

COULD YOU WORK WITH YOUR... MUM, FRIEND OR EX-FIANCÉ?

Working with family or friends is usually a recipe for disaster but, as Hannah Dickson discovers, in some cases it can also be a sure-fire success

Your ex-fiancé MEGAN SARGENT & BRENT MILBURN

Megan Sargent and Brent Milburn can credit themselves with a number of things – educating New Zealanders about the virtues of the traditional Jewish bagel, turning obscure contacts into meaningful business mentors and creating a thriving business from scratch.

But, perhaps most significantly, they have triumphed in an area where few manage to succeed – the once-engaged pair have managed to continue running a business once their relationship ended.

Abe's Real Bagels is New Zealand's top selling bagel company. Now over 10 years old, the idea for the company came while Megan was in the United States on her OE. She saw a crowd queuing outside a café and joined the line to see what all the fuss was

about. The fuss was freshly baked bagels and Megan was as smitten as the loyal customers in the line.

"I mentioned to Brent [back home in New Zealand] that we should consider opening something similar here."

Brent loved the idea and went into action mode researching the market at the public library and in the yellow pages (no internet in 1995!). The couple had always planned to start their own

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business, it was just a case of finding the right one.

Another trip to the States a few months down the track provided them with machinery and a tenuous contact (a friend's father who was a lawyer had a client who

baked bagels for a living) offered to give Brent a month's training.

Despite the fact four banks turned down their loan applications, Megan and Brent put everything they had into the fledgling business and opened Abe's Bagel Café in the middle of Auckland's CBD. The plan was for it to be the first of a chain, so they made sure the décor, branding and packaging was such that it would give the impression of being much bigger than it was.

"We wanted people to think that



From their first batch of bagels, top right, to the development of their new range of bagel crisps, Megan and Brent have worked well together despite ending their personal relationship just as the business was taking off.

it was genuine," says Megan, "Not just a couple of Kiwis having a go."

Megan continued working full-time to provide a salary to live on while Brent was in charge of the café. Aucklanders loved the bagel concept and the café was constantly busy. Brent was swamped and needed more help so Megan resigned to join him on the job.

But at the same time they decided to call off their engagement and end their personal relationship.

"It was a bit difficult," remembers Megan. "When you break up with someone you don't usually want to see them for a while, but we were together 12 hours a day, seven days a week."

"We didn't tell our staff about the break up because we didn't want them to be unsettled and they never guessed. I think it's to our credit that we managed to keep a lid on it."

While other couples might have considered throwing in the towel because of their personal situation, Brent said it wasn't something they ever considered.

"We couldn't have sold the business because at that stage it

wasn't really worth anything. And we knew we had complementary skills and were pretty confident we could still work with each other."

But, as if things weren't stressful enough, Auckland's 1998 power crisis then hit. The inner-city suffered a five-week long power cut, shops and businesses closed and people stayed away from the central city in droves. On one hand the café was lucky because it had its own generator, but there were no customers.

However, good old-fashioned word of mouth worked a treat. They chalked messages on the pavement letting the stoic few who came into the city know that their café had power – the scribbles were seen by Paul Holmes who mentioned on air that

Abe's was open for business.

It worked and business was good. But after being approached by a supermarket who wanted to sell the bagels in-store, Megan and Brent realised the biggest opportunities for the business lay in wholesaling. There's still a combined café and bakery in Christchurch to supply the South Island market, but the Auckland one has closed. Abe's bagels can be found in around 200 supermarkets around the country and the company's latest product – bagel crisps – is proving to be just as much of a hit.

Which all goes to show that it is possible to work with an ex-fiancé. And all without bickering. These days Megan and Brent are both married to other people (and have both been guests at each other's weddings) with partners who don't have any issues with their history.

"We're both lucky enough to have intelligent, normal partners," says Brent.