

ANNAH STRETTON

RAW emotion

Launching her label in 1992, Annah Stretton is now a household name in New Zealand fashion. In Annah's words, the Annah Stretton story is a complex one — there has long been far more to the brand than clothing. As founder of the highly impactful RAW (Reclaim Another Woman), and director of a number of other charitable organisations, Annah has long had a deep drive to create positive societal change. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that when the phone rang with a call for help as the Covid pandemic emerged, Annah said yes without hesitation. That decision has since helped many thousands during the pandemic — and has also led to a remarkable business opportunity.



Prior to the emergence of Covid-19, Annah Stretton — the business — was in a transitional phase, with Sami Stretton, daughter of company founder Annah Stretton MNZM, in the process of taking over leadership of the brand, working alongside Annah through an anticipated five-year handover.

With almost 30 years in business, the team had identified the need to reinvent. ‘We’re well known as the label that mainstream New Zealand would aspire to wear to a wedding, and we’re delighted by that. Now, though, we’re competing globally and we need to do something differently, to find a way to appeal to a new market,’ says Annah.

This was all running in parallel with Annah’s ongoing contribution to New Zealand’s not-for-profit sector, and her recent return to university. There, she is completing a master’s degree in social science, looking to further research and understand some of the deep challenges she is helping to overcome.

With these two strings to her bow, it was little surprise, then, that when Maria English (daughter of the Rt Hon Sir Bill English, thirty-ninth prime minister of New Zealand) needed someone to manufacture 6,000 face masks, it was Annah she phoned.

‘Maria called. She said: “We need to manufacture 6,000 fabric face masks. We’re working with elderly people, and people with disabilities [who need face-mask protection] — can you help?” Our designer had an amazing face-mask design, and we’ve got 30 years’ worth of cotton fabric leftovers, so I decided we were going to do it. Pro bono,’ recalls Annah.

‘Once we’d committed, I thought: “If we’re going to make face masks for charity, why not open that right up to anyone who needs one?” We know they’re not medical-grade, but something has to be better than nothing, and at the time the supply of PPE [personal protective equipment] from the government to frontline workers was really slow.’

So the Annah Stretton team announced the project, and that first night the phones didn’t stop. ‘We were getting calls from midwives — even the hospitals got in touch. They didn’t know what to do; they just couldn’t get PPE.’

‘We had a whole infrastructure we were able to dig out from when we used to manufacture a lot of our clothing on-site. Nine industrial sewing machines, four industrial overlockers, our huge cutting table and cutting knives. We just got into it!’

As demand continued to rise, the team advertised on Facebook and posted in their local community pages, looking for anyone with access to industrial sewing equipment willing to lend a hand with production. The response came quickly. ‘Everyone reached out; the community got right behind us.’ With strict hygiene procedures in place, sewing was delivered and collected from letterboxes, with the Stretton workshop itself operating as a closed bubble of five people.

‘It was just insanity — it just took off! At the beginning we offered to pay the sewers in clothing, as there wasn’t any money available to pay them. Later, though — when we started selling the

masks — we were able to start paying people for each mask they made.’

With the initial order fulfilled, the team continued to supply to any non-profit or healthworker free-of-charge. As the lockdown levels eased, however, public demand from people willing and able to purchase the masks began to grow.

‘As we started coming down through the levels, people started buying our masks. We got them into our retail stores, and sales were trickling along. Every time there was a government announcement about the virus spreading, we’d see a spike. At the time the expert advice was that we didn’t “need” masks, but people still wanted them, though!’ says Annah.

Over the next few weeks, the government’s messaging started to shift, with concern about the likelihood of community transmission growing. The messaging around wearing masks, in particular, changed considerably: now the advice was that people should have masks in their houses, ready in the event of a re-emergence of the virus. Demand for the Annah Stretton masks skyrocketed.

‘In one single night we did a quarter of our usual annual turnover — just in a single evening. Every time the government said “We might go back into lockdown”, or “Have masks on hand for the family”, we were the [go-to] “mask people”. We were annihilated!’

Their growing reputation for face masks was no accident, though. ‘We got in early, we reacted early. A lot of people might have seen this 6,000-unit order come through and thought “Nah, there’s no money in it, I’ll just sit at

home.” But what started as a charitable contribution has developed into this wonderful business opportunity. I honestly think this’ll be a permanent pivot for us. We now have a diversity of masks available, including a very fancy sequin mask if you want one. Overall, though, our focus has been on making our masks affordable, and reusable, in line with our goal to be sustainable.

‘The other wonderful thing is that a lot of the RAW women who are part of the model have actually benefited from this. They’ve come in: we’ve trained them on the sewing machines or they’re helping pack the masks — they’re working with us in fully paid roles.’

Founded in 2014 by Annah Stretton, the charity RAW was set up to help break New Zealand’s cycle of intergenerational offending, educational underachievement, persistent poverty and violence for a group of disadvantaged women.

‘These are women who have essentially been written off,’ says Annah. ‘Intergenerational criminals, they’ve only ever known disruption. A lot of these women have never worked, so it’s been wonderful to be able to build that community. We have a wonderful diversity of people working together to get this great outcome.’

‘I’ve always wanted to make sure we were more than just a business with a healthy bottom line. How do we contribute? What is it that we do that makes a real difference? Covid has given us another way to achieve this.’