

THE LEFT BRAIN-VERSUS-RIGHT BRAIN DEBATE IS NO ISSUE FOR THIS BUSINESS DYNAMO, WHO COMBINES BANKING WITH HER OWN FASHION BRAND

ANEKA MANNERS



With a career spanning more than 20 years in finance, management and change execution, and the past decade honing her skills in commercial property finance, Perth-raised Aneka Manners has a head for numbers. The National Australia Bank's general manager of credit risk, commercial real estate, is passionate about her industry and has worked her way up in the competitive world of banking to one of the country's top positions. Two years ago, despite a jam-packed diary and demanding day-job, the Melbourne resident responded to her creative yearning and launched an eponymous clothing label. We find out just how she does it.

INSTYLE: What do you love most about your nine-to-five?

ANEKA MANNERS: I get to meet some of the most incredible entrepreneurs across all kinds of industries who are making a real difference in the world. I'm also a total nerd and absolutely love analysing businesses, seeing patterns in things and in numbers, and [having] the opportunity to make a positive impact on the individuals in the teams I lead, doing what I can to help them reach their potential.

Describe a career highlight... They are always the small but really important symbolic things. When [a] vehement detractor becomes your biggest supporter because they see the value of your work; when someone you've mentored gets the promotion they've always wanted; when you get the thing done that everyone said you'd never be able to [do]...Triumph over pessimism and scepticism is always the highlight.

What would you say to women following your path in business? Build yourself a cheer squad that includes people you work with, people outside of work and a couple of key mentors who will tell you the truth about what you need to develop and champion you to others. And get a coach—I absolutely swear by an independent coach to keep you honest with yourself.

Why did you decide to start a fashion label? I came to a point in my life where everything looked rosy on the outside, but I still felt like something was missing. For a long time I ignored it, telling myself I was ungrateful for wanting more, but in the end I realised that if I wanted to be truly fulfilled, I needed to express my creativity in a serious way. I also wanted to break out of this idea that you have to choose a side—business or creative.

What is your design aesthetic?

Elegant, luxurious and strong—I use a balance of fluid mixed with tailored pieces to reflect the dual sides of my nature. I bring my artistic interpretation of the world to the brand through exclusive prints: my photography works [are] converted into limited-edition textile designs, printed on luxurious silks here in Australia. The combination of all these elements creates a timeless, trans-seasonal and individual look.

What do you wish you'd known before starting a business?

How terrifying it is to put your creative soul out there on display for everyone to judge. I have renewed respect for anyone in their own business with their own creations. Separating your emotions and feelings of self-worth from your business strategy and finances is nothing short of impossible!

How do your "day job" and your brand intersect? By virtue of them both being quite different, I will often find myself having ideas about my day job while I'm in creative mode, and equally having a brainwave on strategy for the creative business during my day job. It's probably no different to someone in business who runs marathons or competes in sport. The ability to switch off and do something entirely different with different muscles gives you an ability to manage stress and be more productive.

How do your banking colleagues feel about your side hustle?

[They] have been overwhelmingly supportive, fascinated by the creative process and seeing the end result. Some of their timely advice and support has been the stuff that's kept me going in really stressful times. I do still get some healthy challenge on, "Where do you find the time?", but then I explain that if you think of this as my baby then it's no different from finding the time to look after children. I don't have young children or pets, I have art and fashion instead!

What does a regular day look like?

I don't have a typical day. Aside from the fact that I rebel against routine, juggling two massive commitments means I'm constantly needing to adapt and re-prioritise depending on where the most need is. Some days it's a 4am wake-up call to catch the first flight to Sydney, juggling back-to-backs day and night for a few days, then it might settle down to a 10-hour day and room at night to listen to jazz while working on the fashion business. Some days it's 18 hours straight sewing samples to get ready for photo shoots because there's only one weekend day to do it in.

How do you navigate all the travel?

I love it. I know this will sound twee, but I still get excited about going to an airport newsagent, even on a domestic trip. [It's] my blissfully quiet reading time. There is a copious amount of reading in my day job, so I use the time to get the baroque music on (they say it makes you smarter—I hope so!), get out

“Trust your instincts, nothing is impossible and no-one is better than anyone else”

the pen, write my notes in the margins and get prepared for the week. I buy the *Australian Financial Review* and whichever fashion, interiors or culture mag I don't have yet and challenge myself to get the work done, read the *AFR* and have enough time to fit in the glossy. I love making experiences out of even the most mundane parts of life.

What is the biggest lesson you've learnt? That I'm my own worst enemy and if I can just sort that out I can do and be anything I wish. I think I might be fighting that battle, along with everyone else, for the rest of my natural life.

Who inspires you? People around me, more so than famous people. Not because I don't get dazzled by gloss and celebrity, more because the longer I live the more I realise it's all smoke and mirrors and everyone is fighting their own battles no-one can see. I'm inspired by people who put themselves and their hearts out there, by sheer grit and determination, and by humility to accept help [and] make change. I see that every day in my day job, in our people and customers, and in the arts where the broken becomes beautiful on a daily basis.

What is the best advice you've received? "Now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good." This is what my dad tried to tell me when I was 18 when he saw how much pressure I was putting on myself. I thought I knew better and didn't take it in, [but] now I get it and I don't let the fear of not being perfect get in the way of trying to be my best.

When are you happiest? When I feel like I am making a difference or having an impact; when I surprise myself; when I discover a new piece of music or art that I love; when I nail the perfect cut on a garment; when I'm at the international airport newsagency buying mags!

Do you have any self-care rituals? I have so many it's ridiculous! My current range of tools [includes] chiropractic, cryotherapy, walking in nature, friends, wine, toasted cheese sandwiches, salmon sashimi, sleep and my Sleep Pillow app with the sound of storms, any music by Alan Pasqua or Ludovico Einaudi, cinemas, popcorn and gin martinis.

Finally, any words to live by? Comparison is the thief of joy...run your own race. —EMILY TAYLOR