

# LESSONS EARN'T

*Having grown up in a refugee camp in Lebanon, ABRAHAM HATOUM moved to Sydney with his family when he was 19. He began his tailoring business, now called LookSmart Alterations, in 1994. Here he shares the keys to his success with his start-up self.*



## *Dear Abraham,*

It's fair to say you've never known the easy road. Growing up in a refugee camp in Beirut, you have seen more than your fair share of misery and hardship. Your grandfather died when you were very young, but you know of his hardworking nature; a trait passed on to your father.

You learn about business from the age of nine, when your dad starts a mobile sandwich and coffee bar. You help him squeeze orange juice to sell to tourists, but when war breaks out in 1975, the business goes bust. Your dad loses hope, but you see an opportunity and sell orange juice at the army barracks. Other kids from the camp see your success and set up their own carts — your first taste of competition.

You migrate to Australia in 1985 with your mother, brother and one of your sisters. You are 19, with no English skills

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and an incomplete education. You study at TAFE to complete your last four years of school and enrol at the University of NSW. Sure, it takes 12 years to finish a three-year course, but you never give up. You graduate, with a wife and two kids supporting you.

At 24, you start a photography business with two friends, but work relationships break down and the business fails. In future, keep in mind that friendship is one thing; partnerships are another. Four years later, you decide to start your own tailoring service after discovering an interest in the art from your tailor brother-in-law.

You approach businesses in Sydney but face rejection; you don't have premises or anything new to offer. Refuse to accept no for an answer — vision without passion is like a car without fuel. Ask businesses what they need. You find there's a demand for a seven-day, pick-up-and-deliver tailoring service, with one-hour alterations.

You open CityWide Alterations in 1994 without a single client. Don't fret — it's just like in the movie *Field of Dreams*: build it, and they will come. Your business is the first of its kind to expand into every state, a status you achieve in just one year. Be careful not to stretch yourself too thin. Also, research the concept of first-mover advantage, which is being the first type of business in a new area. Because of your speedy expansion, you don't realise your staff are opening stores of their own and taking your clients with them.

So, thinking outside the square, you open a store under the LookSmart banner in a converted toilet block at Sydney's Chatswood Chase. The move to shopping centres means higher rents, but it pays off. Your Chatswood shop has relocated to the high-fashion precinct of the centre, and you now have more than 100 stores across Australia and New Zealand.

Focus on the care of your customers and employees. Put your people first and profits will follow. Offering customers something as small as a cup of coffee or a voucher does wonders to drive return visits, and looking after employees ensures loyalty.

Your grandfather and father are always in your thoughts and, I have to say, you'll do them proud. You will prove to them — and to yourself — that you don't have to give in to circumstance; you are the creator of your own destiny. 🍀



Hatoum with staff in the workroom of one of his LookSmart Alterations locations in 2000.