

Savvy saviour fixes pour performers

Cafe queen knows how to get a venture back in the black, writes **Alexandra Cain.**

Angela Vithoukas knows a thing or two about running small enterprises – in fact, you could say her involvement goes back to the age of three, when she caught a shoplifter in her parents' fast-food store.

She's now director of the VIVO Cafe Group, which takes underperforming hospitality businesses and turns them around.

Vithoukas's forte is buying businesses facing ruin and rebuilding them, or starting businesses from scratch. It means she's constantly in start-up mode, which she says is hard, yet incredibly rewarding.

Vithoukas has owned and sold 17 businesses. She is now focused on what she calls "her newest baby", Weddings and Events of Australia, which provides advice and support to businesses in the wedding industry.

"I have worked in the family business for as long as I can remember," she says. "After school each day, it was my job to make 500 of the most perfect potato scallops you will ever see."

She says even before she went to school, "my dad built me a box so I could see over the till to hand over the change".

Unsurprisingly, Vithoukas left school in year 11 to go into the



Heart starter ... Angela Vithoukas and her brother, Con, at VIVO Cafe on George Street in the city. Photo: Louise Kennerley

family business with her brother, Con, and the two have been in business ever since.

She acknowledges her parents were disappointed that she didn't go to university but backed her regardless, on the proviso she didn't get treated any differently to other staff.

Vithoukas says the first few years were exceptionally tough; she would get up at 2am to go to work and be in

bed by 7pm, missing out on the social life all her friends were enjoying.

"I was badly bullied by the head chef and I'd be chased down the street by dogs on the way home because I'd been inside the rotisserie to clean it and they could smell it," she says. "It was really rough. When my parents eventually gave us the chance to go into business with them, the first thing I did was fire that chef."

A levelling experience was fracturing a disk in her neck after a fall at home. Vithoukas says it was a blessing in disguise.

"Before I injured my neck, I thought I could do it all myself, which only resulted in me alienating everyone around me," she says. "My injury was very painful. It was many months before I could even brush my own hair. It forced me to learn

how to delegate and nurture a team." Her confidence as a business owner soared when she won her first award, the 2005 City of Sydney Cafe of the Year.

"Our customers voted for the award, although I did nothing to persuade them to vote for us," she says. "When we won, I couldn't believe people would go out of their way to vote for us and it gave me confidence we were on the right track."

She says the award was the first step in understanding that building a brand in a small business is just as important as it is in bigger businesses. Since then, Vithoukas has won a slew of awards, including the NSW Entrepreneur of the Year and the Telstra NSW Women's Business Owner Award.

Vithoukas also has her own radio show, *Angela's Business Mix*, from 6-8pm on Mondays on Sydney's 2SSR. She also sits on the Sydney lord mayor's retail advisory panel and the Australian Taxation Office's micro business panel and she's in demand on the speaking circuit.

"Small businesses are the lifeblood of the economy," she says. "And as small-business owners, we're the masters of multitasking: raising families, coming up with new business ideas and being a good friend, all while trying to recover from the financial crisis."

"It's no picnic but it's still an exciting time to be in business and there are still great opportunities out there, if you know how to pick them and are prepared to work hard."