



A GOLDEN CATCH

Neil Bromage profiles
Doreen Lofthouse, the
woman behind the world
famous Fisherman's
Friend lozenges
Pictures: Bill Wilkinson

WHEN you meet Doreen Lofthouse be sure to look her straight in the eye - not that easy when you are staring at a woman who is worth a reported £55 million. Doreen, who is as down to earth as her name suggests, has built up a phenomenally successful business on the back of a product which many people find too hot to handle. She is the driving force behind the world famous *Fisherman's Friend*, the strong throat lozenge with both punch and profit.

Doreen is a straight talking entrepreneur who believes in eyeball contact to judge honesty and integrity. And it is an attribute which has worked well for her in her business life.

She has achieved so much despite an unpromising beginning. Her school days were less than inspiring. 'I couldn't wait to leave. I certainly wasn't the brightest pupil. Take geography. I hardly knew where Birmingham was'.

Her geography has improved and the company she manages now exports its products to 112 countries. Politicians and personalities shout the praises of the fiery friend and even Prince Charles has succumbed to their charms.

Back in 1865 however, few could have foreseen the success of James Lofthouse's new lozenge. It was not until 1963 that Doreen started to actively market the product outside Lancashire. But it was tough going and in 1972 when the company moved to its present site it still only employed eight people.

Since then Doreen has taken Fisherman's Friend all over the world. In the last five years the company has doubled its turnover to £25 million when most others have been floundering. 'If I had been selling a product





Doreen has built up a multi million pound business despite leaving school with hardly any qualifications

Left:
Doreen Lofthouse at Fleecewood docks
Above:
In her office
Right:
Arriving at work



above a pound we too may have suffered, but we're selling a product that costs 50p. It's a product that people use as a confectionary and for medicinal purposes, often before going to the doctors. Compared with prescription charges 50p is very little.' Experts at London's Guys Hospital have tested Fisherman's Friend and endorse its qualities in relieving bronchial congestion.

Even so, recessionary times, require a special breed of person at the helm. 'Whether its the nineties, thirties or the next millennium the head of a company must have energy and an alert mind that can encompass everything' she said. 'Not in detail, but like an umbrella over all departments.'

She is full of good advice for other budding entrepreneurs. 'live, eat and breathe your company above all else except your marriage. Don't borrow money, and set out to make a pound not a million.'

Whilst she 'never' considered failure she admits 'lots' of mistakes along the way. 'Nothing is ever black and white' she says. And to those who have previously failed 'try again' is the message.

Fortunately, only about 10% of Doreen's business plans fail to come up to expectation. Surprisingly however, she still gets criticism.



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which if constructive she welcomes. A recent advertising campaign was described by one newspaper as 'shocking'. Her response was that 'we wanted people to think a bit so that the advert would stay in the subconscious longer'. It obviously worked as sales are increasing.

Success has brought financial security but Doreen has not forgotten her roots. In 1984 the Lofthouse Foundation was set up to 'improve environmentally the aspects of Fleetwood and contribute to the welfare of the town.' One way of achieving this is by ensuring that the company remains in family control. 'Putting this business into the hands of someone whose only interest is profit would take the heart out of it... staff would suffer... this business is like one large family and it is not our intention to see that change'.

Doreen does not see herself as glamorous. 'at weekends you're more likely to find me muddled up in the garden', her third love.

Her first love, Tony, the company chairman is a major factor in her life and they even share an office. It is for this reason that they

have been able to do what eludes so many others in combining marriage and business. 'When we go home at night we know what the other is thinking'. And though they dine out most evenings due to Doreen's dislike to cooking they still chatter on about the business. 'we try not to talk about work but it generally only lasts past the soup'.

Apart from hard work there seems to be no single thing responsible for her success. But fate has played a hand. 'so many things have happened that I have had to think, this must have been planned'. She recalls the time she decided to export and of a woman entering her

office within hours of that decision. 'She was an expert in exporting who went on to work for us, and I never had a single problem with export documentation'.

It is clear that she believes someone has guided her along the way. As a result perhaps, Doreen was 'confirmed' three years ago and her faith plays an important role in her life.

Doreen Lofthouse, MBE, has already considered the day when she will step down. 'I'd like to think Duncan (her son) will take over'. In fact Duncan has already started to take on some of his mother's workload and Doreen now sees herself as 'just a figurehead'.

But when she does retire so too will Tony 'and so the timing has to be right'. Then, there will be no 'popping in and out, that would be most unfair to Duncan, though I would always be there if he felt he needed me.'

When that day dawns Doreen has one final piece of advice that lies within her favourite phrase, 'never be without a friend, whether it's a Fisherman's Friend or husband'. Retirement just would not be complete without Tony. □