

# “My car accident went on to inspire a new business”

JOANNE MATHEWS, 47, founded TenPilates, a chain of exercise studios offering dynamic Pilates across London, where she lives with her partner Justin.

**THE IDEA** I was head of marketing for Habitat when I was hit by a car in October 2005. I fractured my coccyx and suffered severe whiplash, and was signed off work for six months. During that time I had appointments with GPs, physios and sport massage therapists – all based in different practices. I became frustrated by this lack of consistency and joined a local gym where I met David Higgins, a personal trainer who specialised in a dynamic form of Pilates. We had both noted this failing in the healthcare system while also identifying a gap in the market for a boutique Pilates studio. By combining my marketing background with David's fitness expertise, we realized we had a chance of actually making our business idea a reality.

**WHAT HAPPENED NEXT** Most important to us was the venue. We wanted an area that would appeal to high-end clients, but with low overheads and a flexible contract. But on our tight budget – we had £40,000 savings and a £10,000 overdraft – we would have to compromise.

It took seven months to find a suitable studio in Notting Hill, through a company called Workspace that lets out units on a short-term lease in mixed-use sites. We then developed our brand. We needed a strong logo, and I employed a freelance designer to create the logo and a lifestyle PR agency to get us press coverage. David sourced our equipment from the US, where he'd been practising dynamic reformer Pilates before coming to the UK, and, when we opened in 2007, he taught 40 hours of classes a week, while I manned the reception. It was exhausting, but we had no choice – we couldn't afford to pay trainers and were just covering our basic expenses. I was driven by the confidence that we had a great product and the fact that I'd invested everything in it. It paid off because by the end of 2008, we'd generated enough interest to allow us to hire more trainers and open a second studio in Chiswick.



**BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT** Expanding gave us momentum and credibility; customer numbers snowballed. David and I relocated our Notting Hill studio to larger premises, and in 2010, we employed physiotherapists to develop TenPhysio, a service providing sports massage and holistic therapies in all our studios. It has helped business to grow because now people can come to us and get all the treatments they need in one place.

**MAKING IT WORK** David and I started to take a small salary after six months, but the majority of our profits are reinvested into the business. We hired extra staff as and when we needed them, and employ 90 per cent of our fitness experts, which helps consistency of tuition for our customers. We also took on two additional shareholders – my partner Justin, who has an advertising background, and Adam Kaye, who had set up a restaurant chain and brings invaluable expertise to the table. Sadly, David decided to leave the business last year to be with his family, so I have employed individual management teams in each studio – it has been a challenge learning to let go, but is important if the brand is to continue to grow.

**WHERE I AM NOW** We have 135,000 individual visits a year, a core base of 10,000, and employ around 75 members of staff, including 26 trainers and 12 physios. We have seven studios across London and aim to increase that to ten by 2015, as well as adding a nutrition service. Although I loved my previous career, nothing beats the satisfaction of knowing I'm making a difference to other people's lives.

**GLITCHES** Finances have never been my strong point and I was constantly battling with hidden costs such as business rates. As company director, I needed to understand all aspects of spending. Attending a three-day course on Finance for Directors, run by the Institute of Directors, gave me the basis I needed to make more informed decisions.

**MY TIP** Be honest about your own skillset – you may have the creative ideas, but can you really deliver them? Don't be embarrassed to ask for help in the areas where you need it.

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