

ZooBookKoo couple enjoys success with educational toys

Following another successful trade fair at the NEC, husband and wife team, Stephen & Karen Wattleworth, count their blessings. They have run ZooBookKoo designing and manufacturing fun educational gifts and games for over 12 years. So with all the emotional stress that being a couple and a family brings (2 boys age 12 & 13), how can a couple hope to run a successful business and still make time for themselves?

Stephen is an experienced director with a blue-chip background. He puts it down to, 'Just another business structure – with systems and procedures - which Karen likes to bend a little (he chuckles) but it works well for us.' They have clearly defined roles. Managing a small team and outsourced services, they divide their time between their factory and warehouse at Bentwaters Park, the former American airbase in Rendlesham, Suffolk and their home offices. Stephen oversees all elements of strategy, manufacture, sourcing, finance, systems and export. Karen is responsible for day-to-day management, sales and marketing, and manages the warehousing and customer services team. New product design is a joint effort and their children are their inspiration. They are extremely disciplined and organised. 'There just don't seem to be enough hours in a day, so we try to make every one count,' says Karen.

'We have very different styles,' confirms Stephen. 'Karen is an 'implementer' – she likes to get things done, preferably as quickly as possible. Whereas I am more of a 'shaper' – always challenging the way things are done, striving to move forward and grow. When developing anything new, I believe it takes three iterations to move from concept to completion. So we do clash occasionally – but it works – it's a healthy, creative clash – and then there's the making up...!'

So how do they keep that twinkle in their eyes, let alone stay friends and colleagues?

'We've basically worked together ever since we met in Burton, Son & Sanders – that was based down by the harbour in Ipswich. Though Stephen often helps out other companies through his business Power 2 Perform. We even sailed to New Zealand on a 42 foot yacht for 18 months. We're soul mates,' says Karen. Stephen outlines how they make time for each other these days. 'We go out for dinners or lunches; we plan events for us or for the family and holidays – to look forward to; we celebrate every small success story and we get the kids involved.' Karen adds, 'It's important to get dressed up and to try not to speak business, though we often do – but getting better. Most important of all is to hug and laugh several times a day, especially after stressy board meetings,' she laughs. Stephen raises his eyes to the ceiling, 'We don't always agree, but we get there in the end!'

As with all businesses they have to keep an eye on growing (not shrinking!). Now they are entering a new phase which is bound to bring its own stresses and strains. It's an idea they have worked on over the past months. They are both looking forward to the new challenges this will bring.

ZooBookKoo educational gifts and games are available from good toy, book and gift stores.

ZooBookKoo ten top tips for successful 'company' couples:

1. Clear division of duties – write it down – change it (with agreement) if necessary
2. Disciplined time management – you may have to keep each other motivated and on track
3. Plan regular fun time out – don't heels (ladies!) for dinner out; cinema; early night!
4. Plan events – try something different (eg a Friday down to London Tate or the Eye, sport...)

5. Remember to hug each other several times a day (especially if you were cross or stressed)
6. Laugh loudly and often – share jokes and funny stories – always popping up in emails
7. Celebrate even the smallest success – a crisp rosé and a takeaway, shopping, massage...
8. Careful not to bore family and friends talking about your business
9. Be respectful (would you speak to a colleague like that?) and say sorry as often as required
10. Share business issues / challenges / new product ideas with the kids

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