

The queen of productivity

Managing director of Successful Internet Strategies, she is called New Zealand's email and Internet marketing guru. **Brigid Kelly** talks to Debbie Mayo-Smith, known for her "tell it like it is", down to earth style and creative, plain talk, challenging and visual presentations, seminars, speeches, training and consulting.

Debbie Mayo-Smith is an easy speaker to remember.

Trim and ridiculously young-looking under a trademark tumble of dark curls, her style is part soccer mom, part banker, with a touch of the romance novelist. Her voice, too, is warm, well-modulated and soothing, like all the best American lady success stories. But there's little of home-baked cookies and holiday aprons about this native New Yorker, whose heart now belongs to Tamaki Drive.

"I know you miss your old mates," she says, sympathetically, to a gathering of hoteliers, who are here to learn ways to replace lost smoking customers. A photograph of said mates appears on her Powerpoint screen - several "merry" Australian drinkers in drag.

"But the habits of the vast majority of people out there who don't smoke, haven't changed. They need to be pulled out of the closet!"

The audience is disarmed. Over the next hour Mayo-Smith will bombard them with practical ideas gleaned from their own membership - she's done serious homework in the weeks leading up to the seminar - and her own specialist knowledge on direct marketing and time-saving tips. They'll also know her office number, her website address, where to sign up for her e-newsletter and how to buy her books. And chances are, most of them will use that information.

Mayo-Smith's passion for sharing her knowledge is palpable. Sure, she's in this to make a living, but it's obvious she genuinely likes her work.

International keynote speaker, author, consultant, website strategist and workshop presenter, she's the managing director of her own company, Successful Internet Strategies, with a regular radio spot on Viva with Simon Dallow, four books to her name, a fairly full appointment book for the next year, and an eye on the next market shift. It's all the more impressive when you realise she's also a mother of six.

Superwoman? Perhaps, but Mayo-Smith is the first to tell you there's a limit.

"In the scope of life you can do anything you want, but you can't do everything," she says.

"So I decided to choose the things I found pleasurable, and decided what I was most passionate about and what would be the most profitable was motivational business speaking, workshops, and writing books."

She keeps on top of the household chores by not doing them - she is able to afford more extensive home help than many working mothers - and her love of technology has streamlined her office work.

"I have embraced technology wholeheartedly and by using it fully, by knowing Microsoft Office software and hiring people that know it also, I'm able to accomplish what seven or eight people would do with one or two. The internet is the most incredible business tool for marketing and communication - I use my website for online transactions and use the internet as a research tool to find new businesses and new opportunities."

Her job takes her travelling often, and she tries to take one or more of her children with her on trips where possible. "Our kids go on a lot of vacations!"

In many ways Mayo-Smith could have been a role model for Desperate Housewives. After earning her double honours Bachelor of Science in economics and geography from Southern Connecticut University, she started work as a market analyst on Wall Street during the cut-throat, fast-paced 80s.

When she married her Kiwi husband and moved to Wellington in 1985, Tower Trust Services created its first marketing manager position especially for her. She left Tower Trust to be director of marketing at Jardine Fleming New Zealand, a company she helped set up.

And then she had the babies. Six in six years. A boy, Alex, twins Daniel and Samantha, and triplets Elizabeth, Matthew and Erin.

"When the triplets were almost two I decided I had had enough and that I must work again. I felt I could not go back to the corporate world, so the only alternative was self-employment."

In four years, she had gone from "sitting on the sofa nursing" to successful motivational speaker.

She initially planned to set up as a marketing consultant, but noticed very quickly that "the ground was swarming" with them, and turned to the then-fledgling internet marketing field. She has continued to develop and alter what she does to keep her services fresh and valuable.

"It's your baby so you can change it if you want to."

Self employment also means plenty of flexibility - she is about to take one of her children for an afternoon walk when I call her - but it can have a downside.

"Often business can become your mistress - it's very seductive, and you want to spend all your time with it. Parents who go to work till 5.30 don't have that (danger), they can leave their job behind them. My business has a cap on it - I can only be so successful up to a point, because if I start going away too much then it puts undue strain on my family. Life is a series of compromises."

New Zealand is an easy place to do business, she says, though too small a market to sustain her motivational speaking work on its own.

"I like how open people are here. You can pick up a phone and speak to the managing director of a company, where you couldn't even do that in Australia. In the States nobody answers their phone - they screen their calls. By and large it's easy to be a big fish in a small sea - it's very lovely and easy here."

This year she has plans to launch an exclusive club where members receive life-changing tips by email, rather than having to listen to a motivational CD for a month. She'll be producing 30 computer tips for broadcast on Simon Dallow's radio show, speaking at around six events in Australia, and going on the road as part of the New Zealand Retail Association's roadshow in August.

Her next goal is television - perhaps a Supernanny type show, but focused on computers or productivity.

One thing that's certain is that her future won't be set in concrete. Mayo-Smith is all about moving with the market.

"I find that being flexible and looking for the next business problem or solution has been instrumental in my success."

