

Susi Lennox – Yes Yes Yes



Yes Yes Yes – for some it’s a Meg Ryan moment, for others it’s from the final climax of James Joyce’s novel, *Ulysses*. For Susi Lennox and her business partner Sarah Brooks, it’s also the title of their very successful Petersfield-based company, which manufactures natural intimate lubricant products. The award-winning business, founded in 2003, turned over £1.2 million in 2014 and now employs a dozen people full time. The Yes range has over 20 international distributors, and is sold online to 92 countries worldwide. Its water-based and oil-based products are available in high-street health food stores and pharmacies throughout the UK.

As the eldest of five children growing up in an Irish/Scottish Catholic family in Glasgow, Lennox credits her family with providing an encouraging and creative environment where inspiring and sometimes wild thinking was allowed. The twin influences of her father’s family’s hunger for academic attainment blended with the entrepreneurial spirit of her mother’s retail-minded family, equipped her with ambitions for achievement and happiness and gave birth to her pioneering spirit. With a degree in English, and a post grad in education, her first job was teaching international students at St Clare’s College in Oxford during the swinging sixties. Marriage and a move to Winchester followed where, having given up full-time teaching to bring up the couple’s three daughters, she was able to cultivate her interest in the new psychologies, quantum physics, and holistic health, out of which studies she began running personal development workshops. This eventually led her into the corporate world working with such major clients as Shell, IBM, BP and Exxon Chemicals, where she met friend and future Yes co-founder Sarah Brooks.

Tell us more about your early career

In the early ‘70s I trained as a yoga teacher and studied meditation and complementary therapies, which was quite unusual in those days, especially as I was married to a practising GP. It certainly

created some interesting dynamics. The personal development workshops opened a door into management consultancy, where I worked for a number of world-class organisations, travelling extensively. I loved the role of independent change agent, giving me as it did permission to work with new ideas into global businesses, which tend by their nature to become entrenched. Often the larger the business, the more difficult it is for individuals to flourish and bring all of themselves to work, because their values don't always fit.



How was the idea for Yes Yes Yes born?

Sarah, with a degree in chemistry, was a senior consultant creating global reporting processes for Pharmacovigilance and together we had worked in the drug safety divisions of major pharmaceutical companies. She had been at Pfizer when Viagra was launched, and became acutely aware of some of

the unintended side-effects of this sexual revolution. While husbands were rediscovering their sex drive, their wives were often finding intercourse painful and they simply couldn't keep up. The net effect was that some husbands were finding younger partners with predictable consequences for their marriages.

That inspired us to investigate what products there were for women which would enable them to enjoy an equally active sex life just as comfortably. What we discovered was a gap in the market for a pure and natural personal lubricant.

Sarah and I had both simultaneously reached a point where we felt it would be good to apply what we had learned from working in other organisations to launching our own business. So we set out to "change the world from the inside" by creating a new concept: a certified organic, plant-based natural range of intimacy products.

Why was it so important to take the ethical, organic route?

Having been immersed in corporate environments, we had seen the compromises people had to make to allow market presence. We challenged ourselves to create a business where ethical compromises didn't need to be made.

On the organic side, our research into the category revealed serious concerns about the ingredients of other personal intimacy care products. Their chemical formulations rely on a glycerin or silicone base, and disquieting ingredients such as paraben preservatives and propylene glycol, all of which have been shown to have potentially harmful effects on the body, and particularly the more vulnerable and highly-sensitive intimate tissues. This made us determined to offer pure and high-performing alternatives, which would enhance, rather than compromise, intimate health without side effects or skin irritants. The only way we could demonstrate the purity of the ingredients we used in the Yes range, was to go down the certified organic route with the Soil Association, widely recognised as the gold standard. This gives customers the guarantee of our products' purity.

How did you achieve that?

We set up our own product development laboratory, and devoted three and a half years to intensive research, creating and testing new paradigm formulations. After working through myriad prototypes we were able to patent our breakthrough water-based product, confirming its true originality.

You each sold your houses to fund the R&D, did you have any doubts you would succeed?

It was a daring, perhaps reckless thing to do, but without external funding, financing the R&D phase ourselves ensured our freedom and autonomy. Despite some serious challenges and blows en route, I don't think we ever had any regrets. We were investing in the strength of our original vision, and that commitment kept us on track.

Can you tell us what some of those challenges were?

A formulation chemist we had briefly consulted about natural preservative systems, applied to patent Yes water-based in his own name. That was one of several betrayals of trust we encountered, which mostly served to strengthen the commitment Sarah and I had made to each other.

We've also had to deal with a number of copycat products coming on to the market, several of which are actually infringing our patent, but we proudly assert our status as pioneers in the field of certified organic intimacy products, and choose to capitalise on that further by extending our range.



Where did the name come from?

From my reading of Ulysses I remembered how the long book culminates on the last page with the celebrated soliloquy by Molly Bloom, as she remembers how she first succumbed to the sexual overtures of our hero, in her final utterance of acquiescence – "and yes I said yes I will Yes." This was the inspiration for the name of our brand, our business and our website (www.yesyesyes.org)

What has been your greatest moment?

I feel spoilt for choice. Achieving Soil Association organic status was an early landmark for us, and two years ago, receiving NHS approval was the cause of great celebration. It was the first time a certified organic personal care product had been listed in the drug tariff, enabling Yes water-based to be prescribed by GPs and healthcare practitioners. We are very proud of this recognition.

We have so many wonderful testimonials from women and men who describe how Yes has helped them turn the clock back, healed their relationships and resolved intimate discomfort. When they tell us the effect Yes has had on their marriages and their intimate health, we feel very moved and gratified.

One of our products, Yes Baby, is for couples who are trying to conceive, and the first time a customer announced "I'm pregnant" after using our sperm-friendly lubricant, was a major thrill. Since then, we've had reports of many Yes babies and each time it's a source of joy.



What's your day-to-day role?

I'm in the office every day, and closely involved in all operational issues as well as developments relating to new products and new markets. I attend and exhibit Yes at medical conferences, and international trade shows, and I use every platform possible to raise awareness of the importance of side-effect-free natural intimacy products.

Between 50-80% of menopausal women experience vaginal dryness caused by declining oestrogen levels. This can cause pain during intercourse, and frequently a condition called atrophic vaginitis where even sitting down can hurt. Chemically induced menopause, as with breast cancer treatment or having a hysterectomy, creates the same effect, as can pregnancy, breast-feeding, taking anti-depressants, the pill or antihistamines or suffering from stress. This means that most women have a need for vaginal moisturisers at some stage in their lives.

Where do you take you inspiration from?

I have a galaxy of influencers: mystics, poets and pioneers. Anita Roddick is one. She changed the environmental and ethical landscape with her campaigning and natural products. Essentially I take inspiration from those working in the field of personal and social transformation, such as the Dalai Lama, Deepak Chopra, mythologist Joseph Campbell and life coach Tony Robbins.



How do you give back to the community?

We contribute to a range of charities including the Woodland Trust, Marie Curie, and the Yes to Life campaign. We also practise random acts of kindness towards good causes and our customers.

How would you describe yours and Sarah's relationship?

We're the ying and yang of the business.

You're 70 now, do you have plans to retire?

No – life is too exciting right now.