



Sew What? Inc. It's not a question. It's the answer.™



## **Sew What? founder and CEO Megan Duckett went to the US chasing bright lights and ended up on curtain call.**

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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#### **Draped in success**

Lia Timson, Sydney Morning Herald

June 28, 2010 - What do Lady Gaga, Rod Stewart and Compton High School in California have in common? They've all had their stage drapes made by Australian-born US entrepreneur Megan Duckett.

Theatrical drapes are big business and not only because they are the first and the last thing audiences see.

From backdrops and grand drapes to cycloramas and Venetian curtains, drapery is a special effects tool, an art and an industry as old as theatre itself. Only technology – both in manufacturing and delivery – sets it light years apart from its predecessors.

Duckett understands the significance of drapes to her showbiz clients and to the families of those she employs. She runs [Sew What?](#), a 40-person, 14-year-old manufacturing operation in an industrial zone

south of Los Angeles, where theatre drapery has become a US\$4.6million (\$5.3 million) a year business.

Like many entrepreneurs before her, Duckett started her company on her kitchen table, with one sewing machine to help make ends meet.

"I apprenticeshipped as a theatre electrician back home," says the petite Duckett in her unusual Californian-flavoured Australian accent.

"I wanted to go on tour. My dream was to tour with Billy Joel."

Sitting with the pocket-rocket Melbournian in Shanghai, where she'd been invited to inspire other executive women at the first Dell Women's Entrepreneur Network global conference, one gets the impression that everything is possible when you set your mind to it.

It might be the twinkle in her eyes, or the girlish fringe the mother-of-one started to sport lately, or the fact that she is always crediting her staff - to the point of suggesting their photo, not hers, be featured on this

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profile – with her success, that gives a glimpse of what it takes to make it there.

Duckett left her home for the US as a stage electrician at the age of 19 looking for adventure and a slice of Hollywood glamour. Except she didn't envisage that her Green Card sponsor – an events staging company – might need some sewing done on the side. Her first gig was sewing coffin linings for a Halloween production.

After marrying her now business partner, New Zealander Adam Duckett, the accidental seamstress realised she was earning more money from her craft than from her day job, which by now, involved doing computerised floor plans for 5000-attendee functions.

"That's when Adam said 'what on earth are you doing?' so the challenge was for me to do my own thing knowing that I was also in the land of opportunity.

"He kept his job until the sewing company's volume had grown and the HR requirements had evolved to a point where I found I could no longer make the sale, make the products and manage the staff alone. Now we're together 22 hours a day."

In addition to focus, bullheadedness and a pinch of naivety, Duckett, 38, credits hard work by her staff, a willingness to learn and technology with the success of her business.

"I realised early on that people saw curtains as a cottage craft industry. So I decided to take the craft out of the cottage," she says by way of explaining her interest in computers.

One of the first things she did after starting the company, was to enroll in a course to learn how to build her own website. Then the company built an in-house custom ordering and planning software and signed with Dell to supply all hardware requirements and avoid "shopping around looking for 'deals' and having bits from multiple office supply stores, wrong cables and lost receipts."

Sew What? also developed an application to eliminate lost-in-translation mistakes since the sewing room is staffed predominantly by Spanish-speaking workers.

"I said 6 inches, you thought I said 6 feet. Oops, there goes all my cloth.' It was tremendously frustrating", she recalls with a crooked smile.

Recently Duckett decided she was tired of cutting and posting fabric swatches to designers around the world so they could show their rock star clients their vision for the stage. So she purchased a high grade distance medicine video conferencing solution that allows sales staff to show clients proposed fabrics down to their woven fibres.

This year, with another business partner, she opened a second business – Rent What? – an off-shoot that rents and repurposes stage drapery.

Does she ever look back and think she's built a really nice business? A long pause ensues.

"I don't stop to ponder, really. I go to bed at night really tired," she chuckles in a non-victimising kind of way.

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● "Once a month, we have our fourth Friday celebrations where we gather the whole company for 30 minutes and celebrate birthdays, specials occasions, and give recognition for something really special. That's when I do think I'm really proud of what we've achieved."

● And has she finally met Billy Joel?

● "We've made drapes for him, but it wasn't my sale, so I haven't met him."

● Not yet, anyhow.

