and going, "Ahhh! Okay, that's what's on for the day."

So I do a bit of that. I love to take my girls to school now that they're in school, and that's a little bit of downtime for me now. I make my way to the office, it's funny, my girls actually made a playlist for me of motivational music to listen to. So I have my playlist that I listen to, because here you don't have cars, so actually you've got to public transport it around, which is fine. And then I get to listen to my music and pump myself up. I find that actually puts me in a good headspace to be a bit more motivated of the challenges or what awaits.

I usually talk to my staff as soon as I get into the office, we touch base, Skype is very important for us now, communicating. We've always got to be in touch with each other because now the business is, basically we're a team across the region, we're in so many different locations even in Australia, we're in Brisbane, Perth, Sydney. In the region we're in Vietnam, Singapore, and expanding as well, so really for us to try to, that's something I've worked really hard on, is trying to create a really good team culture, despite us all being geographically dispersed. So there's a lot of communication between us all throughout the day.

I try to be as organized as I can. I am very big, even internally, for everyone taking notes. I'm very much into everyone having and taking note culture. Having a to-do list, I have to do my to-do lists or visualize what I'm going to do the night before usually, before the day begins. So being organized, as a busy mum, as I'm sure you know Cynthia, it's all about preparation and being organized. I

mean I have to think about my girls and what they've got on, so I've got to be

highly organized. I think it's only being highly organized that I can be successful, otherwise it would all get too much and on top of me.

So they're busy days, I'm often at meetings, doing all sorts, interviews, writing blogs, doing client strategy sessions, I'm still very active with our clients. I really love to have breakfast with my girls, have dinner with my girls, make sure I have quality time with them at the end of the day. But then I usually do get on the computer and I still have to do some work once they go to bed at night. My daughter set me a three year goal list herself, that we've worked through. So she said "Mummy, maybe after this next year, because you've got so much on, maybe then you can stop working in the evenings." And I said, "Yeah, maybe, let's work towards that." So I probably have one more year of doing those crazy long days.

But every day is exciting, I'm very energized by what I'm doing here in the region because there's so much for Manning & Co in this next 12 months, so much for Gemstar, we're doing very exciting things. Teams growing regionally. I was so nervous about making the step and taking the leap to come into Singapore and move here, I know this time a year ago I had many sleepless nights and really questioned, oh my gosh, is this the right thing, am I the worst mother in the world for doing this, what am I doing? Moving my children abroad, everything that comes with that, leaving my business in Australia. But a year on, things are thriving, my girls are thriving, they love it here. The international experience they're getting here, you know, it makes me happy every day to see them so happy and thriving. My business is thriving, and I think I'm thriving as well.

Cynthia Dearin: That is super inspiring stuff. So I'm wondering, what is next for you then? Where to from here?

Gemma Manning: Oh, there is a third venture. I kid you not. My third venture is, so basically I guess what's next, is Manning & Co, we are becoming firmly a regional strategic marketing company with a lot of opportunities up here to grow across anywhere from Japan - interestingly, Japan's back on my radar, with opportunities for me to go into Japan - through to India. So the Manning & Co business will continue becoming fully regional with a growing team. Gemstar, we're going into Australia, we've kind of come out of Australia and we're opening up centers in Australia. So Perth is opening up and we've got lots going on for Gemstar in Australia and in other countries across the region.

But Light Years is my third venture, and that is I think where, after Light Years, I will feel like I've achieved my main business goals, at least at this point of time in my life. Light Years is my social impact venture that I actually went to Necker Island to pitch to Richard Branson. And I did that about a year and a half ago.

Cynthia Dearin: Wow.

Gemma Manning: People call me crazy, but Light Years is definitely a project that, I've kind of already started making some progress towards Light Years, but basically Light Years is to help young disadvantaged women globally to become self-independent women with an education and with a clear pathway into a career, and that would be provided by Light Years, which would be an extension of both Manning & Co and Gemstar, with some hubs where we employ women in technology, and we employ women in the creative marketing space. And the idea is that we get corporates to get on board and give those businesses work to keep these women employed, but we will take them through a full program teaching them life skills.

For me, I've had a bit of a difficult path in a way, at times, with what I've experienced first-hand being a woman, and I've been well-educated, so I've been very fortunate to have an education. I've still had many challenges thrown my way, and I just want to level all playing fields in the future. I don't want things to be necessarily easier for women than they should be, I just want equality and level playing fields. So I try to achieve that myself, I'm trying to pave the way for my young girls to be inspired, hopefully, by what I'm doing, but also for them to have a different path that's far more equal. But also for women who can't even get an education, and are not in education, employment or training, they're the women that I'm really keen to give a good start to and to mentor them and guide them. And that's what I pitched, as I said, when I spent a week with Richard Branson on Necker Island, and I'm quite close to getting that project to a point where I can soft-launch it.

Cynthia Dearin: Amazing. Gemma, if people are interested in finding out more about what you do, whether that is Manning & Co, Gemstar, or Light Years, how can they get in touch with you?

Gemma Manning: Through LinkedIn, or I'm happy if you want to give my email details.

Cynthia Dearin: You can choose whichever you like. If you put your email then you risk the deadly deluge of emails that may follow, but it's entirely up to you if you're okay. But maybe, your LinkedIn profile is just Gemma Manning?

Gemma Manning: Yes, just Gemma Manning, yes. So through LinkedIn, that's fine, that's probably the easiest.

Cynthia Dearin: Okay, that's fantastic. We're going to have some women, we'll have some men, but I know we're going to have a lot of women listening to the show who are thinking about expanding their business internationally, and they haven't

actually done it yet. What are your final thoughts for those women? What's your message to them?

Gemma Manning:

I think, you know, it can be scary at the time to think beyond what might be your comfort zone. So for me, if you just think, I was in Balmain in my Sydney office, had my Manning & Co business going very nicely, I was in my comfort, you know, I was in my little bubble there. And it's been very scary, at the time it was scary to push outside my comfort zone and push the boundaries to come here. But I know it's the best thing I've ever done, and sometimes I think, just overall in business, you need to push yourself out of your comfort zone to really be able to see you fully take flight. And to fly. And I do feel like the business, I'm flying, the business is flying. My test was, really for me, I mean, I was very scared of this move, to be absolutely, brutally honest. It was a very scary decision. So there's an element, I think, of believing in yourself. On a practical level of course, just making sure that you do your due diligence, and work with a company, Cynthia, such as your company and others out there who can help by making sure you do the due diligence, and make sure there is something there in an international market that makes sense. And that there's an actual market there.

Even though throughout even my YoungGems program, which is the young entrepreneurs program, we go through a lot of the discipline around market landscapes, and all of that stuff. I'm a strong believer for all of that, and being ready, but I also know you sometimes need to take a punt. A measured punt, but you can't plan everything. And yes, I'm all big for planning, so please don't take this the wrong way, I love planning, but I know that what I'm experiencing with my Manning & Co business, I didn't know those opportunities existed, and market research wouldn't have told me either. It's me being physically here, to be honest, that's taking Manning & Co ... Manning & Co might be, within a year, our business here might be stronger than the Australian business. And that's me being here. Being also respected for my decision by companies around, I think that doing this does kind of, you get street cred in a way, I think people do start to take you even that little bit more seriously.

So I think sometimes you've got to take the punt. I think I did, it was measured, but I also had to believe in what I was doing and show enough determination and dedication to carry through on what I set out to achieve. And that can be applied across so many areas in business, but I guess from an international expansion side of things, you've got to be committed. I do also see a lot of companies that will come and go, and they will expect a business deal after three meetings, and it's just not going to happen, it doesn't happen like that. So you have to be pretty realistic that it's going to take time, it's going to take a lot of hard work. It's kind of like starting a second, I felt, like startup mode again. But if you've got some good people around you, you keep believing in yourself,

backing yourself, and have got that inner strength and that resilience, I think then beautiful things can happen with expanding a business internationally.

Cynthia Dearin: Gemma, it has been so fantastic to have you on the show today, and as I said before, I am so impressed by what you've achieved. I'm really looking forward to seeing what you do next, and to having you back here on the show sometime to tell us where you've got to.

Gemma Manning: I would love to. Thank you so much for having me Cynthia, I really enjoyed our chat. I really did.