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The CEO Magazine
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More than Skin Deep

In only eight years, Deb Farnworth-Wood has transformed Australian Skin Clinics into one of the foremost businesses in the industry and has grown the company exponentially.

Images courtesy of Australian Skin Clinics

When Deb Farnworth-Wood purchased Australian Skin Clinics in 2007, she could see the huge potential for the non-surgical cosmetic treatment industry. Having seen that treatments such as laser hair removal, cosmetic injectables, and chemical peels had become more popular and more affordable for the everyday consumer, Deb wanted to raise awareness of the industry even more.

Deb is passionate about her company, the treatments it provides, and the results her customers receive. The industry is growing every day, and Deb believes that soon the everyday woman will be booking in treatments regularly. "I truly believe the treatments we provide will be as commonplace as having

your hair done," Deb says. "Nobody wants to look older. I anticipate that in the next five to seven years everyone will be having our treatments."

Deb purchased Australian Skin Clinics and came on as CEO eight years ago, shortly after moving to Australia from her native United Kingdom. She started her career in retail, working for the chain store Debenhams, which gave her extensive experience in all facets of business. "In the 1980s, Maggie Thatcher was empowering women in the United Kingdom, and this empowerment made it easy to grow and accept one promotion to the next. When I was very young, I started in office administration and was quickly promoted to administration manager, then regional administrator seconded to store-opening teams. I had the opportunity to gain experience in

audit, stocktaking, security, goods receipt, warehousing, display, maintenance, and on-floor sales. I worked in just about every aspect of the business."

The company wanted Deb to move to London the following year; however, she was not prepared to give up her home and quality of life to live in the chaos of the city. Instead, she resigned from her position and began what she believed would be a temporary job at a general practice. This was her initiation into the health industry.

"At that time in the United Kingdom, the government had an initiative called 'GP fund holding', which meant that general practitioners held the responsibility for the hospital budgets for certain treatments. This was new for GPs, as they had never been in that kind of business role before. >



“Across the country, they were looking for experienced business managers who could come in and take financial accountability as well as management accountability for those budgets, and with skills to drive innovation in the health sector. I was involved in the first wave of those initiatives. Within 12 months, the doctors made me a partner, and I was the first non-general practitioner to become a partner in a general practice.”

Deb goes on to explain: “Down the track, we bought a pharmacy and introduced other services such as dental, podiatry, dietetics, counselling, and aesthetic services.” The opportunities for growth and development were endless, and after 17 years Deb was looking for a new challenge. Then aged 44, she decided it was time for a big change and moved to Australia with her husband and family. On a reconnaissance mission in 2006, Deb found Australian Skin Clinics and immediately recognised the potential for growth and development. She decided to buy the company and revamp it.

With Deb’s experience and background in health management, she analysed the business, deciding what worked and what didn’t. When she first stepped into the business, it offered a wide variety of beauty, cosmetic, and aesthetic treatments—too many, in fact. It was then that she decided the treatment offering needed to be simplified. “We did a lot of the soft and fluffy beauty. But we also carried out cosmetic injectables, laser treatments, and low-key surgical procedures, such as liposuction. What that meant was that the business was difficult to manage. It wasn’t efficient because we needed too many staff grades, too many stock items, and there wasn’t enough staff flexibility.

“It was difficult keeping on top of staff training, development, service delivery, and standards. It was inefficient, and supply management was cumbersome, so I decided that there was a whole range of procedures that were better left to the regular beauty therapists or doctors. I strategically chopped off



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- Deb Farnworth-Wood

the top and the bottom and we were left with the core treatments in the middle—being the most popular, the most cost-effective to deliver, and the most profitable for our business.”

Deb also decided the way forward was to franchise the business, and for this to happen the model would need to be simplified. “I spent a great deal of time researching franchising in Australia, and one of the things that stood out very clearly is that in a franchise you have to be able to easily replicate what you do. I analysed what was profitable and what skill sets were easy to obtain, and implemented this into the business. I knew nothing about franchising when I started on this route, so I had to do a lot of

learning first, starting from what a franchise is and how it works.

“Franchising is not as big in the United Kingdom, so it’s something I had very little exposure to. In some ways, that was a big learning curve. But elements of franchising were evident in the retail multiples that I had worked for previously, so all that knowledge was still useful. I always want to learn more, look for new information and new challenges, so for me that was a great opportunity to learn more.”

Deb is very involved in ensuring every franchisee is the right fit for her company. “We’re looking for people with good business skills. They don’t necessarily have to have knowledge of the industry, but they need to have a good

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grasp of business. We are looking for people who are committed to making their business work and grow. They need to drive their business and the sales of their clinic forward on a daily basis.”

Deb also wants to ensure every franchisee maintains the ethos of Australian Skin Clinics and demonstrates the brand values. “The number of enquiries we receive about franchise opportunities is truly beyond anything I’d ever expected. I love

to talk to potential franchisees to find out their aspirations and see if they’re the right fit for our culture. Our core values are that we want to provide the everyday person with the opportunity to look and feel fantastic, and we will not compromise the standard or quality of our service. We consider ourselves a leader in terms of quality service and quality treatment, but we also want to provide accessibility and value pricing.

“My cornerstone is all about quality and efficacy. My extensive health background has ingrained in me the principles of ethics, measurable outcomes, and accountability. I insist on clinical evidence for the effectiveness of treatments, and whether or not the treatments make a real difference to the client. We don’t carry out any treatments that are fluffy; we don’t do anything that won’t actually deliver a result for the client, and we’re looking for visible results. We use only equipment

that is backed by science, and we spend a great deal of expense and time testing new and innovative equipment. Unless it meets our strict 26-point criteria, we’re not interested in taking it further.

“My role as a franchisor is to make sure that my franchisees get value for money and to help them drive a good return on their investment. If we do right by the franchisees and they do right by the client, then the clients will keep coming back and everybody will be happy.”

Deb is a highly ethical person, and this can be seen in her approach to business. She is passionate about dealing with integrity with her team, clients, and suppliers. When establishing a relationship with a supplier, like Syneron & Candela, who provide the equipment for the Australian Skin Clinics’ laser treatments, Deb ensures that she is honest and ethical at all times. “I have a really high moral code when dealing with our suppliers. I will



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never put a supplier in a Dutch auction position. If I ask for quotes on any particular item, I will never discuss one supplier’s prices with another. I believe the most useful way to get the best out of your suppliers is to be really honest and say, “This is what I’m looking for. You give me your best offer, and then we’ll make a judgement on that case.” When we get the tenders in, we select the one that has the most merit, including quality, delivery, training, and price. We never go back to another supplier and say, “Well, if you can drop your prices by a few dollars, we’ll go with you.”

Another important factor for Deb is the sustainability of her suppliers. Since Australian Skin Clinics continues to grow rapidly, she needs to ensure that her suppliers can handle this growth. “One of the core values that I’m looking for is sustainability,” Deb says, “because as our business grows, we need to know that we

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can rely on our suppliers. Even in the early days when we only had three clinics, I always made sure that the suppliers that we used were capable of catering to a larger business. The last thing a growing business needs is to be caught out and lose an important supply chain. I encourage suppliers to have an intricate knowledge of our business so that they understand our priorities, and we maintain regular contact with them.”

Deb cares deeply about her team and her company, ensuring the quality and integrity of Australian Skin Clinics never slip. She is truly passionate about helping people, particularly women, to achieve their goals. “The things that give me pleasure in life are seeing people change, develop, and grow. As we are working within a female-oriented environment, we have a massive opportunity to influence a large number of

women on a daily basis. We provide our team with opportunity to flourish and grow. We have technicians who have become clinic managers and franchisees. I really get a buzz out of that.”

Ultimately, Australian Skin Clinics has been built into what it is today on the back of Deb’s hard work and integrity. The beauty industry can sometimes be seen as misleading, and Deb wants to ensure her business is always honest and upfront. “Our industry is one where there are great companies and some not so great. I operate on a very high ethical and professional basis, and I expect my team to do the same. The fact is, the treatments that we deliver are all credible and they are all backed by science.

“The whole journey has seen a lot of highs and lows, but has been very exciting and very challenging. I wouldn’t change a day of it.”