



A passion turned into a profitable business

For the UAE's book lovers, Magrudy's needs no introduction. Here Isobel Abulhoul, founder and managing director of Magrudy Enterprises, tells **Ritwika Chaudhuri** about her passion for reading and love for children's toys that ultimately turned her into a successful entrepreneur.

What prompted you to set up Magrudy's and when? Also, why a bookshop? Does it have to do with your love for reading and quest for knowledge?

Magrudy's was set up 34 years ago, back in 1975. It was born as a family-run business with me, my husband and son running the show. In those days we had a young family and it was very difficult to find children's toys.

Initially we set up an educational toy shop, and along with that, we used to sell children's books. Eventually, mothers

visiting the shop started asking about different types of books like mother and child books or cook books. So overnight, the types of books started multiplying.

I had a large library at home, and I am an avid reader. As a consumer and reader, books were an area I was familiar with, and that is something very important when you decide to set up a business. If you are passionate about something and enjoy doing it, then it becomes easier to turn your hobby into a successful business.

I also love children's toys, as it gives

me immense pleasure to choose good toys that children enjoy playing with.

What does Magrudy mean?

It is just an Arabic name, however, it does have a meaning -'fated'.

How were the initial years, as you were setting up a new business, arranging finance and marketing the concept?

I did not have a business background and neither did my husband. I was a teacher before I had children. But Dubai

is the kind of place which is very forgiving of mistakes. It was a stiff learning curve, though.

One needs to be cautious in business. Since business is all about taking risks and you cannot avoid that, it is prudent to take risks that are manageable and not huge. I was cautious in the beginning because I had no experience. That is why, when we made mistakes, they were not too big. We never had huge stocks, which could not be sold.

Magrudy's grew organically over the years. We did not take a loan. We started small with our own finance. We did not market ourselves. It was pretty much word of mouth. We had things in our shop that were not available in the market and that was good for us.

You said you started small. What was the initial capital?

Honestly, I don't remember. It was just what was needed to start a small venture and my husband provided for that. It was on going like that until three to four years later when we were able to finance ourselves and the business. Usually in a typical business plan one should be able to break even or pay back one's capital within three to four years, depending on the type of business and the capital one puts in.

When did you come to Dubai?

It was in 1968. My husband is from Dubai.

Where are you from?

I am from Cambridge, England.

Along with your passion for books, is it also the lack of such facilities at that time which prompted you to set up such a shop here?

As I said, there were no book and toy shops in those days in Dubai. But like books lots of other things were also not available at that time. However, it used to be an enjoyable challenge to be innovative using whatever means available to us.

I am left-handed and most left-handed people have their own ways to do things to make their place in the right-handed world. We are a minority, but we have an edge and look at things with a different view point. Left-handed people are creative. I am not creative artistically, but I do believe I am creative and that was helpful when I set up Magrudy's.

Magrudy's has been recognised as the leading employer in this region by Hewitt. What do you have to do to make an enterprise successful, respected and trend-setter?

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I was absolutely delighted and thrilled as we never expected to be awarded when we entered the contest. Apart from my family, this has made a big difference for my employees as this creates a perception about the company.

Looking after its employees is extremely important for any company. But then, no one can sit back and say they are perfect, and hence, we have a long way to go.

I think mostly people get influenced by what is happening around them. They cannot help but recognise excellence in other companies. However, I always avoided trying to copy others as it was never necessary. Also, we are doing a few things here which are not done by others and that way you can set your own standards.

I do not think being successful is difficult but it is a case of believing in yourself, and choosing the right thing, looking at the right kind of business you want to do. It is also important to think like a customer: what you would like to buy, what can please or irritate you. By the way, I am a difficult customer.

I love what I do and I am passionate about my work. So, it is not a job for me, rather it is more joy and hope. We are very lucky to have a multicultural team here in Magrudy's and the publishing industry is fascinating.

How many employees do you have now?

We have 270 employees at the moment.

What according to you is Magrudy's area of strength?

Magrudy's, being a family business, one of our greatest strengths is that we treat people who join us as part of a big family. We want to make them feel at home, feel proud of what we do and we also take great care to make sure that customers get the best service. We always try to run the business with honesty.

For example, if something goes wrong we try to apologise and admit our mistakes rather than ignore them. When you are in business, you cannot have everything hundred per cent right, but you should be honest and ready to admit these mistakes.

Being in the family business we have old-fashioned ethics and accordingly, we choose products selectively.

What is old-fashioned ethics?

We try not to use gimmicks as these are, in a

way, dishonesty. You see wonderful offers and discounts, but there is always a fine print below. I personally do not like that approach. So we don't practice it in Magrudy's.

Regarding the choice of merchandise, we never sold toys that link to violence. We would like parents to feel comfortable when they buy from our shop.

Since Magrudy's is in the business of knowledge, what do you have to say about the country's drive towards a knowledge-based economy?

Reading and being literate is essential particularly in your mother tongue.

Hence I think, though it is good to know English as it is a global language, one needs not to be totally reliant on it at the cost of one's mother tongue, which is Arabic here. So I look at the drive towards a knowledge-based economy in a different way.

It is fine to embrace new ideas or skills, but don't lose the skills that made your country proud, like for example poetry, folklores, handicrafts which are some of the treasures of this country. I believe in today's busy life you need to focus on life skills or skills in a wider sense. Some skills are acquired in life, but some are special skills, not very common, but important at the same time.

What do you think about reading habits in the country?

The recent trend in book discussions and book festivals is really good and shows people's appetite to take part in lively debates. We are so lucky to have so many festivals back to back like poetry, arts, books etc. Dubai is in the forefront of regional cultural events.

Who are your main customers?

We have a broad mix of customers from all nationalities. I am always very touched to see the second generations visiting Magrudy's talking about their experience of coming here as children and that is wonderful to know as a founding partner.

Children are my main focus and if they enjoy going to a particular place or shop, therein lies the success of it.

What is your future plan regarding further expansion?

We have 10 branches at present, eight in Dubai, one in Abu Dhabi and one in Al Ain. You



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have to decide what you want to be and work towards it.

We are not in enormous rush to expand too fast. Our growth is driven mainly by customers. We will continue to grow in the same fashion, while protecting our integrity and retaining our core values.

Our future plan includes taking Magrudy's regionally within the next five to 10 years. It might happen sooner or later depending on a number of factors including finances, availability of shop spaces within the target countries and getting the right partners.

We are in detailed discussions with a number of organisations in the region that want Magrudy's to be in their countries. We will be cautious when we go into unknown territories.

I do not want to try new things; rather I would focus on core products like books, toys, stationary, cards and a small number of gifts.

How do you view competition?

Competition is a fact of life; it makes you better in the field you are in, and keeps you sharp. People are not realistic if there is no competition. More bookshops mean more readers and more opportunities.

Tell us some of Magrudy's initiatives towards corporate social responsibility.

Magrudy's is active in encouraging reading among UAE residents, setting up book clubs for adults and children, inviting authors for book-signings and workshops and working closely with local schools and charities to promote reading as a path to knowledge. Magrudy's was one of the first retailers in the UAE to introduce jute carrier bags.

We have employees with special needs. It is important that companies try and accommodate adults with special needs within our community. Magrudy's Educational and Resource Centre (MERC) focuses on supplies to schools and colleges in this region and also runs professional courses for teachers and educators.

Any particular message you want to convey?

Yes, it is towards the parents. However busy they are, they must set aside at least 15 minutes to read to their young children giving them exclusive time and making them feel important. That way parents can initiate the habit of reading in the younger generation early in life.