

Women in Cleaning

Lisa Michalson remains true to herself during Cleanstar's climb to the top



Lisa Michalson

By Kim Taranto

When Lisa Michalson was younger and saving for her first house, she took on a second job cleaning the local schools at night. Little did she know that the vacuum she was using would bring her so much success later in life. Now, working alongside her husband and business co-owner Garth, together they manage one of Australia's leading wholesalers of commercial and domestic vacuum cleaners – Cleanstar.

"I first become involved in the cleaning industry eight and a half years ago when Garth and I started Cleanstar – formerly known as Vacstar. I basically followed his lead with product and industry knowledge and with my background in finance and administration we hit the ground running," she recalled. "After university I worked for a few wholesale distribution companies in the finance area and found myself gravitating toward general management. This gave me a good grounding for when Garth and I took the leap to start Cleanstar."

Michalson credits her knowledge to hands-on training in business and learning about the cleaning industry. "I do a lot of listening

and communicate with my team and customers often," she revealed. "This way I get a clearer understanding of what Cleanstar can offer the industry and gauge a better understanding about the industry in general and how it's changing and evolving."

The key to business success for Michalson rests on two critical points: "You need to know your product; use your product; understand your product; and believe in it when you sell it," she stated. And the second point? "You need to live and breathe your business," she added. This is an all-consuming task for anyone in business, but when it comes to be being a woman, there are a few more challenges thrown in.

"You need to juggle your family life, children (homework), housework, all areas of the business, staff, your health, eating well (cooking for a fussy husband!), exercising, maintaining friendships – and most of all – keeping your sanity," Michalson exclaimed. "You need to look after yourself mentally, try to keep calm and put things into perspective. You often need to make hundreds of decisions so you take it step by step."

As a woman with two young girls, it is a priority for Michalson to be a role model to them and show them that the world is their oyster. "We were born in this great country where opportunity is bountiful if you are willing to 'give it a go' and I want to instill that ambition into my children," she shared. However, she's a firm believer that even though women are the ones who have children and – generally speaking – run the household, they also need to strive in their career achievements.

When asked about the role women play in the cleaning industry and the 'glass ceiling', Michalson does believe there is a stigma attached but has also seen a change over the years. "This is a male dominated industry and even though you see more women coming in, it will take time for things to change," she remarked. "It doesn't bother me though, I believe in myself and my business and am determinately focused on that – which is what counts."

"It's tougher in business as a woman; some people think you have to be aggressive or arrogant to show that you are strong. I think all you have to do is be yourself," she advised. "You do become tougher over time, but the key is to remain who you are. Don't change for anyone."

Michalson shuns the notion that some people think, as the wife of the business owner, she lives a life of luxury and can do whatever she wants. When in reality, it's much harder. "But I don't feel we need to prove anything to anyone," she said. "I work very hard and I wouldn't have it any other way."

Cleanstar's success alone is testament to Michalson couple's hard work, although she admits she doesn't often reflect on its achievements. "Being so wrapped up in the business you don't look at it from the outside, but I must say that I am very proud of what Garth, myself and our Cleanstar family has achieved," she reflected. "Our mission has always been to offer our customers the best and friendliest customer service and a great, ever expanding product range, so they can build their businesses alongside ours."

"Our philosophy will never change. The relationships we have with our customers has become more than just about the dollar," she explained. "There are plenty of highs and lows in business and there will always be people along the way who don't want us to succeed. But they don't bother us."

A final message from Michalson when asked what advice she would give to other career-hungry women starting out in the cleaning industry: "I only have one piece of advice," she paused. "Above all, be yourself."

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