

Entrepreneur Alicia Lai says motivation comes from her customers

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Dissatisfied with the evident gap in the ethical fashion market, Alicia Lai and her husband, Van, had the idea of setting up an online leather-free footwear and accessories company, which they called [Bourgeois Boheme](#).



Alicia Lai from Bourgeois Boheme

Their hard work has seen Bourgeois Boheme go from strength to strength with a retail showroom in Richmond now open and an international customer base. What started off as a hobby four years ago has seen them winning four awards from PETA and Alicia herself was named one of the Future 100 Young Entrepreneurs of the Year during Global Entrepreneurship Week 2008. An award which celebrates entrepreneurial flair and innovation in progressing a responsible business venture.

Like an eco-dragon (an ethical, no people-eating one) - we put 5 big questions to Alicia on what it's like to run her own business.

What have been the best and worst moments of running your own business?

Best moments:

- When our first order came through
- When a shipment of our very own labeled Bourgeois Boheme shoes arrived
- Receiving positive feedback from customers and continual encouragement from them to carry on
- When out and about in London and seeing a customer wearing our Bourgeois Boheme shoes

Worst moments:

- When a shipment of Bourgeois Boheme shoes arrived from manufacturers and they were an absolute disaster. Lots more hard work was needed to bring them up to our usual standard
- The continual struggle to maintain a healthy balance of work and play

What advice would you give to someone thinking of starting their own ethical business?

- Preparation and research are key - have your business plan set out before you do anything. These are tedious tasks but essential and you will thank your lucky stars you completed these.
- Network - gain as much advice and assistance as possible and build contacts as it's a small community so you never know when you'll need them.
- Don't compromise.
- Lastly, be prepared for highs and lows, there will be many but as long as you stay focussed and dedicated – the sky is the limit!

Which High Street brand do you think is the most ethical and why?

"Lush immediately springs to mind. They only use natural and vegetarian ingredients, and some are suitable for vegans too. None of Lush's products are tested on animals and many of them use little or no packaging, so they have real environmental benefits too. Additionally, each item comes with a sticker to tell you which individual hand-made your product, meaning you can be sure of how it was made as well as where it is coming from! They even give some of their profits to animal welfare/environmental charities and campaigns.

And their B Never Too Busy To Be Beautiful franchise is the only UK make-up retailer with a full range of cosmetics suitable for vegans. About time!

If you were Prime Minister what would you do to make business more ethical?

This is difficult to say as there are many aspects of the definition of 'ethical' and to enforce a business to be 100% ethical would sadly be too costly or prohibitive and different people have different views of what is ethical.

I think tax credits for companies who have some recognised ethical certification/mark and who register their CSR would be a viable solution. The government would rely on the audit function & standards of the organisation issuing the certification to avoid fraud. This would require minimal effort of the government

to police and as the companies would be claiming tax credits back on the annual tax return, it would require minimal government administration as well.

What's your biggest eco sin and why can't you live without it?

Travel, I love it which means the easiest and quickest way to do this within our busy lives is to fly. We do off-set our carbon footprint each time we travel though

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