

Super woman!

► When retail guru Kate Hardcastle isn't travelling the world saving businesses, she's doing charity work, guiding a financially ailing rugby club, and being a great mother. She takes multitasking to a whole new level, says Shiva Kumar Thekkepat

Kate Hardcastle is just back from a long morning session with a potential client in Dubai. It's past 3pm and she hasn't eaten since breakfast, but she graciously agrees to do the interview before a late lunch. It's only after some persuasion that she orders a plate of pasta.

That in essence is Kate's attitude towards work. The 36-year-old UK-based retail guru believes that having the right attitude is vital to make businesses succeed.

Retail guru, what's that? "Well, they [the press] like to give you titles in the UK," she laughs. "A few years ago some media people asked me to help a city that was really struggling - Bradford. The story got picked up and it was on every news channel.

"It was a time when the recession had hit the UK, in 2009, and many businesses were closing down. Nobody was doing anything about it, just blaming the retailers, blaming the global economic downturn, and so on.

"That was the state of the UK retail scene. People thought it was just cooling a bit, that after a while people would start spending money again."

Never one to mince her words, Kate told it like it was. "The retail scene was going to change for ever," she says. And her words resonated with consumers.

"People had started working at more than one job, their lifestyles had changed," she says. "People did not shop nine to five any more, and yet shops in the high streets opened nine to five.

"People had started 'window shopping' online and then deciding what to buy later in the stores, or maybe online. That was not about money, it was about convenience, a new approach to shopping.

"The only hope for the retailer was to embrace the different channels, understand there are different ways of selling. Some of

them thought that because the customers were going online, they should take all their business online too. They didn't realise that while online sales would be a big part of business, there were other factors involved. People take a clinical approach to online shopping and luxury impulsive purchases are made rarely – when it comes to checking out and putting in the credit card details, most online customers shy away from such buys. So the high streets still had a place, only it was a different place.

“When I started talking about this, most people were interested, and media including the BBC had me talking to more small businesses that were in trouble.”

Thus the retail guru was born. Her company, Insight with Passion, acts as a troubleshooter for ailing businesses. Kate goes in, talks to all the players in the business from the bottom up, analyses the situation and prescribes the medicine, which is usually a common-sense approach to solving the problem of getting a higher footfall into shops, or increasing the reach of a business.

Kate has won more than 20 professional awards, including the coveted National award

‘You have two ears and one mouth, and you have to use them in that order’

for Young Marketer of the Year, Outstanding Business Woman, Innovator of the Year and Inspirational Business Woman, all in the UK.

She now works across the globe and is a regular speaker at business forums. She was in Dubai recently to speak at a seminar hosted by Capital Club Dubai, the region's premier private business club.

For a company to stay ahead in business, the simple way is to stay focused on customers, says Kate. Customer satisfaction is not only a key factor, but also an intrinsic part of a firm's vision. Very often a company begins to fail because it hasn't kept up to date with the constantly changing face of what the customer wants and needs, and has a tendency to give priority to internal needs rather than those of the customer, she explains.

When helping a business, Kate creates programmes, organises workshops and has talks with every member in a corporate team.

She was in New Delhi, India, recently to advise some retailers on customer service. How does what she learnt in the UK apply to India, or China or Australia – places where her business-enhancement programmes are in big demand? “The same circumstances do not apply,



Kate launched the Customer at the Heart awards in the UK, which she can be seen presenting above and left

but the same processes do, and that process is research,” she says.

“You have to talk to people. My grandmother always taught me you have two ears, one mouth, and you have to use them in order. I am a very good listener and I am always full of questions, and I think the directors of the businesses I've worked with would say that

They're not likely to come back, are they, even if you jazzed up your home for them?”

The ugly is when it's a combination of all three – price, service and attitude. “When they match the price by sizing up the customer, give them the service they feel they deserve – cook up prices and cheat people,” says Kate.

The worst crime, she says, is when a shop is closing down for the night and a customer comes in and they turn him away. “It's infuriating, and not likely to inspire loyalty.”

Kate also helps business-to-business organisations and finds that even though the way businesses operate varies depending on location, the basics are the same. “Generally people want to be treated with respect; everywhere they feel the businesses don't say ‘thank you’ to them often enough, don't deal with them in a friendly and honest manner, we find out what's missing or what there should be more of, and fine-tune their modus operandi.”

Kate deals with the company bosses in much the same way as she deals with her four-year-old daughter Nya Ella – with words of encouragement and appreciation, before telling them what they are doing wrong. “I always tell businesses what they are doing right first, so they feel better,” she says. “No one praises the owners and people at the top. They get their profits, and bonuses, but plain appreciation is hard to come by. Then come the brass tacks – this is where you are, this is where you want to be, this is how you do it.”

All for a song

When she was growing up Kate wanted to be a jazz and soul singer. “I very quickly realised I wasn't going to make much money because the probability of success was so small,” she says. “I did it for six months professionally while still at school. I was the next big thing in my head. I played clubs and gigs the UK, and saw the cold, unglamorous side of it all. This was in the Nineties before Simon Cowell came along. It was really hard work and I didn't want that kind of a life.”

While studying for her A Levels, Kate discovered a passion for marketing. “That was when I got interested in management, and even while I was studying I got into music management,” she says.

Kate was 18 when she became the lead vocalist and manager of upcoming troupe, The Fabulous BB Kings. She brokered deals with Sky TV and Harley-Davidson for the band, then went on to do a degree in business.

But her passion for singing remains. Even now, she sings occasionally for various acts including Bare Faced Cheek, a band she helped start while still in college. Her own business, which she started in 2009 during the height of the recession in Europe, and charity work keep her busy and travelling the globe. She and her

I am quite friendly and good to be with, so people give me information quite freely.

“When I talk to a customer, I don't look like a scary CEO in a grey suit out to intimidate them. I am like a mum on the school run, asking them, ‘How does that work for you?’ or talking to them about their work and kids and how that influences their purchasing decisions. I get honest feedback, and that works everywhere.”

What then does the retail guru prescribe to boost retail sales? Nothing very drastic, just plain old common sense, says Kate. According to her, there are the ‘good, the bad and the ugly’ in the retail business. “You go to someone's house and feel welcomed, taken care of – if you are treated like that in retail, that's really good,” she says. “The bad is when it's an expanse of glitz and gold and people stand around not caring if you are interested in the goods or not, if they are sad and tired, or uncaring and boorish.

“There are others who are always waiting for the makeover that's nine months away. Why don't you make some money now? When you don't look after the customers you have, that's plumbing the depths. I've seen a lot of this in Australia, and in the UK. They are busy spending money trying to improve their business in other areas, when they should be taking care of the customers. It's like someone coming into your home and you ignore them.



staff devote 20 per cent of their time, energy and resources to projects that are close to their hearts. "I think it's important to give people the motivation and support they need to get involved with charity work," she says.

A drive to give something back

The desire to contribute to the community goes back to her childhood. A great admirer of Dame Anita Roddick – the late British businesswoman, human rights activist and environmental campaigner who founded ethical beauty retailer The Body Shop – Kate wrote to her as a child and even met her.

"I was so inspired by the way she managed to combine business with making a real difference to the lives of others," she says. "I'm hoping to do the same with my company and projects."

Realising that many UK charities weren't getting the exposure they needed to raise funds or recruit volunteers, Kate started her own charity, called Charity Dreamgirls, in 2007. She launched the charity with a one-off concert, which she performed in, to raise money for some of the smaller charities in the UK.

She wrote to a number of star singers asking them to take part. Incredibly, Smokey Robinson sent a video message and American R&B and pop singer Martha Reeves flew in from the US. The concert was a sell-out.

After her success, Kate decided that rather than setting up another charity that would further eat into a shrinking pie, she would set up an organisation to stage events to raise awareness for smaller charities that couldn't do it for themselves.

"There are 180,000 charities in the UK all competing for the public's attention and money," she says. "If you are a smaller charity, how do you get yourself heard? I knew I could bring my skills from the corporate world to support them and create fun events people would want to get involved with."

The group has organised many events to help 11 charities around the UK, including the Yorkshire branch of the RSPCA, Leonard Cheshire Disability and The Stroke Association.



Not satisfied with all the pro bono work she and her staff do, Kate has launched another initiative called Positive Image, a campaign to inspire confidence and positive body image in young people and to tackle issues such as obesity, anorexia, self-harm and bullying.

"I was bullied for a long time at school because I did not conform to their idea of what girls should do," she says. "I spent weekends in my bedroom because it wasn't cool to go to the museums I wanted to. Everything comes from a lack of confidence – which is what we hope to build in such victims."

Kate also recently took on a directorship on the board of rugby league team Bradford Bulls.

"My father, who's a fan, called me one day to ask me to help the team, which was in financial trouble. How could I refuse?" laughs Kate.

She is the first ever female board director within British rugby league. She says she will focus on developing the Bulls' brand and building up the club's fan base among families and children as well as creating new opportunities for women in rugby league.

But what she really wants to do is be a good mum. "I juggle my work commitments with help from my mum, who babysits," says Kate. Her mother and daughter travel with her on her trips abroad. "My long-term plan is to just be the best mum I can be," she says. Charity, after all, begins at home.

For the launch of her Positive Image campaign, top picture, Kate enlisted the help of (from left): former athlete Diane Modahl, Dr Helen Wright and TV personality Dr Jenni Trent Hughes. Kate is also a talented jazz singer and has performed with many bands including For Funk Sake, above

● sthekkepat@gulfnews.com
@Shiva_friday