



When anxiety threatens to stop you in your tracks

What if you had achieved some of the biggest dreams of your career? For Anne-Marie Martin, founder of diddi dance franchise, she did, and some! But with hidden struggles.

Hang around the franchise industry long enough, and one woman will soon bounce into your world, with her friendly demeanour and passionate zest for life. Anne-Marie Martin, founder and owner of diddi dance is the kind of woman you'd want to chat with over a few glasses of wine, soaking up as much knowledge and life-tips as you can.

For the award-winning franchisor, life might have looked like it was all a dream come true. Professionally-trained in ballet and contemporary dance, Anne-Marie secured some pretty amazing commercial dance jobs after graduating from university, including as a cabaret dancer on a cruise ship. "I moved to London and joined a contemporary dance company. I had an amazing time. Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot of money in it. The cost of living in London meant I was forced to leave and return to commercial dancing."



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Franchise Finance



During this time, Anne-Marie's life became one of a kind many 90s-kids could only watch on TV. "I was really fortunate, dancing on quite a few pop videos. I travelled around the UK, performing on various roadshows which were massive back then – I was even one of the dancers at the Smash Hits Poll Winners Parties!" For anyone who doesn't remember the Smash Hits Poll Winner's Party, it was a televised awards event between 1988-2006, with winners being chosen, based on the votes of Smash Hits' readers.

Anne-Marie says she completely enjoyed the experience; one of her highlights came in 2001, performing at both the Brit Awards and Top of The Pops. "On Top of the Pops, I danced for Ash, who were performing their hit, Burn Baby Burn. Robbie Williams was there! The Brit Awards was equally incredible. Ant and Dec were presenting and I was dancing for Sonique, straight after Eminem! You're backstage with all these artists, and performing on stage, in front of millions of people. It was a massive WOW moment in my life!"

However, as she danced her way through her twenties, Anne-Marie was fully aware it wouldn't continue forever. Especially as she slipped further away from the average age of commercial dancers. "When I was about 26/27, I attended one audition, and everyone else was in their teens. I remember comparing myself to the younger, fitter, taller, prettier dancers, thinking I was a bit 'mutton dressed as lamb'. Between my dancing gigs, I'd also been teaching; helping with dance classes at my local dance school, and old secondary school. It was at this audition I decided it was time to stop and focus more on teaching."

This would prove to be Anne-Marie's greatest career move, "I started working at a kids' play centre. At the time, there weren't any dance classes specifically aimed at toddlers, and I saw there would be scope for teaching kids to dance early on, from conversations I was having with some of the parents. At first, I was sceptical about teaching under 5's – have you tried to teach a toddler anything! I knew we couldn't teach them actual routines, as they haven't yet developed the memory skill to retain the sequence of movement. So, started by offering a fun dance class, to show them how to move to music."

Since this first class in 2003, the diddi dancefranchise has grown to 503 weekly classes for children aged 18 months to 4 years, across 40 UK-wide locations.

However, whilst Anne-Marie has built a successful franchise, and launched a second business she, like many successful women, has hidden something many of those who've spent time with her, couldn't have imagined. Anne-Marie has struggled with anxiety. "I think I've only just discovered how to take care of myself over the last year," she says.

Mental illness is something which is spoken about a lot in many arenas, but rarely in business or franchising. For Anne-Marie, it was after the birth of her first child, in 2006, it came to the fore when she suffered with post-natal depression. "I was a new mum, had launched three pilot franchises and was also teaching my own classes. When my son was born, I wasn't ready. I naively thought babies slept a lot. So, had assumed I could do my admin when he slept. But as any mum can tell you, this isn't the reality! Then I was teaching again when he was four weeks old. I felt like I wasn't allowed to enjoy any time with him."



Anne-Marie says this was when she hit a low, emotionally, "One moment, everything was fine, then I'd suddenly feel overwhelmed. As a person, I can normally balance a huge workload; but then, there was too much to juggle: franchising, my classes, my teachers, and setting up my soft play business, and my anxiety levels hit the roof! I was in and out of the doctors, as it would manifest through physical illnesses; IBS, sickness, heart palpitations and my throat closing. They were very dark days. Sometimes, If I am not careful, I can feel the anxiety starting to creep back, trying to take control again."



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Anne-Marie credits the support of her husband and family, helping her climb out. "Business can sometimes be a ruthless and lonely world, so having a strong support-network around me was what I needed. As a franchisor, connecting with someone who understands the pressures of franchising was harder. This is one of the things I value about EWIF. We are a group of people who really understand and support each other. It's up to us to feel safe enough, as women in franchising, to remove the façade and say, 'I'm struggling with this'."

Anne-Marie has been on a 15-year journey and stresses the importance of not trying to compare your journey to someone else's. "You need to find your own balance. The success of my business has taken 15 years to achieve. Celebrate your little achievements along the way, rather than comparing your day one to another person's day 265. There are no barriers for us as women to be as successful entrepreneurs as a man, when we work at our own pace, instead of trying to compete. You are you, and you are great at what you do!"

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