

Career Profile: Avril Owton MBE, Owner, The Cloud Hotel



Avril is an inspiration to all of us. A former Tiller Girl, Avril took over the running of the hotel when her husband died unexpectedly at the age of 45. The discipline of her dance training together with the show business mantra 'the show must go on' enabled Avril to take on, with no business experience at all, an ailing, country hotel and turned it into a prosperous and successful business. An avid reader of motivational and business books she is, today regarded as one of the country's most accomplished businesswomen. In 2006 Avril was awarded the Shine Awards Woman of the Year and was voted Hampshire Businesswoman of the Year. Avril was awarded a MBE in 2008 for her services to charity and in recognition of her outstanding business skills.

Avril in a minute

Avril Owton left school after her O Levels to pursue a career in dancing. She became a professional dancer with the Tiller Girls, one of the most popular dance troupes during the 1960s. Avril's life changing moment came when her husband died suddenly and there was no life insurance or mortgage protection. She had four children and a hotel in the New Forest desperately in need of modernisation.

Avril's husband was the chef and had managed the hotel and looked after all the repairs and facilities; and while raising a family, Avril helped out domestically wherever she was required. Suddenly Avril found herself in the spotlight and had a decision to make – give up or go forward. She decided to go forward but she had an enormous challenge. Unlike most of their competitors in the New Forest, rooms at The Cloud Hotel did not have en-suite facilities and guests had to share toilet facilities. With a background in show business, Avril had no experience in business management or administration experience and admits that she did not know a bottom line from a chorus line!

However, Avril was determined to succeed.

Running your own hotel

Avril knew that if she wanted the hotel to succeed, she should aim to make it the best in the New Forest. She had to invest in updating its décor and fittings, such as adding en-suite facilities and modernising the bedrooms. Avril found understanding the financial side of the

business the hardest; nonetheless she persevered to learn it. With a helpful bank manager, she set about securing the necessary finance to start the modernising work on the property.

The other element of the businesses she had to master was employing the right staff. It might sound clichéd, but in hospitality the staff can be your biggest asset – or your biggest liability. It can be a self fulfilling prophecy. Avril believes that if a hotel has staff that feels valued, part of the team and involved in the decision making processes, the employees are likely to be happy. This in turn means that they are likely to provide great customer service to your guests. Subsequently, your guests will want to return again and again.

The changes that Avril made ensured that The Cloud Hotel significantly increased the volume and frequency of guest visits. The hotel's success is testament to the hard work, perseverance and determination of Avril and her team.

Current role



Avril has a hands-on approach to running the hotel and maintains contact with all her staff to ensure that everything runs smoothly. Some members of her staff have worked with the hotel for over 18 years, ever since Avril has owned the hotel. Avril believes in rewards, not just financial but non monetary too. Every year in January she shuts the hotel for two weeks to give her employees a holiday and takes them out to dinner and a theatre performance.

Today Avril also spends time networking and speaking at conferences. She was the chair of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight branch of the Institute of Directors and the founder of the Wessex Women's Network. In 2006 Avril was awarded the Shine Award Woman of the Year and was voted Hampshire Businesswoman of the Year.

That same year Avril was commissioned to write a book entitled "Delighting your customers" which is now widely available. In 2007, Avril was made an honoree member of the Leading Women Entrepreneurs of the World and she was awarded a MBE in 2008 for her services to hospitality and for her charitable work.

Avril's mantra for success

Avril feels that young women face an uphill struggle when working in the hotel industry due to the long irregular hours that can adversely affect family life and even their health. Her advice

for dealing with a male populated industry is to stay feminine and don't become aggressive. She advises: "don't try to be better than the men, just try to be a better woman in business". Avril stresses that women must be prepared to work hard, keep on learning and constantly persevere to achieve the highest success. Whatever happens, try and maintain a positive attitude as it creates positive results.

Avril on People 1st's Women 1st initiative: "This is exactly what the industry needs. As I attend quite a lot of conferences, I see first-hand the lack of women in senior positions in the industry. This glass ceiling needs to be shattered and Women 1st can help a lot of women in the industry to aim higher. It is an initiative that enables women to share and discuss their experiences so they can solve problems with helpful input from likeminded men and women."

More information on Women 1st is available at www.people1st.co.uk/women1st