



# EXEMPLARY ENTREPRENEURSHIP

## GABRIELLA SOMERVILLE MANAGING DIRECTOR CONNECTJETS LTD

Starting her career with Virgin Atlantic as Cabin Crew, Gabriella Somerville was selected for the carrier's prolific promotional team, hosting VIP Inaugural flights to several U.S. cities, as well as Hong Kong and Japan. She then moved to British Airways, before running her own boutique events management company. In 2006, she was appointed Client Relationship Manager for Bombardier's company Skyjet International, honing her customer relationship skills and aviation knowledge to evolve an innovative Jet Membership program, before joining successor company VistaJet as VP Program sales. In 2009, Gabriella founded ConnectJets with her own seed capital, a business she continues to run today, always expanding its charter/sales activity. Charity work is close to her heart and ConnectJets has raised over £ 150,000 for the Children's Hospice and Military Charities.

By Sylvie Péron

**A**tall, model-figure all clad in black Gabriella Somerville greeted *Altitude* on a chilly winter morning at her new office on Berkeley Square, in London. Her career in aviation has been so impressive that it seems debatable what she would be most proud of.

"There have been a number of highs and lows over the last 26 years since beginning my career in aviation," says Gabriella. "The most rewarding is undoubtedly the work with our designated charities. There is no greater joy than changing the life of an individual and aviation has allowed me to



Charity has and continues to play a hugely important role in my life. Thanks to Bombardier, private clients and operators we were able to take 33 Children, Parents and Siblings on two Learjets and one Gulfstream to Disneyland

do that. The personal success brings its own reward and of course recognition is something that we all aim for. I was particularly delighted to have won the European Honorary Global Exemplary Award for Entrepreneurship in 2015.

The award has opened a number of doors both here in the UK and further afield to be a spokesperson for the industry. In 2014 I also took up the role of mentor for Virgin Unite, the not for profit foundation group of the Virgin Company/Brand."

Undeniably, bringing a feminine touch to the work place does play to one's advantage. "However, being a woman in a male dominated environment can hold its challenges," states Gabriella. "There has always been a resistance within the industry towards women taking up key roles,

particularly in aircraft sales and other stem fields.

I am delighted that organizations such as EBAA/ BBGA/ BACA/WIA are beginning to challenge the status quo by giving women a voice to create and implement change at every level. As a company and female CEO I was delighted to have been awarded the exclusive agency agreement by Piaggio Aerospace in 2014, where we duly went on to introduce their first UK client in 2014. I think this is a clear testament that women can and do make a huge contribution in our industry.”

### AVIATION ON THE ROAD MAP

The second child in her family, Gabriella’s father was keen to have a son. “Whilst he was unquestionably delighted that I was a girl, he had already prescribed a road map that would include the integration of aircraft into my formative years. My father was both a designer and architect and his love of carpentry led him to design and construct a number of wooden aircraft with rotors and blades.

These planes brought much amusement and joy to me as a young child and I guess it was then that my passion was birthed.

My father was also an avid air show groupie, and the fact that we had a relative in the Red Arrows team was part of his desire to attend, so this played a key part in the journey as well. The formative years of any child’s life are pivotal and very much lay the cornerstone for their future destiny.”

Gabriella landed her first role as a flight attendant for Virgin Atlantic in 1989 to the envy of all her friends. “It was a girl’s dream job in the 80’s” she says.

“Richard (Branson) brought back the romance of air travel, and it was truly wonderful to be part of something that was so exciting and cutting edge. Remember these were the heady days of the on-board butler, catwalks at altitude, inaugural parties over the Atlantic! It was truly wonderful and I cannot remember a day when I wished I was doing something else.

Richard’s personality and desire to challenge the status quo made him an overnight success in the media. His PR strategy was on spec and paid dividends over the prevailing years.”

### CABIN CREW MANAGEMENT

According to Gabriella, crew management does require a level of diplomacy. “The conditions for crew today are rigorous, including long hours, less pay, increased service demands, short layovers and sleep deprivation. It requires a certain individual and temperament to manage the long, unsocial hours along with working at altitude in a tight piece of aluminum tubing! I take my hat off to them all – they do a grand job.”

Moving from Virgin to BA was a complete culture shock. “The move was a strategic one as I needed to explore and develop my career in a large corporate to progress up the ladder. I knew I needed to experience both the entrepreneurial and corporate ship. Both served me well in terms of experience and I am convinced they were duly instrumental in the eventual set up of my own company and its prevailing success.”

### ENTREPRENEURISM

“It was by default and not intention that I moved from Bombardier to VistaJet, due to the takeover of Skyjet by VistaJet. Within the space of a few weeks I went from being a client relationship Manager at Bombardier to VP of sales at VistaJet. The transition was not without its challenges but it was a wonderful opportunity under the leadership of Thomas Flohr to enter the aircraft sales arena. Bombardier and BA fell into the same category in terms of process and procedure at a corporate level and Virgin /Vistajet introduced me to the school of entrepreneurship.”

So what made her decide to start ConnectJets in 2009, right in the middle of a

major economic downturn?

“I have always embraced a challenge. To be fair, it was a combination of factors, including the sale of my chalet in Chamonix, combined with turning a certain age that inspired me to make my mark in Aviation. I am also a believer that during a recession/downturn there are huge opportunities.

The market tends to shrink, the competition starts to decrease and marketing budgets are cut - there you have your golden opportunity to maximize your brand in a tired market. I also saw opportunities where clients were looking to downsize or sell their fractions; there was a secondary market available that offered us a clear space in the industry. We went on to turn over 4m GBP in our second year of operating with zero debt. I think this is confirmation that starting in a downturn can have its advantages.”

ConnectJets is a small boutique brokerage. “I like to think of us as the Savile row of business aviation,” says Gabriella. In 2012 the company was awarded a commendation for their services and have since

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gone on to receive further awards and letters of acclamation. Customer service is at the very core of ConnectJets. “Where there is tough competition, service has to be your differential. I also like to think we are innovative, having serviced a full wine menu for our clients where we instructed a wine tasting at altitude with some of the UK’s finest sommeliers. We are currently working with a Harley Street nutritionist to source and develop menus that will complement our clients’ dietary requirements at altitude and promote well-being. We have also developed an on-board wash bag with luxury brands to further enhance our offering. It is the totality of the experience that leaves a lasting memory.”

With regard to aircraft sales, ConnectJets are the financial advisors of the aviation sector. In such a complex market the process has to be kept simple while developing a level of trust with clients. “Our honest and unbiased approach has served us well,” says Gabriella. “I will only sell an aircraft if I am wholly convinced the client is financially aware of the full cost implications, including management, maintenance and depreciation. Purchasing an aircraft is undoubtedly one of the most important purchases in a client’s life and it is important we help them to get it right; they will come back if you do.”

## EXPANDING THE CHARTER/SALES ACTIVITY

ConnectJets are looking to expand their charter model and adopt a new technology platform that will enable them to provide an online solution for clients who prefer to shop from their smart or iPhone. “We will continue to enhance the client experience both on and off-board by increasing our portfolio of products and services. The whole experience has to be totally holistic from the point of booking to our client’s arrival at their destination. I believe the new brokerage

model has to be a hybrid of the human and the tech. One without the other will fail.”

Today, the company is keen on supporting its aircraft sales activities in the pre-owned aircraft market, while also engaging in a number of consultancy projects in China, Bahrain and Africa.

As the industry continues to grow, the competition likewise is adding more pressure to the small brokerage model. “We have to take a sober look at what the consumer wants and build a strategy that offers flexibility and service in line with consumer needs. These needs continue to change and develop as the market matures.

There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that the market is saturated right now and there is a need for consolidation in both the brokerage and

operator market. As an industry we also have to look at our charter pricing strategy; margins of 3% - 4% will not create sustainability in the long term and will undermine our position going forward, potentially destroying the industry. The big players are willing to sell at zero margins in order to obtain market dominance – by doing this they create a false economy and do our clients an injustice if we continue along this path. Competition is positive - iron sharpens iron and as an industry we need to embrace it and not fear it. Undoubtedly the digital disruption has arrived and we cannot deny that we need to face the elephant in the room. Technology is here to stay and therefore we have to create space for it, however we also have to treat it with some caution.”

ConnectJets are shortly to engage and implement a new digital platform that will provide a one-stop shop for the smaller to medium size broker-

age. This new system will allow access to the digital arena for all brokers (regardless of size or budget) to compete on an equal playing field.

## A SUCCESSFUL MODEL

“Primarily we are in the service industry and therefore it is paramount that we provide the highest levels of service, safety and security for our passengers,” says Gabriella.

“The key components to running a successful brokerage are employing staff with loyalty, discretion, knowledge and experience. People who exhibit a strong sense of service bring a core set of values and business ethics to their work. Experience is paramount, there are so many variables and challenges in aviation it requires an experienced and cool head to manage the complexities of any operation.”

