

Women in Business

Sarah Dunwell heads the UK's first social supermarket, Community Shop. It aims to help people out of food poverty as an alternative to charities and food banks

Sarah Dunwell started out in business at the age of 16 with just herself, a driver and a van full of soft-play equipment. 'I wanted to be in charge of my own destiny and run my own business,' she explains. She and her driver would travel between church halls and sports centres across West Yorkshire holding classes where children could learn through play, an idea which back then was almost unheard of. 'Nowadays you can do everything from baby massage to baby ballet,' she laughs, 'But none of that existed back then.'

Sarah is now 44 and her current project is Community Shop, a social enterprise which is trying to make cheap food accessible to those who need it most. It is a development of Company Shop, which allows employees in the food supply chain to buy leftover or excess food at low prices instead of it going to waste. 'One of the things that happens in the food supply chain is that there is lots of surplus food, lots of cancelled orders and forecasting errors,' says Sarah. She describes her job as trying to 'join the dots' between surplus food and the people who turn up at Company Shops every day wanting to buy cheap food, but aren't eligible to shop there. 'The contracts Company Shop had with suppliers and retailers simply didn't allow us to get that food to the people who needed it most,' she explains.

Many businesses were eager to help with the new venture, but were wary of compromising the integrity of their brands by offering their goods at a discount. This meant that Sarah's biggest challenge was convincing retailers that Community Shop could make the idea work without becoming a competitor. She certainly seems to have struck the right balance, and Community Shop now works with big names such as Asda, Morrisons, Nestlé and Heinz. 'We have to make sure we create a

new customer base for them by helping people improve their lives rather than cannibalising their market share,' she says.

That's what Community Shop is trying to do. Only registered members can



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shop there, and being a member means living in the local area and receiving a government means-tested benefit such as council tax relief, unemployment benefit or a state pension. Sarah hopes that Community Shop can help people to such an extent that they don't need it any more. 'Membership is reassessed every six months, so if you've managed to get a job you may not need us again in six months time.' But she knows that there is no simple answer for the people who need help. 'Food poverty is always a cause and consequence of something else. There's always pay day lending tied up in there, or

underemployment, or unemployment, or mental health problems, or addiction or domestic violence.'

For this reason there is Community Hub. Above the pilot shop in Goldthorpe, South Yorkshire, there is a café and cookery school where people can get help to address the underlying problems which have brought them to this point. 'It's that work that actually makes people's lives look and feel very different,' Sarah explains, and she takes a very hands on approach. She can often be helping with the washing up in the café one day, and spend the next talking to MPs in Westminster about the project and how it might fit into any of their party manifestos.

This hectic schedule has to work around Sarah's two teenage children, and she admits the support of her family is crucial in allowing her to continue her important work. 'I have got the most incredible parents,' she smiles. 'They love the work that I do and they're really proud.' Sarah's parents live just a few miles from her, and are always on hand to help with the kids. 'Having those relationships around me has enabled me to do the things that I'm really passionate about.'

Sarah has big plans for Community Shop. Following the success of the pilot store six more shops will be opened in London in the next few months. Sarah sits on the London Food Board, Boris Johnson's food advisory panel, which is chaired by Rosie Boycott. Sarah and Rosie are making plans to open 20 more shops across the country this year, and are currently researching which areas are most in need. 'I'd like to see a Community Shop on the high street of every deprived area, having that transformational effect within that local community.' We wish her well.

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