

Online nanny recruiters go global^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ursula Maidens had a name for her new company long before she knew what it would actually do.

With a background in childcare and the name, Rockmybaby, it was always going to be about children, but it was not until she was "twiddling my thumbs" after selling her childcare centres that she decided what to do with it.

With two young children, she knew she wanted to work from her Hawke's Bay home and decided on an internet- based nanny and babysitter recruitment service.

The business's massive growth had been really exciting, she said.

What started as a small enterprise had developed into a New Zealand-wide franchise, then spread to Australia. Now there are tentative plans to take on the rest of the world.

The original small business plan worked when the business started in 2006, but after three years "it grew into a tiger". "I was holding it by the tail."

She was fielding inquiries for nannies and babysitters from around New Zealand, and Australian families who had used her service while staying here were asking if she could help them back home.

About this time last year a decision had to be made. "It was either set up regional teams of staff all around New Zealand, or set up franchises. We investigated, and decided on the franchise model."

Priced between \$20,000 and \$50,000, three were sold in the first six weeks, jumping to six by the end of 12 months, with seven left to go.

The franchisees paid a flat license fee per month, which was easier to manage than the traditional percentage of turnover and marketing contributions. "We want them to be successful, and the best way to do that is not take all the money off them."

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In New Zealand it was by pre-set region; in Australia by town or city guided by the franchisee's wishes. Internationally, it is likely to be by master franchise for a whole country.

Mrs Maidens said in Australia, the law governing franchise contracts was quite different to New Zealand's, and would vary from country to country. "Selling by master franchise to someone who knows the laws of the country they're going to be working in makes sense."

And the secret to making a new business work in the tough economic climate of the past 12 months?

"Hard work. I've never worked so hard."

The couple managed the intellectual property, the website, took the 0800 calls, negotiated with potential franchise owners, ran the marketing programme, supported the existing franchisees and ran the so-far unsold regions.

And life is about to get busier.

While negotiations to sell the Sydney franchise had potential, Mrs Maidens was planning on managing the rest of the business in Australia in the meantime, to lift the profile to a point where it attracted franchisees.

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Mrs Maidens said the long-term goal was to sell all the franchises in New Zealand and Australia, the latter expected to raise, "fingers crossed", between \$500,000 and \$750,000. Then it would be a case of running the support network, and deciding whether to actively market worldwide franchises.

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/10/12/online-nanny-recruiters-go-global> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/australia-and-new-zealand> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/economics> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/international-organizations>