

# Top form

As our series of case studies on Barclays customers continues, **Tim Edwards** talks to House of MV, purveyors of fairy-tale frocks

## Vital statistics

**Name and job:** Emma Swinn and Veronica Westley, bridal couturiers  
**Company:** House of MV  
**Established:** 2003  
**Company status:** sole trader  
**Date of VAT registration:** 2003  
**Start-up costs:** £25,000 (approx.)

St John's Street is a quiet shopping area in Bury St Edmunds, as yet untouched by the likes of McDonald's. Every establishment here is individual, and no more so than House of MV, a boutique selling bespoke bridal, christening and ball gowns.

"Everybody wants a fairy-tale wedding," says Emma Swinn, co-founder of House of MV. "We just offer them the experience that we'd like to receive."

"Customers feel relaxed when they come in here; they sit around for three hours at a time and have a cup of tea while we show them samples and drawings."

Emma has always been into fashion; as a taller-than-average teen she found it difficult to buy stylish clothing in high-street shops and ended up making her own. Soon people were asking where she'd got "that cool skirt" from. By the tender age of 20 she'd already been asked to kit out the bride at a wedding.

Fast-forward 13 years. She and Veronica Westley (the 'V' in MV) were both working in a high-street clothes shop in Bury St Edmunds when, realising they could run things better themselves, they started joking about setting up on their own.



When Emma came to work one day and told Veronica she was handing in her notice, things got a little more serious.

After spending a frantic few weeks looking for suitable premises, they opened in November 2003.

### LEARNING CURVE

"We knew nothing about running a business when we started," says Emma. "We didn't know what we had to do, nor the order in which to do it. It was such a relief when the bank staff were so normal and friendly. Plus, they helped us with our business plan."

"One of the great things about Barclays is that I'm never afraid to ask our Relationship Manager, Chris Marshall, silly questions – and they even do left-handed chequebooks!"

Emma and Veronica do know about fashion, though: "We didn't take any notice of other shops when we were preparing to open. We knew exactly what we wanted: other bridal shops can be quite staid, but we're very relaxed," says Veronica.

Emma's a great fan of embellishments – Vivienne Westwood and Basia Zarzycka are particular favourites of hers – so her time working in Nashville, Tennessee, making stage costumes for country singers was a dream come true.

However over-the-top House of MV's designs can be, there's always a customer willing to go further.

Currently vying for 'most eccentric request' is a 'tin foil' wedding dress (silver lamé, actually) and a bridesmaid's dress tastefully finished with fairy wings for a sixth form-aged girl. ❖



## “EVERYONE WANTS A FAIRY-TALE WEDDING. WE JUST OFFER THE EXPERIENCE THAT WE’D LIKE TO RECEIVE”

EMMA SWINN, BRIDAL COUTURIER

Ever mindful of marketing, they were worried about footfall as St John’s Street is tucked away from the main shopping precinct. The road does, however, link the town’s pubs with its clubbing spots, so by leaving the lights on in the window displays every evening, they can showcase their wares to women out on the town.

They’ve also combined forces with other traders to get better signposting and have forged links with other businesses in the wedding sector. They’ll recommend a florist, for instance, and customers will in turn be referred to House of MV.

Emma’s also having her soft-top Mazda roadster painted pink with their logo, and a website is currently under development. Helpfully, the local press has shown interest and given them valuable coverage.

Apart from a part-time seamstress, there are just the two of them running the business. All their hard work doesn’t come cheap: a bespoke dress from House of MV costs from £900, while off-the-peg dresses sell for between £400 and £3,500. Materials are expensive and, although they do allow people to pay in instalments, they won’t get started on a dress until they’ve received 50 per cent of the total cost.

Veronica points out that one thing they had to learn early on was how to manage their customers’ expectations from the moment they walked through the door.

Emma agrees: “People were coming here to get a bespoke gown because they actually thought it would be cheaper than an off-the-peg one,” she says. “When we spend hours showing a customer materials and dresses, and then we do the drawings and they tell us it’s too expensive, it’s a real waste of our time.”

They’ve been open less than a year and already they’re branching out: in a few months they’ll be launching their own off-the-peg range. That’s all they have planned at the moment, but Emma will soon look for opportunities to expand even further. ■

### How we can help

Is it time to stop dreaming and time to start doing? Why not try:

**Start Right seminars** – learn about setting up your own business in these Barclays-run seminars. To find out more, see [www.business.barclays.co.uk/bb/seminars](http://www.business.barclays.co.uk/bb/seminars) or call us on **0800 028 4002**.

**Barclays Panel of Experts** – we give start-ups access to free specialist advice from Enterprise Agency Advisors, accountants and solicitors. To find out more, see [www.barclays.co.uk/business](http://www.barclays.co.uk/business)

### House of MV’s top start-up tips

- 01** Having good staff is crucial – their support makes all the difference
- 02** Join forces with other businesses in the area to maximise your exposure
- 03** Every once in a while, step back and look at your business from an outsider’s perspective
- 04** Plan absolutely everything – at the end of every day make a ‘to do’ list of what you need to do tomorrow
- 05** Most importantly, don’t be afraid to ask for help – when starting up there are no silly questions!

Photography: Sam Scott

