



Lessons from the downturn

Gabriella Somerville talks to **Dave Spurdens** about making progress during the worst of the downturn

THERE are times to embark on a new business venture and other times when it may best be postponed, or even avoided altogether. For Gabriella Somerville in 2009 the depression in business aviation (and much other commercial activity) presented the perfect opportunity to pursue the apocryphal silver lining and invest her money into a business aviation charter and brokerage venture.

She felt she had seen the niche that was more tailored, more unique and attractive that could even capitalise on a market that was seeing several companies go to the wall and others adjust the scale of their operations to a more cautious model.

Gabriella saw gaps in the market in certain areas and recognised them as opportunities she could capitalise on. "I felt my life of working in business and commercial aviation had equipped me to see the openings and to turn them to my advantage. The timing was perfect and I felt I had sufficient experience to bring my vision to fruition with a brand that could work even in the dark days of 2009."

"I was fortunate in freeing up some personal capital quite easily and, with the desire to start my own business, decided to just 'go for it'. I thought if I didn't take the plunge then I never would and at the time I had a road map and a vision that I believed in but not much else. I think most people thought I was quite mad!"

Gabriella's education in building and running an aviation business started with Richard Branson when she was nineteen when Virgin was a series of scribbled notes and a veritable treasure chest of faith and belief in the project.

"Richard Branson had a huge influence on me and I think if I hadn't served part of my aviation career with Virgin and Richard I question whether I'd be doing what I'm doing now. My initiation into aviation started in an entrepreneurial set-up under a man who had great vision and 'balls' ambition. As a member of the team that was developing that business we had to be part of it.

"The great thing about Richard, and I base this observation on having worked for other major airlines and manufacturers, is that he never forgot to look behind to make sure everybody was following him. He would come aboard the aircraft and sit down with everybody asking how their particular procedures were working, that was part of his greatness because he gave everybody a voice.

"When you are young, working for a potentially great organisation is a tremendous

opportunity and the realisation that you have the power and the autonomy to make changes and to be listened to by the most influential person in that organisation. I was there pretty much from the beginning and we were all well-versed in the drive and entrepreneurial spirit. I am sure it was that deep belief and spirit that allowed him to achieve so much from a very basic area of opportunity. It made me realise that is half the battle of starting your own business."

So does she still turn to Branson when the going gets sticky now that she owns ConnectJets and is out there on her own?

"I don't, because I worked for a number of other companies where I learnt valuable lessons and some of those have stood me in good stead as well. I was with Virgin for seven years, BA seven years, Bombardier four, and then VistaJet. I learnt different important skills at each. At Virgin it was entrepreneurial qualities and if you had them in you, they would come out. British Airways was good for me because it was a very straight, well-organised company with many procedures and barriers that had to be negotiated, like the Unions for example, and it was a very different spirit and ethos to what I had experienced at Virgin.

"It was a paradigm shift from one set of core principles to another. Bombardier, in business aviation was a big ship that I sailed on and learnt a great deal while on board. VistaJet offered me my first role in aircraft sales and charter and was a great motivation for me in starting my own venture. The vision and enthusiasm of everyone at VistaJet under the leadership of Thomas Flohr is a key part of their success – they have a really fresh and innovative approach and have added a new dimension to the business jet market."

Gabriella's experience with iconic names and mega companies had prepared her for the positive ways to run a successful business but it had also taught her to anticipate and handle the bad times which was a very fortunate quality to fall back on when the commercial tsunami hit the UK and the rest of the world.

"I don't want to give the impression that at ConnectJets everything has been plain-sailing because when you are running a business in a challenging environment you will always have difficult times and hit the wall at some point but the key is to recover from those moments and recover quickly. Luckily I am an inquisitive person and the prospect of knowing what is on the other side of the wall pushed me forwards. I have a quote firmly fixed on my wall from Winston Churchill which says "if you are going through hell, keep going", and that is exactly what I did and keep doing. I have kept my eye firmly fixed on the goal believing that what I had started would succeed if I just kept going."

Gabriella started ConnectJets with private capital and there have never been investors or backers for her to worry about. She believes the secret of success in the business aviation industry is a healthy cash-flow: "Cash is king in this business. Your whole balancing act when you have a business like this is to keep an eye on the books, looking to where you have a certain amount of money to invest and develop the company otherwise you will never grow and reach your ultimate goal.

"Investment and growth mustn't be confused with size. We started with seven staff and grew very quickly but our overheads had trebled overnight and we had to reduce that level of expenditure very quickly. Looking back I can see that we did not cut back quickly enough. We felt pain and there were mistakes that were made or should I say there were things I did at that time which with hindsight or a crystal ball I would not do again. Overstaffing was our problem and the balance of your staff structure with the income you are able to generate is key and fell upon my shoulders alone because there were no partners. Whatever the company has gone through is my responsibility.. that can be a very lonely walk.

"I would now advise people who are looking to start their own business not to make the mistake of thinking that it is a romance. It is a lot of hard work which can more easily go wrong than go right. You only have to look at the number of entrepreneurs who do not last longer than two years. I sometimes wonder where we would be now if we hadn't changed our staffing ratios and cut our overheads. We now have three staff and use consultants quite liberally for certain projects."

MAKING A MOVE INTO MOVING METAL

ConnectJets was recently awarded the exclusive UK & Ireland dealership for Piaggio Aero and the new Avanti EVO and Gabriella sees it as a significant moment that has given the company extra credibility in the market. It provides them with an extra dimension above being solely a charter and brokerage company and she is confident it will open up new opportunities for them.

"I love the Piaggio Avanti EVO and sincerely believe it has a promising future in the UK. I think people will see it as a very smart business tool and a good investment. If you are looking at performance and operating costs it is a win-win product at all levels. It merely sips fuel unlike many of the jets used in business aviation, it is a very 'green' aircraft with an exceptionally quiet cabin and it is faster than many jets. It is the fastest twin turboprop in the world exceeding 400KTAS.

"Piaggio have introduced a significantly improved service and support network and a new maintenance program that reduces costs, all of which I believe will see its popularity worldwide evolve and consolidate."

To say Gabriella is excited about the latest development for ConnectJets would be an understatement but that is the way she perceives business aviation at all levels. Attractive, confidently effusive and sartorially elegant she embraces a culture that cherishes the activities of the jet-set fraternity. She lists her loves as fencing, rugby and Barbados. She likes the occasional flight in an Extra 300 with her friend Michael Jorgensen, pilot and aviation photographer, and the odd ride in an old Stearman over Lac Leman. She lists her culinary preferences as Scott's in London, The Cliff in Barbados and the Guy Savoy in Paris, a very eclectic choice. Her passionate embrace of all things aviation is reflected in her desire to reinvigorate the glamour of aviation and she cites the nostalgic and evocative branding and marketing campaigns of Virgin Atlantic as a great example.

Her uncle, Roy Somerville, was Squadron Leader of the Red Arrows aerobatic team and Gabriella's father constantly made her wooden aeroplanes instead of adorning the family Christmas tree with dolls and fluffy teddy bears. Aviation fuel coursed through her veins from a very early age and she was always destined to make a career in the aviation industry. Apart from striving to pass her PPL she is a passionate contributor to charitable organisations. Two years before embarking on her ConnectJets from CHASE she initiated a landmark flight to Disneyland Paris for sick children from CHASE Hospice in Surrey with Learjet ambassador Lewis Hamilton and the Fly2Help foundation.

She is still very much involved in charitable events but her objective for ConnectJets is to continue developing innovative new products and services, leveraging the potential for taking advantage of emerging markets and building value-added quality partnerships. As confidence returns to the business aviation sector ConnectJets has completed a high-profile and precipitous move from Fair Oaks Airport in Surrey to new premises in Central London.

Located in the heart of Mayfair, the new offices just off Berkeley Square position the company and allows us to be within striking distance of a vast range of clients, providers and collaborators. The move is also significant as it coincides with a significant refocussing of the companies chartering business. Over the coming months ConnectJets has ambitious plans to consolidate and develop its client base and charter offering, cementing its position as an industry leader in bespoke travel solutions.

You somehow get the feeling that, one way or another, the targets she has set herself at ConnectJets will materialise, perhaps with another inspirational quote from Winston Churchill: "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity. An optimist sees the opportunity in every difficult."



Piaggio Aero dealership is next step.