

Australasian Surf Business Magazine

#90

Women in Business

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FEATURE ARTICLES:

Just Bloody Remarkable - Interview with Briand + Doug of Rip Curl, With the Flow: Danielle Clayton Salt Gypsy, Faster Rhythm: Speed to market programs ramp up.

ASB WOMEN IN BUSINESS

"I WAS SURROUNDED BY BLOKES, WHICH IS GREAT, BUT I WANTED TO FIND A WAY TO CONNECT WITH LIKE-MINDED FEMALE SURFERS DOING COOL, INTERESTING TRAVELS."



FROM SALES REP TO SURF GUIDE, DANIELLE CLAYTON'S PATH TO BECOMING THE FOUNDER OF SUSTAINABLE SURFWEAR LABEL SALT GYPSY AND CO-OWNER OF WOMEN'S SURF CONCEPT STORE SEA BONES HAS BEEN PART-SERENDIPITY, AND PARTIALLY A STUDY IN FOLLOWING INNATE TALENTS TO WHEREVER THEY MAY FLOW.

Casually perched on a velvet sofa at the rear of Sea Bones, the Byron Bay store she co-owns with photographer Ming Norrish, Danielle Clayton reflected on the combination of sliding door moments that had brought her to this juncture – multiple career moves, two businesses, and one bouncing baby boy later.

Just blocks from the shop, the gentle point waves of The Pass beckoned. Today it was typically offshore, one foot, and smothered with backpackers and longboarders. Although not geographically distant, it couldn't be further removed from the West Coast where Danny first cut her teeth surfing, near her childhood home on Auckland's North Shore, New Zealand. "I learned to surf the long, hard way, out at Muriwai and Muriwai Bay beaches with lots of big, raw West Coast storm swells and no-firms," Danny recalled. Also drawn to art as a girl, Danny opted to do an honors degree in 3D Design with a major in sculpture at university. At the time, Danny's father questioned what type of career she'd hoped her studies would lead to. Danny didn't yet know, but felt compelled to do it anyway. She revelled in studying water like old glass window panes to create sculptural objects that she'd install around NZ, and document them in still and moving images. Once Uni finished, Danny continued her sculptural practice at a glass studio in Japan while splitting time between teaching English and surfing around the southern islands.

When she returned to NZ in 2008, Danny landed a job at Billabong NZ as a sales rep and account manager for Von Zipper, Quiksilver, and Nixon, giving her a grounding in both the surf industry and sales – and leading her parents a reprieve from worrying about her career prospects. Yet after two years at Billabong, a chance meeting with a couple who worked as surf guides at Liholihi in the Maldives saw her change course again.

"They invited me to come and work with them and I applied, got the job, quit Billabong and high-tailed it over there."

Although Danny's mum was horrified that at age of 29 she'd traded her secure job to become a snorkel guide in the tropics, for Danny the move was a no-brainer. "For the first time I had a season of concentrated warm water surf time and really good waves, consistently. It completely changed my surfing and changed my life," Danny said. "My surf level accelerated from a very average intermediate level to feeling confident in myself and my ability in the lineup for the first time. I note this because such a big part of being a female surfer is the inequality that exists in this traditionally patriarchal culture and industry."

Danny met her now-fiance, Jade, surfing the lineup at Juba, and the pair spent the next two years working for Liquid Destination, operating surf charters in the outer atolls of the Maldives and, in the off-season, fitting over to Jade's base at Byron.

"It was really love that brought me here," Danny said, mothering in the air to signify both the store and the township it stands in. "I followed my heart. Jade had signed up for the 2011 season, so I joined him on the boat later that year and we ended up bouncing between Byron and the Maldives for a few years."

While operating the charters, the first incarnation of Salt Gypsy was born – not as a brand, but as a blog. "I was surrounded by blokes, which is great, but I wanted to find a way to connect with like-minded female surfers doing cool, interesting travels. Around that time, blogs were becoming quite popular. It seemed like a good way to build a platform to talk story with other women, and at the same time showcase some of the cool independent women's surf labels that had started to pop up."



Hindie Caz Redings



While surfing with guests, Danny and Jade would also be shooting tag team, so there was always a camera on hand. "Jade would be getting all these photos, and I would post photos of me wearing cool rubies and surf bikinis then do reviews on the blog. It was the springboard for what Salt Gypsy became – I kind of unwittingly built a community through the blog and Facebook page."

During her third year of working in the tropics, Danny stumbled on the idea of women's surf leggings out of necessity. "I'd be exposed to the elements all day, every day. I was becoming increasingly conscious of sun damage and skin cancer. Although I'd found these cool brands making some cool rubies and bikinis, there was nothing for your legs. I had a couple of pairs made up on a visa run to Bali from a design I put together," Danny recalled.

Danny took two pairs of leggings back to the Maldives and began testing them in the surf. "It was a swell of July 2012, and it was massive. It coincided with two other backlogs of women surfing around the Maldives in the same region at the same time, unheard of. I was super-excited because I had two ladies on my boat too. They were getting burned, so I was like, 'Try these and cover up your sunburnt legs.'"

"The other backlogs of girls saw my ladies wearing the leggings, and were like 'If Danny had any of those onboard she'd have sold out, because we're all getting burnt.' That was my a-ha moment. I heard that feedback, and ah okay, I think I might have a product here! My on-Billabong sales rep brain kicked in."

A few months later the season finished up and the idea was still stuck in my mind, but I had no money. I was on surf-guide wages, we got paid in pesos. So I was like, 'how do I launch this product but get funded first?'

Danny put it out there on the blog and Facebook page, and received about twenty orders for her color-by-number paneled surf leggings. "That kick-started it – I thought 'people are interested, they want to buy these things. So yeah, we'll go for it.'"

Today, Salt Gypsy has blossomed into a women's ethically-made surf separates label bolstered by a community happy to pay a premium for sustainable products, however this current business model wasn't by grand design. "In full disclosure, I didn't start out to have a sustainable brand. I basically needed to find a way to earn money. I just followed what I saw other people doing within manufacturing. Starting in Bali, I literally jumped on a scooter and drove around the streets of Denpasar and Kerobokan trying to hunt down makers and then eventually small factories," Danny recalled. She then launched the Salt Gypsy online store initially as a multi-brand site, selling other indie label surf bikinis and wetsuits, including The Sea – a US label which Danny was first to import and sell in AU. "Interestingly, the first thing I sold out of that summer were the bespoke one-off surf leggings I'd produced in Bali," Danny said.

Danny then spent two and a half years in Bali getting her fledgling label on its feet. At first the brand juggled a few small wholesale accounts, then Urban Outfitters reached out and placed several large orders. Salt Gypsy went from \$20k in annual sales to \$150k the following year, but self-funded fast growth and constant production problems began to trouble Danny – as did seeing the amount of pollution generated by the manufacturing industry firsthand. "I was thrown into the deep end and didn't really like what I saw," Danny recalled.

WE WANTED TO CREATE A SPACE THAT WAS WELCOMING AND INVITING FOR WOMEN TO FEEL COMFORTABLE SHOPPING, WITH ALL SORTS OF PRODUCTS AROUND COASTAL LIFESTYLE. MOST OF THE BRANDS IN STORE ARE LOCAL BASED, AND PREDOMINANTLY FEMALE OWNED AND OPERATED BUSINESSES. THAT'S PARTLY BY DEFAULT. THAT'S JUST OUR JAM.

Danielle Clayton - Salt Gypsy



So in 2015, Danny pivoted again. "I hand-broke the business to restructure my supply chain and bring it more in line with my personal values. I was researching Sally Slater's Darkroom and Patagonia, two hero brands, and because they're open source I was able to trace back to factories and textile suppliers, and found the fabric we're now using, Tencel. I just love it. Lasts four to five times longer. It's really attempting to help reduce the amount of marine debris and ocean plastics, as well as diverting textile and carpet off cuts from landfills, so all this nylon waste is being regenerated."

Returning to Australia to restructure, Danny spent time sampling on the Gold Coast. "I was working with a production consultant to get into a China factory, but it fell through last minute. Because I'd been sampling with the Gold Coast crew, I had a ready-made production order and they were familiar with my style. So it was partly by design and partly by default that I ended up with production in Australia. The communication's great, the machines that work in these boutique production houses in Queensland are experts at what they do. It's fast turn around, and it's great - I really enjoy Australian manufacturing for many reasons. Definitely a relief to whizz up the road whenever you need to get a return on a garment, I can ask my team to repair it and am able to have quite immediate turnaround. That said, my production costs have quadrupled since I started, and that's not even including the intangible costs. So I'm still open to offshore manufacturing."

As the label matures, Danny earmarked financing and scaling Salt Gypsy's growth as her biggest challenge. "I'm still working on procedures to help fund our production a lot of the time. We're constantly doing back-to-back production runs because we can't keep up with demand. So we have a great problem, but it's still a problem. And yeah, just lacking big chunks of capital to really invest into inventory has been a challenge."

The label is predominantly sold through Salt Gypsy's online channels. "I've been direct to consumer right from the get-go. From my 18th birthday working as a sales rep through the GFC, I could see how hard it was for retailers. That was around the time online shopping was starting to become a main channel, so I knew once I had my surf leggings ready to go, it had to be straight through the blog and Facebook page direct. I've worked really hard over the last seven years to build an online business."

Currently, three quarters of Salt Gypsy's business is online and one quarter is wholesale. "With my production currently in Australia, wholesale's just not a viable business model. We're very reliant on online store sales, but also work hard to have really great customer service and minimise returns and exchanges, which can blow out company budgets in terms of costs of freight and things. Online is definitely how I've been able to survive as a small business for the last seven years," Danny said.

Sea Binos, on the other hand, is bricks and mortar - yet like Salt Gypsy it also centres around fostering community. "We wanted to create a space that was welcoming and inviting for women to feel comfortable shopping, with all sorts of products around coastal lifestyle. Most of the brands in store are locally based, and predominantly female-owned and operated businesses. That's partly by default. That's just our jam. We just love working with other women, and there's such a great talent pool. So yeah, we wanted to have a space where independent labels who otherwise would struggle to have a retail presence could have a space collectively."

In 2018, Salt Gypsy got a junior addition to the team when Danny and Jade welcomed their first child into the fold. After becoming a mother, Danny redefined and stepped back from certain business rules. "I still wear a lot of the hats, and had worn all of the hats up until I had my baby and had to hire my first assistant, Carly, who's just been amazing," Danny said. "I have definitely had to ask for help with our social media. Starting a social business, becoming a mum for the first time, life has been very, very busy. But I have just taken back on Instagram. So my voice is coming back out."

Stepping back into personally creating content for Salt Gypsy's social channels is time consuming, but Danny sees it as a crucial ingredient. "If you can find different ways to kind of humanise the social media aspect and have some direct engagement, that can really build you up for some great success," said Danny. "When you're able to use social media as a tool for business in terms of showcasing not just your product range, but also your values and all the things that you want to see in the world and the change that you're trying to help be a part of, that speaks to people, and makes you really open for collaborative dialogue and introductions. I think that's a really great thing."

Of the many invitations to collaborate that have landed in Salt Gypsy's inbox, one in particular resulted in a new women's board range with GSI. "I just received an email pretty randomly about a year ago, and then spoke to Matt Kelly at GSI," recalled Danny. "It was just really cool to see someone have a vision for everyday female surfers that aligned with what I would love to see in women's surf culture."

The range includes a twin fin, a mid-length, a longboard, and a stand up paddleboard, all with a distinctive Salt Gypsy aesthetic and little details in delivery, like photo-fine packaging. "Design-wise, we worked with Richie Louett on the technical specs of the boards, because that's definitely not my area of expertise," Danny said, and noted she's proud of the results. "We felt there was a gap for women like myself who aren't necessarily competitive whippersnappers on the board crew, but like to try a range of boards to seek different conditions for our backparks that we surf every day. I hope we've created that with the three board models and all the colors that we came up with to tie back into our Salt Gypsy range of surf garments."

So yeah, with the view of looking cool in the lineup with a rad fin board that you'll take care of and hand down hopefully to your daughter or niece."

Other recent Salt Gypsy collaborations include Le MU, the Australian sister brand of US-based Aloha Collection that make splash-proof bags. "We've had some design collaboration with those ladies, and they're products I've been using daily. We've also got a new collab with an eco surf resort run by friends in New Zealand called The Huts overlooking Shipwreck Bay, and worked with a New Zealand print and textile designer on the print for that particular collab." The Huts and the beaches surrounding Shipwreck also served as backdrop for launch videos created to announce Salt Gypsy's board range featuring Danny and a cast of female friends putting the boards through their paces.

Forging additional partnerships is an avenue that Danny's keen to explore further. "Creative collaborations are part of my core business values, and I'm always on the lookout for things that I personally would love to see designed better or in a cool or different way," Danny said.

Reflecting on her journey, Danny pointed out how skills honed during her seemingly arbitrary degree in 3D design and sculpture continued to help on a daily basis - like her eye for aesthetics and penchant for recycling materials. Career decisions that had extremely normal shaped by chance had actually hinged on Danny's willingness to back herself. Random meetings with strangers had opened many doors, yet it was Danny who took each headlong leap. Her ability to flow or pivot whenever opportunity knocked was a recurring theme. On the horizon, she was stacked towards the kind of business growth that will likely require additional course corrections and test Danny's self-determination some more. "I'm in the middle of re-negotiating some things, trying to figure out how to scale our growth and build a sustainable business. Looking at offshore manufacturing to help offset some of our local production, increasing the number of drops of new ranges - going from one or two a year to three or four. Many collaborations are in the pipeline, and just continuing to really thoughtfully design great products, and doing it in a responsible way," Danny said.

"If anything, I'm just a normal everyday female surfer who needed something for myself and couldn't find it, so I made it. I keep talking to my friends and network and each production we do, and it's getting better and better. I try to be as open and honest as I can," Danny stated.

Mirroring the tight social community that Salt Gypsy springs from, Danny's future business aspirations are also decidedly inclusive. "I'm not here to have the world's biggest, best surf brand. I want to use this business to support my ocean women community around the world from grassroots levels and ideally, one day be able to support competitive athletes. I don't know if that makes or is unique. All I can think of is that I am my customer. I just want to make cool products and help women feel awesome in the lineup, and feel equitable and asked that they're wearing something that has value to them in terms of environmental and social impact."

