



# Sustainable Ambitions

KeepCup founder, Abigail Forsyth, talks about her humble beginnings and how she has entered the sustainable market at just the right time.



**W**hen Abigail Forsyth first started developing the KeepCup, she thought it would be “a nice little project” to have on the side while she raised her children.

Four years later, the KeepCup has become Australia’s leading reusable barista standard coffee cup, distributed by many of Australia’s biggest names in coffee and launching into markets worldwide. Her humble plans, it seems, have taken off beyond even her most ambitious dreams.

“It’s like a tank rolling toward you,” she says, “Unless you climb in and start driving, it’s going to run you over.”

From her small office in the hip inner-northern Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy, Abigail laughs at the nostalgia of the beginnings of a project she hoped would keep her mildly occupied during motherhood. Her children, she reveals, were her primary inspiration in the initial design, as she took notes from her daughter’s “sippy” cup.

In 2007, Abigail and her brother Jamie

were growing increasingly concerned about the amount of wastage taking place at their take-away food store, BlueBag. They toyed around with existing reusable cups, but most were ugly and few fit under a coffee machine. Furthermore, there was the question of whether people would wash their cups. To see how receptive customers would be to reusable containers, they experimented with a plastic soup mug and found that 15 per cent of their customers did reuse their mugs. They knew then that they had a market.

The next step was a two-year design phase to come up with an attractive and convenient option. It was of primary importance for Abigail that the final product was aesthetically pleasing. Wanting to create more than just an item that was sustainable in theory and a nice idea, Abigail knew that for the KeepCups to catch on they had to be something people wanted to use, like an iPod or a SIGG water bottle.

“We had a good idea of the aesthetics. We wanted to echo a paper cup, but also be visually distinctive,” Abigail explains. “[The KeepCup]’s reason for being is sustainability, but it’s the form and colours that people love and it’s probably why you buy it. And, it’s certainly why you enjoy using it.”

Abigail received two grants from Design Victoria and the City of Melbourne to design the KeepCups and from there worked with industrial designers to come up with the initial design.

A few skeptical manufacturers had told her that if she couldn’t sell the prototype

to corporates, then she couldn’t sell them commercially. And so, she took the prototypes to NAB and Energy Australia, who were instantly receptive and placed orders based on the prototypes. Abigail’s designs had entered the market just as these corporations were looking to boost their

KeepCup a desirable designer item. “People didn’t even know what it was and they were buying it just because they liked the colours. People were telling me this was something they wanted to do, or something that they had been looking for,” she says. “That was just such a fantastic

“THE KEEP CUP’S REASON FOR BEING IS SUSTAINABILITY, BUT IT’S THE FORM AND COLOURS THAT PEOPLE LOVE AND IT IS PROBABLY WHY YOU BUY IT.”

sustainability programs and the KeepCup fitted the bill perfectly.

With this renewed confidence, Abigail moved forward in the design phase, but in 2009 hit a major glitch as the first cups from the tool trial leaked. “It was a really stressful time,” she recalls. “You’ve committed so much time and investment at that point. Never having manufactured anything before we did not know this trial and error was part of the process.”

The issue was resolved by shaving off microns to fine-tune the edge. In June 2009 KeepCup launched at the Federation Square market.

The success of that initial launch was beyond anything Abigail expected, selling 1000 cups in just six hours. The reaction they received was phenomenal, in that it followed Abigail’s desire to make the

moment – knowing that we provided a solution for something that people wanted.”

The product itself hasn’t changed much from the initial design. There has been some minor fine-tuning, such as changing from a semi-gloss to a matt finish and this April the company plans to launch an espresso KeepCup.

Since the initial start-up, the KeepCups have been sold direct in Australia via major roasters including Merlo Coffee, Campos and Toby’s Estate, as well as through corporates such as ANZ.

With limited formal marketing, Abigail credits most of the product’s success to its popularity in social media. For instance, in one case someone from Los Angeles had blogged about the cups and within half an hour they had received 10 orders from the US. Abigail’s marketing strategy, or some



“IN SOCIAL MEDIA IT’S EASY TO SPOT DISINGENUOUS COMMUNICATION. YOU HAVE TO BE GENUINE AND THAT WILL MAKE PEOPLE SEEK YOUR PRODUCT OUT.”

might arguably say lack of, is indicative of the new-age environment in which the product was launched.

“It’s a movement” explains Abigail in the words of Seth Godin it happens “when people talk to one another and ideas spread and peer support leads people to do what they always knew was the right thing.”

Since this incidental start, Abigail has taken a more purposeful approach to social networking, actively engaging in discussions where she can. In this respect, she warns other corporates that it is important to be cautious in any approach to the newest online environments.

“You have to be careful how you push your agenda,” Abigail says. “In social media it’s easy to spot disingenuous communication. You have to be genuine and that will make people seek your product out.” In other digital efforts, the company revamped their web site last November.

Another huge step the company took

was to launch their first office in the UK. Learning from their first experience launching in Australia, Abigail says that their first step was to seed themselves in the “third wave” espresso community. In winning them over, Abigail hopes to spread admiration of the KeepCup in a similar fashion to her home turf.

They also launched the KeepCup at Coffeefest in Seattle, Washington and received a positive response.

“The big chain stores dominate over there, unlike Australia and New Zealand” she says. “But, there is a growing and passionate community of third wave independent roasters in the US.”

This energy to expand overseas has come as less of a purposeful push and mostly at the behest of customers, Abigail says. Essentially, when they receive an inquiry, they look for an overseas partner and just follow where the demand is. With limited competition who knows where this demand will end?

#### TALKING DIRTY – A BARISTA’S GUIDE TO THE KEEP CUP

As with any new product, learning how to work the KeepCup into your café’s routine poses some challenges. Abigail offers a few tips on integrating the KeepCup into your workspace.

**You are not accountable.** Some baristas have expressed concern that they may be held accountable for serving coffee in a contaminated cup. Abigail notes that the legal advice they’ve received is that there must be negligence to give rise to liability. Provided the vessel is visibly clean and fit for purpose no liability can arise.

**Just say no.** If customers are bringing in dirty cups, it is ok to politely refuse to serve coffee in them and ask if next time they can bring it in clean.

**Taking note.** The side of the KeepCup is designed to mark what coffee your customer prefers. Check it out as it may save you time in taking their orders.

**Stick it.** Keep a pad of sticky notes where you take your orders. If the customer’s favourite coffee isn’t marked on the cup, or they want a different one, you can write it on the sticky note on the cup as you line up your orders.