



# THE PERFECT BLEND

It takes a unique businesswoman to turn an oxymoron like ‘affordable luxury’ on its head and not only serve it to consumers but also create a following with them and distributors alike. Lisa Srao, CMD, I Brands Beverages, speaks with **Ayesha Dominica** on what it is like being a rare species in India’s \$9 billion liquor industry, the reasonable yet premium products her company has on offer, with a little advice thrown in for budding women entrepreneurs in the country, among other things.

**I**F EVER THERE WERE a line written to sum up Lisa Srao; it would be Lynda Berry’s - “Expect the unexpected, and whenever possible, be the unexpected!” For, to successfully etch out a niche in India’s \$9 billion liquor industry, it’s exactly her kind of spirit

that’s called for. As Chairman & Managing Director of I Brands Beverages Ltd, Lisa has forged a path with her dynamic and young award-winning company, which is one of the fastest growing liquor start-ups in India, with four fantastic products in their portfolio; all sold across 5,000

points of sales. Born and raised in the UK, Lisa made India her home after her marriage in 2003. Starting a family and raising two beautiful kids kept her busy. In 2008, when she found herself some free time, Lisa decided to start a business of her own. “When I started living here, I noticed

that international products in the price sensitive bracket, at that point of time, were of very low quality standard and good quality products were extremely expensive. I felt the distinct lack both in terms of accessibility and variety. Even to get a packet of biscuits was a chore for me, as they were either soggy or lacked variety.” She found a very specific gap in the market in India’s liquor industry. The premium liquor segment in India’s mass market was completely under-utilised, explains Lisa. “This is when I envisioned building a liquor business in this country that provided the market with value-for-money products. I wanted to start a company that propagates a culture, which is steeped in delivering higher than customer expectations, with a focus on the

people involved in achieving it.”

I Brands Beverages was thus set up after extensive R&D for over 2 years, prior to commencing India operations in August 2008, with their flagship product Granton Whisky, which was introduced in the deluxe segment in Uttarakhand as a test market, where a lot of attention was given to consumer feedback. “My father was in the trade of liquor distribution in the UK, so I initially thought of distributing his products in the country. But the research we undertook, soon pointed out that this was a totally different market, which required a totally different product and approach. I needed to literally start from scratch, in terms of product development, image creation, distribution strategies and marketing initiatives, among other things,” adds Lisa.

## UNIQUE OFFERINGS

*Nothing will work unless you do.*

– Maya Angelou

I Brands Beverages brings a lot to the table that is different from other players in the market. Besides being known for its vibrant, fresh and entrepreneurial charisma, it has this single-minded purpose of providing consumers with the utmost experience in international quality standards. They truly believe that the devil is in the details, be it in the developing of the finest of blends or presenting them in the best possible forms of packaging; from exquisite award winning canisters to beautifully embossed bottles, along with other features, all designed to ensure that I Brands products stand out in every segment in which they are positioned. “I believe that the only

**“ We have taken the semi urban – village route in the distribution of our products.**

**The approach was to grow slowly and steadily over a longer period of time, constantly evolving and perfecting the products and strategies along the way and developing a solid base foundation in the states that we are present in before opening up in other states. We pay immense amount of attention toward developing products that are of international standard quality and superior packaging, yet value for money and exceeding consumer expectation.”**

**- Lisa Srao, CMD, I Brands Beverages**



way to succeed is to exceed your customer's expectations. Our USP is our product," states Lisa.

With a comprehensive variety of spirits, I Brands Beverages has, in its portfolio, products that are the desire and envy of any new player in the global arena. The company has lucratively launched its four brands - Three Royals, Granton Whisky, Rum 99 and Granton XO Brandy - in the Indian market, since its inception in August 2010. "Granton Whisky is our flagship brand. It is a richly layered whisky, blended from the finest scotch, malts and select Indian grain spirits. The rich flavour of the blend comes from an age-old tradition of blending fine whiskies developed in the UK," describes Lisa. "Our recipe for the blend has been developed by our international team and is as per international benchmarks. We combine this knowhow with the input of our own blenders in India, with their first hand knowledge for local preferences." This whisky's fine quality premium blend, top of the line design innovation, canister packaging, embossed bottle and finest quality closures available on the market, make it completely unique to its segment.

Speaking about Three Royals, Lisa elucidates that is a premium whisky, which is also a blend of scotch, malts and select Indian grain spirits. "It is a value for money product, whose premium blend and international standard look and feel, allows consumers a taste of affordable luxury. The whisky is unmatched in the smoothness of its finish, uniqueness of its balance and fullness of its flavour. It is available in an embossed bottle that is particularly attractive, with its vintage label and superior quality canister packaging."

The third product under the I Brands Beverages umbrella is Rum 99, an authentic dark rum, and one of the finest on the palate,

as proven by the extensive blind tasting sessions conducted before its launch. "Its superior taste is an amalgamation of a smooth and mellow dark spirit combined with a rich Jamaican flavour. Rum 99 is especially eye-catching with its embossed bottle and silver cap. Its cutting edge design aesthetics have been developed by our international team of designers, and has been patented," explicates Lisa. With its aura of contemporary elegance, Rum 99 is quite popular with the young or new age drinker.

Of course, the kind of products within I Brands keeps getting better. Granton XO Brandy is a French Luxury Brandy that is

unique and rare, with a rich rustic aroma, a golden lustre, warm honey hues, impeccable balance, a smooth finish and an elegant taste that mellows the palate. "From the perfectly selected grapes picked up from the finest vineyards of the world to the quality-intensive distillation process, Granton XO brandy has been developed and overseen by our European blenders to create the finest product. It brings to you an experience par excellence," expresses Lisa.

### BUSINESS MODEL

*Trees that are slow to grow bear the best fruit*

– *Moliere*

With a strong presence in Punjab, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Chandigarh, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in the North, and Goa and Pondicherry in the South and with a retail presence in over 5,000 outlets across 8 states, I Brands products are positioned in the mass market premium segment. All of this is no small achievement. Every success, big or small has its attribution in their simple business philosophy of taking time to build the empire. "We have taken the semi urban-village route in the distribution of our products. The approach was to grow slowly and steadily over a longer period of time, constantly evolving and perfecting the products and strategies along the way and developing a solid base foundation in the states that we are present in before opening up in other states. We pay immense amount of attention toward developing products that are of international standard quality and superior packaging, yet value for money and exceeding consumer expectation," reveals Lisa.

I Brands has managed to take the oxymoron that is affordable luxury and make it a very real thing for consumers. Each consumer is guaranteed an





## Lisa Srao – A Spirited Woman

- Lisa is of Punjabi origin, UK-bred and Bangalore-based
- Her father is Amarinder Singh Srao, the founder of the popular British beer, Double Dutch
- As a kid, Lisa Srao wanted to be a marine biologist
- She has been given the moniker of India's Liquor Baroness or Whisky Priestess

## Accolades for Excellence in Craft

- Best Startup Company
- Runner's up award for Best Brand Premiumisation
- IndSpirit 2014 Excellence in Packaging Award
- Innovative Start Up of the Year

*USP: The devil is in the details, be it in the developing of the finest of blends or presenting them in the best possible forms of packaging; from exquisite award winning canisters to beautifully embossed bottles, as well as other features, all designed to ensure that I Brands products stand out in every segment that they are positioned in.*

experience of a premium product, with an element of luxury that is available at an affordable price point. And every consumer is very important to this company, as can be seen in the re-launch of Granton Whisky last year. Speaking about it, Lisa explains, "Since its launch in 2010, Granton Whisky was gaining popularity in the markets that we were present in. However, from the feedback we received from our consumers, we felt that the blend of the whisky needed to be stronger, as opposed to its smooth blend at the time. Our product was pulled off the market and given a massive facelift, from its packaging, which has now won awards, to its blend, and even its ad campaign featuring a popular



youth icon. It was an expensive decision, but a decision that I was ready to take. We are a youthful and energetic company, and can, not only afford to continuously evolve our products, based on consumer feedback, but also ensure a quick turn round time for implementation of the same."

They may still be an infant company and have a limited market share in all the segments they are present in, but everything they've done so far has made them more than a force to reckon with. Now in its fourth year of operations, the company has shown a sharp growth curve and is one of the fastest growing liquor start-up companies in India. I Brands has around 1% of the market share in Haryana for Granton Whisky in that segment! There has been

such a phenomenal response to I Brands' products across the country. One can't help but acknowledge the popularity and quality of the products that have allowed the company to not only sustain itself in this incredibly tough and complex industry, up against some massive players, but has also doubled the turnover in just 3 years, surpassing the million dollar mark!

### OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

*If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.*

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

Every venture comes with its set of challenges. It's what

makes the successes all the more worthwhile. For Lisa, as a woman in a male dominated industry, the challenges were expectedly more and sometimes tougher. But Lisa just took each in her stride and dealt with her challenges with the same of blend of smoothness, impeccable balance, elegance and élan of each of her products. Speaking about the same, she mentions that they faced a lot of snags initially. “The biggest challenge was perhaps that the liquor industry is a financially intensive industry, and at the onset I Brands was self funded and I didn’t have the kind of funds to play with, that is the norm of the industry. Currently, of course, we have private financial investors who have helped us take the business to a solid base foundation. Another hiccup was that when we started out we were an unknown brand. We thus had a hard time getting distributors to work with us. Regulations in each state are also very different from the other in terms of excise duties, tastes, language liquor preferences, licenses required etc., which makes everything in this business incredibly challenging.”

While these are very real and common to most entrepreneurs, the challenge of being a woman is one that can add multiple complexities to the running of any business. Shedding light on some of the issues that she faced, Lisa mentions that it’s the initial stages that are the most demanding. “I was advised by many not to get into the Indian liquor industry just because I was a woman; most thought it was impossible and told me that. When I approached the trade, they would laugh and tell me I wouldn’t be able to make it here. Nobody took me seriously, so much so that during meetings with distributors, they would address my manager and talk to him because he was a man.” It’s a complex space and certain dealings were very challenging



for Lisa and her company. As new entrants, the trade did not initially accept them, no distributors wanted to work with them; nobody believed what they wanted to do was even possible. “Armed with a lot of determination, I decided to go ahead and start the company with my own limited investment, an amount far less than the massive amounts that the rest of the trade was playing with. Over the years, I have slowly built myself to penetrate an industry that very few women in the country have managed to do. Today, all I Brands products receive phenomenal

responses, with both, the trade and consumers accepting us. We keep getting repeat orders from partners who were earlier hesitant to work with us. The industry is getting to be more organised now and in a few years; it will shift to being FMCG- and retail-driven, which is a tremendous thing.”

### WOMEN IN BUSINESS

*The woman who follows the crowd will usually go no further than the crowd. The woman who walks alone is likely to find herself in places no one has been before.*

– Albert Einstein



As a woman who has made her own path and stood tall and proud amongst the many barriers in setting up her business, Lisa feels that the twenty first century woman has limitless choices in how she can make a difference in herself and the world around her. Today, Lisa may be called India's Liquor Baroness or Whisky Priestess but she is humbled by the titles. She just loves the challenge of her business and it is something she thrives on and wouldn't have any other way. She has a little bit of advice she'd like to share with women entrepreneurs in India. "Blaze new paths and don't allow yourself to be restricted by outdated traditions like 'the alcohol industry is not a place for women'. Pay attention to details in your business and know your strengths. I take on challenges and look to learn constantly and I have great motivational spirit and drive. Live your life with passion and boldness and don't take a job for the sake of it. Love it. Own it. Life is an adventure, be prepared to take risks."

### FUTURE PLANS

*I'm not a businessman — I'm a business, man.*

— Jay-Z

A testimony to the hard work and dedication that Lisa and her team have put in to take I Brands Beverages where it is today, are the accolades they have been given for their work. In its fourth year of operation, they have received awards that are both industry and non-industry specific. These honours include The Best Start-Up Company and the Runner's Up Award for Best Brand Premiumisation at the prestigious liquor award ceremony, Spiritz 2014 Awards, the IndSpirit 2014 Excellence in Packaging Award and the Innovative Start-Up of the Year at the 4th Entrepreneur Awards by Franchise India 2014; as



**Blaze new paths and don't allow yourself to be restricted by outdated traditions like 'the alcohol industry is not a place for women'. Pay attention to details in your business and know your strengths. I take on challenges and look to learn constantly and I have great motivational spirit and drive. Live your life with passion and boldness and don't take a job for the sake of it. Love it. Own it. Life is an adventure, be prepared to take risks."**

well as their first paramilitary awards, which is an achievement in itself.

But Lisa reiterates that the journey has just commenced. "There is a long way to go. The

awards and the retail and trade acceptance convey our brand's penchant for product innovation and consumerism. But we have just begun. We have survived in this monopolistic and capital-intensive industry, where most liquor businesses are known to have shut shop within six months of operation - and that too, with minimal marketing and only because of our superior product offering! I intend to make I Brands one of the top five liquor companies in the near foreseeable future. We are currently interested in and actively looking for institutional and private strategic partners to consolidate our business and drive it forward."

The future looks spirited and animated for Lisa and her company, as they set new targets for themselves. Over the course of the next two years, a semi-deluxe segment whisky and a premium vodka brand will form a part of the company's diversified portfolio, not to mention an increased geographic presence pan India in the next three to four years. "Plans are afoot to launch in Delhi, Rajasthan, Tripura and Meghalaya to organically grow across northern India. We are also looking at Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, West Bengal and Andaman & Nicobar Islands in the next couple of years. Talks are on for developing our own bottling unit in the east and in Punjab as well. We would also like to make a dent in the international market, as the products we make are of international quality, and can be ranked across the world."

With all that she has achieved and everything that she keeps adding to her plate, it is no wonder that Lisa lives by the Steve Jobs quote, "The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do." And she is definitely affecting a change in a male-dominated \$9 billion industry! ■