

She sells sea shells

Clare Anderson, AFHT, explains how she and business partner Alison Gibbs introduced a unique shell massage tool and training package to the UK

I started my career in the beauty industry in 1993 as a therapist. By 25, I had worked in Champneys Tring, ran a beauty studio for Clarins in Harrods and worked as a promotional manager for Decl or. I was promoted to national accounts manager for Decl or and Carita, rolling out their products and training to health resorts and spas throughout the UK.

In 2004, I rejoined Champneys as group spa development manager and was responsible for the development of more than 250 therapists across the four resorts, which included customer care, treatment standards and retail sales. I went on to develop and launch Champneys' own retail products, before joining Gerard's UK as director in 2006.

It wasn't until 2009 that I launched Shared Beauty Secrets (SBS) with holistic therapist and trainer, Alison Gibbs. SBS is a limited company that distributes innovative and high quality professional wellness therapies and products from around the world. Currently, we are focusing all the company's efforts on one product – Lava Shells.



Clare Anderson and Alison Gibbs

Discovering the product

I discovered Lava Shells on holiday in Turks and Caicos in 2008 when a leaflet advertising Lava Shell massage was posted under my hotel door. It sounded amazing so I eagerly booked an appointment. As soon as the therapist touched my skin with the warm shell, I knew I had stumbled on a real gem. I instantly recognised the huge potential in the UK for this novel, holistic treatment.

Being impulsive, as soon as I arrived home I investigated to see if anyone was using or distributing the shells in the UK. Spa

Revolutions, the American company behind Lava Shells, was selling the product direct to a handful of salons in the UK. I immediately contacted the company and requested exclusive distribution. It was keen to find out more, so within 48 hours I had sent across a detailed business plan and my CV.

I realised that it was important to introduce the shells as a serious spa treatment so that the product would not be perceived as a 'gimmick'.

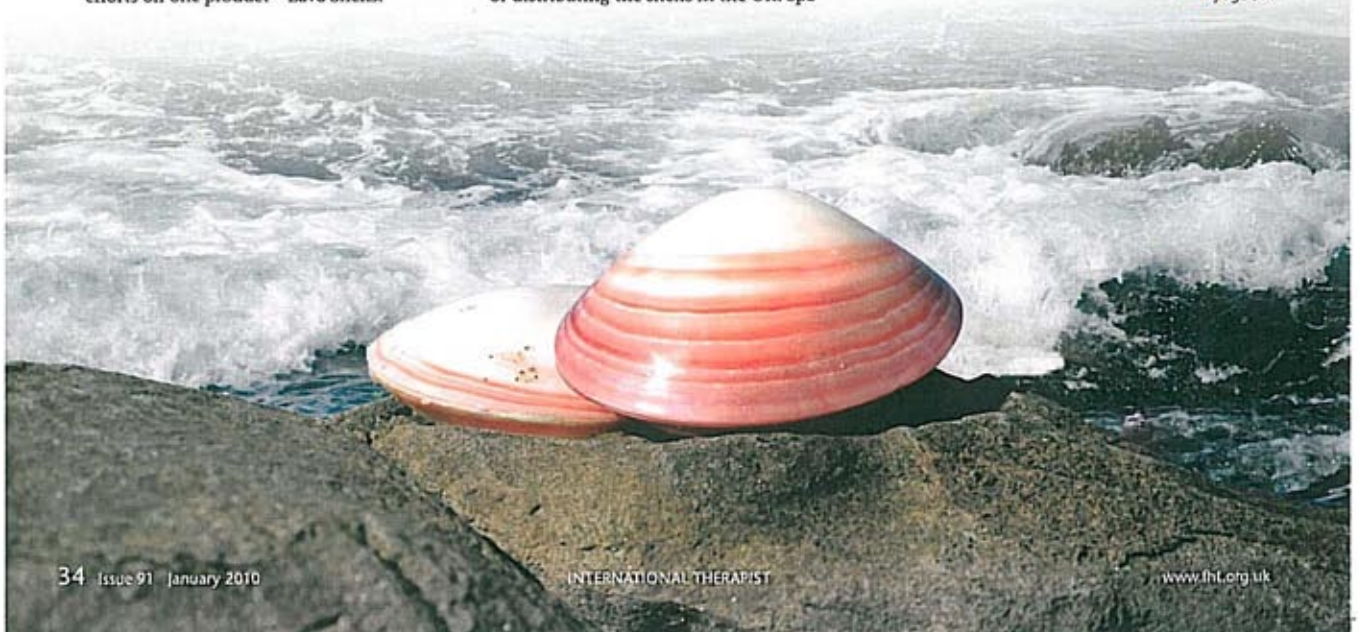
To achieve this, I wanted to develop a five-star treatment incorporating the shells. I had known Alison for many years and appreciated that she was highly respected within the industry and that with her 25 years' experience, she would make the perfect business partner. She was already running a successful company at the time – Indonesian Secrets – but a large part of her career was spent overseas, developing some of Asia's leading spas. Alison's greatest passion was training and development and I knew that this, combined with her understanding of Asian therapies, meant we could launch Lava Shells within a holistic treatment. This was crucial if we were going to position ourselves as a training company as well as a distributor of the product.

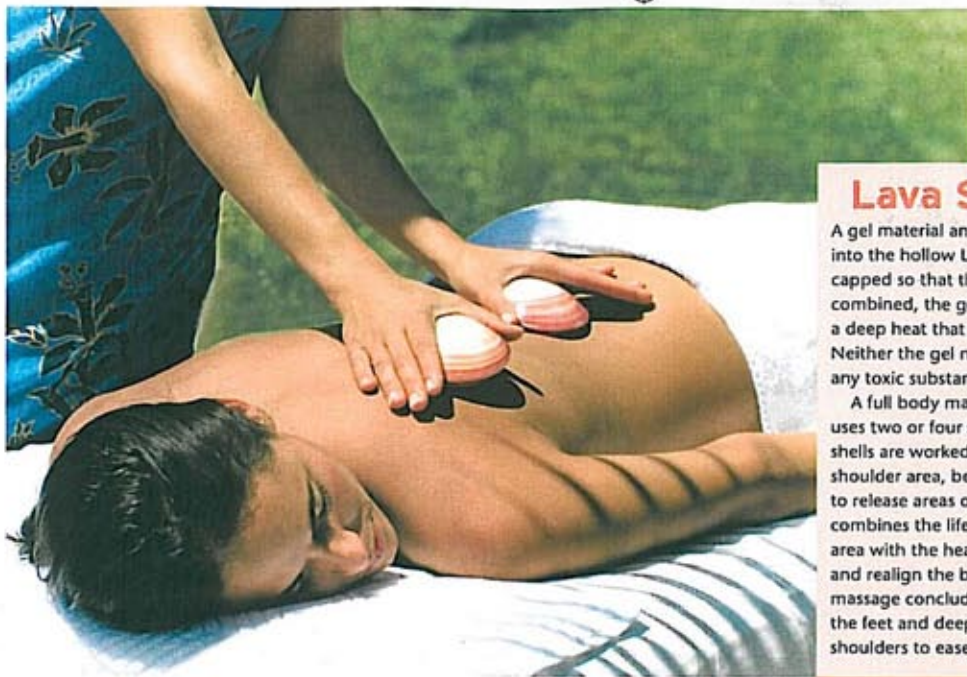
The business proposal

Alison was as excited about the therapeutic benefits of the shells as I was, so our next step was to visit Spa Revolutions with our business proposal. We travelled to San Diego to meet the company's directors and to explain our key objectives if we were successful in becoming the sole distributors in the UK and Ireland. These were to:

- support the shells' eco-friendly philosophy;
- ensure the integrity of the product through compulsory, high-quality training

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Lava Shell massage

A gel material and saline solution are poured into the hollow Lava Shells, which are then capped so that the water cannot escape. When combined, the gel and saline solution generate a deep heat that lasts for more than an hour. Neither the gel nor the saline solution contains any toxic substances.

A full body massage takes 60 to 90 minutes and uses two or four shells. During the massage, the shells are worked over the palms, arms, neck and shoulder area, before gliding along the solar plexus to release areas of stress. This particular movement combines the life-force energy from the stomach area with the heat from the shell to rebalance and realign the body's natural constitution. The massage concludes with pressure point work on the feet and deep tissue massage to the back and shoulders to ease away tension.

for all therapists wishing to buy and use the product;

- set up a charity, Shared Dreams, so that a percentage of the profits could be channelled back to the Asian community.

We explained that we had found a gap in the market and that we would introduce the Lava Shells as an ethical and portable alternative to hot stones, as the shells are self-heating and do not require any bulky equipment or electricity. In addition, we would create a unique full body treatment to accompany the shells, with an optional add-on tummy treatment for poor digestion.

To support the UK launch, we proposed to budget for targeted press releases in both trade and consumer press, and came armed with support from The Spa PR Company, which specialises in health and beauty.

Spa Revolution bought into our vision, acknowledged our expertise within the spa industry and admired our business ethics, as we demonstrated that we were not just interested in making 'sales'. It agreed to SBS being the sole distributor to salons, spas and self-employed therapists in the UK and Ireland, which was key if we were to make this business venture succeed.

Launching the Lava Shells

We gave a detailed presentation to the bank to secure a loan, right at the height of the recession. The success of securing this loan, in addition to personal investment in the company, allowed us to have enough funds for the initial marketing.

The product visuals are supplied by Spa Revolutions, but all our marketing material, company logos, brochures, leaflets and the website, etc, are designed by Alison and me, along with Daniel Saunders, a freelance graphic and web designer based in Somerset.

With all of our promotional material in place, we launched Lava Shells to the industry at the Professional Beauty show in March 2009, where the product generated a

huge amount of interest. Soon after, we gave presentations at SPATEC Europe, which led to a number of meetings and demonstrations with interested parties throughout the UK.

The next stage was to exhibit at Beauty UK/ Holistic Health, and the Scottish Beauty Show. Again, the product was a tremendous hit and attracted immediate orders.

The combination of trade shows and adverts has seen the demand for Lava Shells

have worked with is to draw little, live on the minimum, and put everything back into the business. That way we will grow sensibly and within our means, and we feel in the near future this formula will pay off. It was a gamble launching a new company in a recession, but we believe in what we do and have the faith and vision to make Shared Beauty Secrets a huge success.

It is crucial that you work with someone

“ It was a gamble to launch in a recession but we believe in what we do and have the faith and vision to make Shared Beauty Secrets a huge success ”

snowball since they were launched. We now have more than 100 confirmed clients, including exclusive spas, hotels and health clubs, Bannatyne's Sensory Spas, David Lloyd, Marriott and Hand Picked Hotels.

One of the best decisions we made was to work with The Spa PR Company. Its media contacts, along with Alison giving demonstrations to the press, made Lava Shells well known very quickly. It has been a formula for success, resulting in more than 50 rave press reviews from the top beauty and lifestyle editors, including GMTV's LK Today, Vogue, Tatler, Natural Health and the new Stylist magazine.

Challenges and the future

With just the two of us working to launch the brand it has been quite demanding. When setting up on your own you need to be prepared to work 24/7 in the early stages. Alison and I both believe in positive thinking and hard work, and our daily buzz is getting feedback from therapists and customers telling us how amazing they feel after giving or receiving a treatment.

The launch period was particularly challenging but we knew that investing in marketing was an absolute must to help us grow as quickly as possible. The formula we

you trust, respect and get along with, as you will spend most of your time with that person. Bringing different skills is essential and having an equal footing is also key, but you have to be able to listen to each other's views and make decisions that you feel will benefit the company in the long run. You also need understanding family and friends as you don't get much time to relax while you are getting a company off the ground.

On occasion we have found it difficult when clients or therapists have seen our success and approached Spa Revolutions direct in the hope of becoming another UK distributor or buying the shells without training. Ironically, these people are simply directed straight back to our company.

As for the future, we have such an excellent relationship with Spa Revolutions that it has asked us to support and guide new distributors in Europe. Through SBS, we are also hoping to launch Lava Shell facial treatments in the UK and Ireland alongside a well-known company that cannot be disclosed yet. Watch this space!

OVER TO YOU

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