

taking charge

They are creative, driven and might just be your next boss. Young go-getters are breaking the mould when it comes to workplace stereotypes, Samantha Robin reports.

Photograph by Daryl Gordon

Lachlan Coates, 20, was bored one night when he decided to start his own business. His philosophy was simple — he wanted something he could set up easily and cheaply with the skills he already had.

What he came up with was Burst Graphics, a Frankston-based, online company specialising in advertising and marketing material.

A year later, the bold move has already paid dividends for Coates, who recently won the young entrepreneur category of the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula Excellence in Business Awards. “Right from the moment I started, I had jobs coming in,” he said.

For most, the risk of starting a business at such a young age would have been a deterrent but Coates is among many young people jumping at the opportunity to be their own boss.

The financial outlay for Coates has been minimal — 80 per cent of the business is run from his laptop. “You can’t be conservative if you want to succeed, you need to be able to take some risks,” he said.

It is this ‘no fear’ attitude that has many ‘20-somethings’ branching out and discovering their own business potential.

Empower Business Solutions founder and chief executive Greg Chapman said risk taking was partly a generational rite of passage.

“Younger people are more risk tolerant, which is good because if nobody took a chance, nothing would ever change,” he said.

“Generation Y has watched their parents slave away at the same job for 10-15 years, in some cases only to be made redundant, and they don’t want to follow the same path, they

want to be in charge of their own destiny.

“People should commit to a year, but if they can’t break even in the first three months they need to start looking clearly at their business model.”

Dr Chapman said the evolution of the internet had made it easier for people to start businesses with very little capital.

“There have never been fewer barriers to starting up a business. In the old days it was about bricks and mortar and there were huge financial outlays associated with setting up a business. But these days you can do it relatively easily without much cost involved.”

Dr Chapman said people going into business needed to think outside the box, like Melbourne-based duo Chris Peters and Rob Ward who developed an iPhone case with an inbuilt bottle opener.

“The younger generation are great at

“I think if it is something you really want to do, you should keep chasing it. You can’t have regrets.”

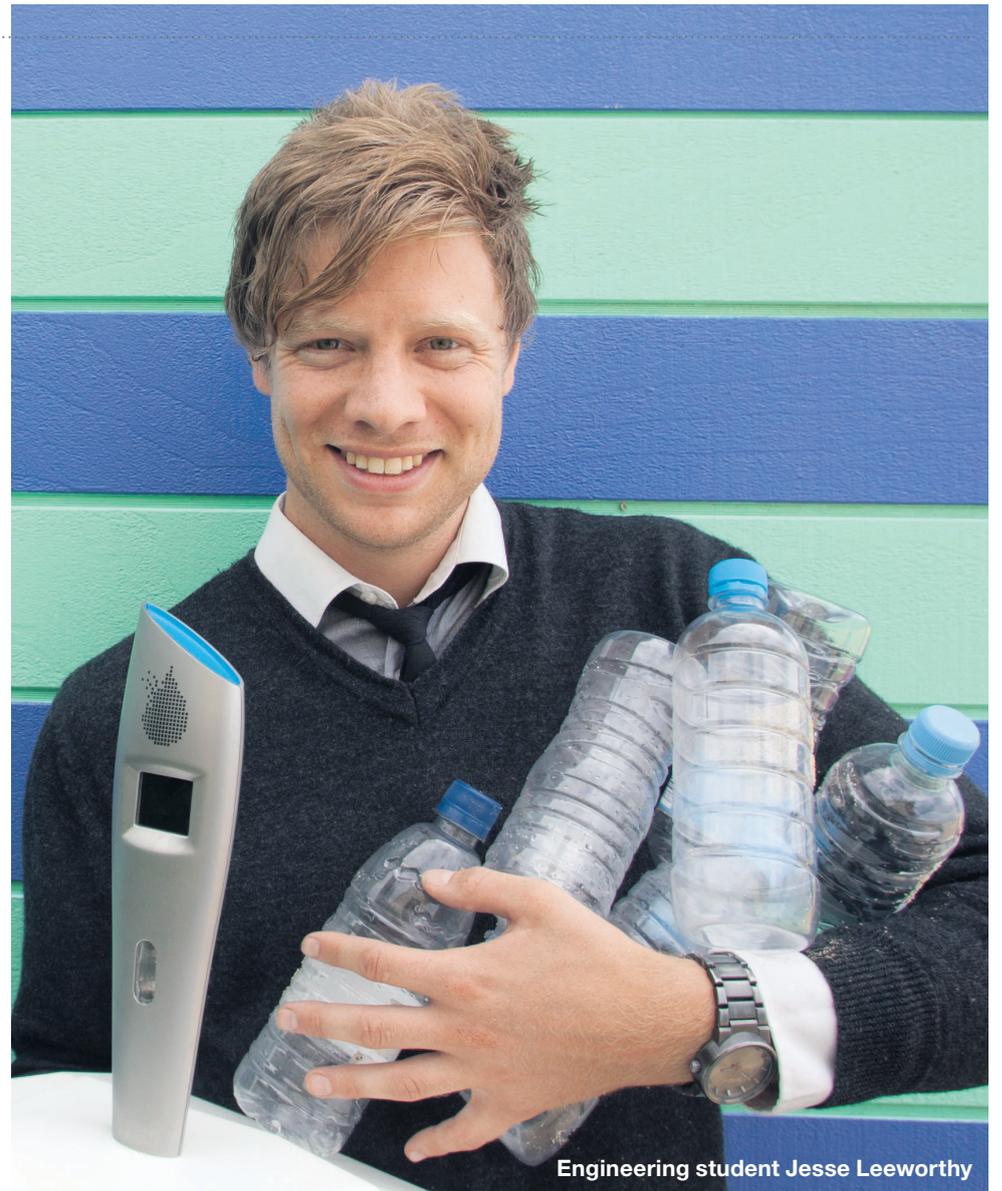
— Rae Blaikie

coming up with ideas the older generation hasn’t thought of but they still need to have the business skills to make it work,” he said.

“There were lots of businesses set up in the dot com era that threw the old business model out the window. Very few of those businesses are still around today. The basic rules of accounting haven’t changed, you still need more money coming in than going out.”

Mornington resident Rae Blaikie is hoping her online clothing business will fall into the success category. After scrolling through possible TAFE courses and not finding any she was interested in, the 22 year old decided to follow her heart and start up her own business.

“I have always loved fashion and found myself wanting to alter clothes to suit my style so I thought ‘why not start my own business?’”



Engineering student Jesse Leeworthy

Blaikie and her business partner Aedan Butler, 26, share the workload.

Their online clothing store Ella & Knox went live last month and dresses are already flying out the door to all corners of the globe.

But she admits it hasn’t all been smooth sailing. Blaikie was refused a bank loan and had to turn to another investor to provide the capital she needed to start the business. It was a huge blow but the setback only strengthened her determination.

“I think if it is something you really want to do, you should keep chasing it,” she said. “You can’t have regrets.”

She also went through the process of hiring and firing two seamstresses before she found the right one. Managing staff was a new experience and one that took a bit of getting used to. “I actually googled how to fire someone.”

Blaikie said while she had prepared herself mentally for the workload involved, it was still a shock to the system.

“You can’t expect to do a few months of hard work and then think the business will run itself. Whatever you think is going to be hard, you have to triple that.”

While making money is the bottom line in any business venture, there are other driving forces influencing young go-getters.

With the carbon tax recently passing through the Senate, more and more businesses are looking for greener alternatives to reduce their carbon footprint.

When engineering student Jesse Leeworthy came across a company setting up an

alternative to plastic water bottles, he was keen to get involved in the project.

He was selected from a group of product design engineering students at Swinburne University to design a water purifying system for Ishke, a company which prides itself on creating environmentally friendly alternatives.

“Growing up in Red Hill, I have always been very environmentally conscious,” he said. “Ishke highlighted how bad plastic bottles were for the environment [it takes more than three litres of oil to make a litre bottle of water] and it really made me want to help make a difference.”

The product is a twist on existing water filtration systems. Instead of refilling plastic bottles, customers purchase a reusable, stainless steel drink bottle that can be refilled, at a small cost, at dispensing stations. The system works off mains water and would significantly reduce the environmental impact of plastic bottles.

Leeworthy spent 10 months researching how the system would operate and ensuring the product was viable. He is confident the Ishke system will be a success and will soon appear in and around Melbourne’s CBD.

He has already been nominated for several design and innovation awards for the product.

Dr Chapman, however, warned that even the environmentally conscious must keep the fundamental business model in mind.

“They can’t save the world if they are going broke. Customers don’t choose you just because you are green — you have to tick all the other boxes of being a successful business first.”