

## Profile

# BUSINESS UNIFORM

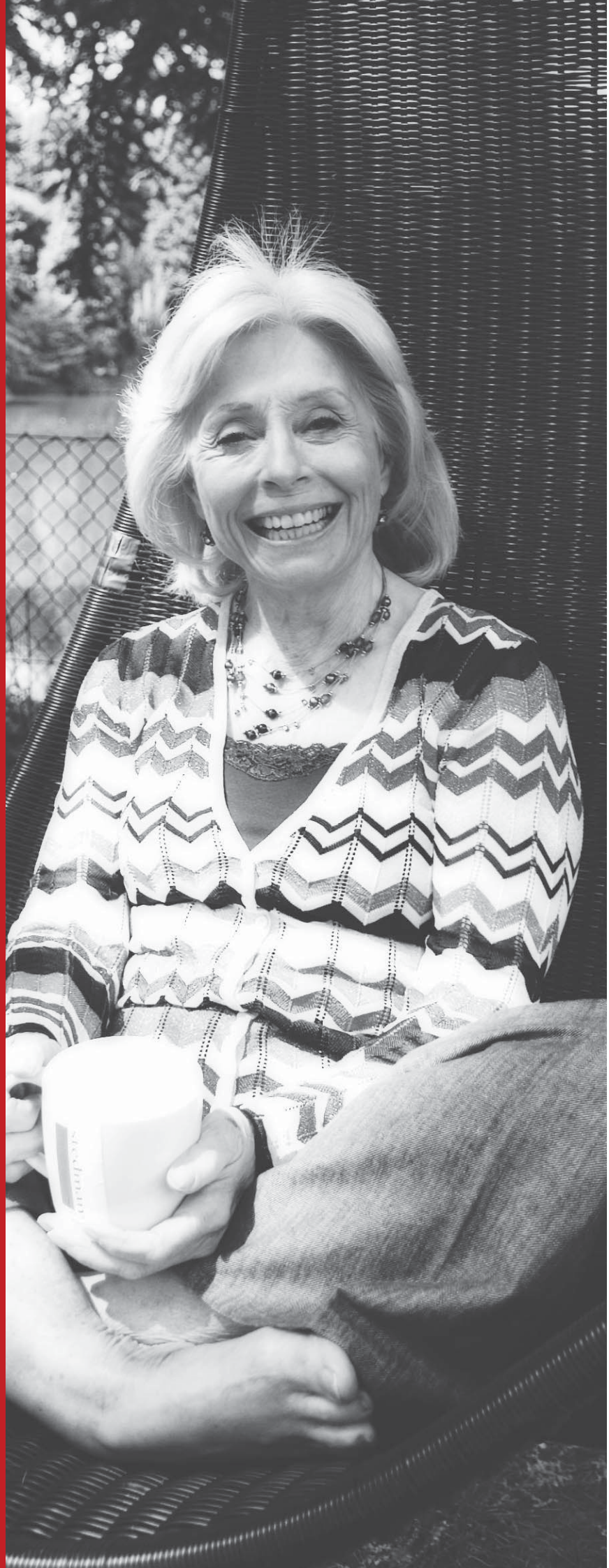
**Sue Stedman had a highly successful career in the fashion industry and was handsomely rewarded for it. But her life only began to have meaning when she chucked it all in to start her own business. With its 20th anniversary approaching, it is a decision she never regrets.**

For someone who has all the obvious trappings of success – a beautiful house near Guildford with one and a half acres of rolling lawns and duck ponds – Sue Stedman sure does like to stand up for the rights of the small business owner.

“I get very cross with things that are not fair in life,” she says, bristling. “I had a client that ordered a large amount of staff uniforms from me, even when they must have known they were going under, probably just to make their staff give an impression of solidity even as the whole thing was collapsing. I never got paid and I am really mad at them.”

Sue turns her anger into polemical articles, having a go at businesses who don't play fair or a government that she accuses of squeezing the lifeblood from the very sector that drives the British economy, namely small business. Don't even get her started on CGT.

But I didn't come down to Guildford to get Sue Stedman's view on what was wrong with the world. I wanted to speak to a woman who by any measure is a highly successful entrepreneur, who epitomises that type of business person driven by an urgent need to fulfil their destiny and is prepared to risk all to do so, even when doing nothing would have guaranteed a comfortable life.



We meet in the sitting room of her beautifully designed and furnished house. ("In my next life, I want to be an architect/designer, preferably Charles Eames." Someone got there before her. An Eames Lounge chair sits in the corner, its timeless elegance undimmed after 52 years.) Sue is a slight, attractive blonde who almost gets lost in the big comfy sofa, but anyone who thinks size matters will soon learn their lesson if they cross Sue. She is utterly charming and funny, but she has the kind of core strength only possessed by people who have trodden the hard road for years and overcome everything that can be thrown at them.

"I was a buyer for companies like Burberry, Jaeger, Harrods," she says. "I mean, I was really well known in the retail trade. My forte was classic English clothing. Yet no matter how well I did, I always wanted to run my own business. The last thing I wanted was a shop, God no. But I did want to produce clothing, so I decided to learn how. At about that time, a supplier of mine, Pastella, wanted to work with the very famous manufacturers L.S. and J. Sussman, who made clothes for people like Pierre Cardin. I approached them, got to know them and discovered they wanted to start a new women's division, so I offered to run it for them. I learned the nuts and bolts of production; I had always had a good eye for design and had even helped design some of the clothes for the big companies I used to buy for. Then a cruise company asked us to design and produce a range of evening wear for sale on their ships. They needed a name to market them under so they used mine. But even though my name was on the label, I was still just working for the company that made them."

Bit by bit, Sue settled in. She had a good salary with all the perks and sufficient staff to take all the donkey work off her hands. It was all very agreeably cosy and the vision of her own business receded from view. Then in 1989 Sue met the woman who would unwittingly bring it back into focus.

"She was an independent broker who wanted us to design and produce uniforms for a client of hers, a big travel company. We did all the work and she walked off with a big commission cheque. I realised I had become too comfortable, that it was time to get on with life."

Sussmans were reluctant to let her go, but as a leaving present generously gave her the new car they'd just bought her. With £30k from the bank, she was off.

"I decided I would only produce uniforms," Sue says. "That woman had showed me there was a really good market out there, for companies who wanted to dress their reps smartly. I wasn't

interested in the mass market, supermarkets and the like, but companies who wanted a smart, bespoke uniform that reflected their values and gave their staff confidence when dealing with the public. One of our best ever clients has been Aviance who provide 4,500 ground handling staff for airlines at 14 airports. Their aquamarine uniforms are unmistakable at check-in counters."

First-year sales of £500,000, almost three times projections, demonstrated the concept and the company has progressed in the 20 years since to a handy £1.5 million annual turnover and a team of six people providing smart workday uniforms for thousands of people around the world, including sales and marketing teams for homebuilders like Charles Church and Persimmon.

"The market for these products is quite niche," Sue says. "The key was finding a good mill to weave cloth and a factory to produce the clothes. I started by using Jeromes, a huge mill outside Leeds, but like so much British industry, they just couldn't cope with the competition from overseas. I used factories in Poland, Ireland and Romania before settling in Portugal where, happily, my fabrics are also woven, so it makes sense all round."

If there is a downside to the business of corporate couture – and Sue is in every other way completely in love with what she does - it is having to nod her head dutifully when a client rejects her more avant-garde suggestions and plays safe.

"I can quite understand why; they are not designers or trend setters, they just want what they think is the best for their business. I happen to think I could improve on that, but it's their decision! Yet safe can mean boring, so we end up with clones – suits made pretty much from the same mould, in navy, black or dark grey. Actually, that's why I love working for Aviance, because they bought into my idea for a brilliant aquamarine cloth."

As you'd expect, there have been the usual idiot Neanderthal attitudes to deal with along the way, men who will only deal with men, that kind of thing. But as 85% of the people she dresses are women, it is not hard to see why her well-trained fashion eye finessed all that and why she has now become the go-to designer for any company wanting a uniform.

"It's all very silly isn't it," she says. "I mean business is business, whoever is doing it. But as some of my Jewish friends might say, sometimes the best man for a job is a woman!"

**Source: Sue Stedman [www.suestedman.com](http://www.suestedman.com)**