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# Theresa Gattung

AFTER TELECOM... FASHION, FUN AND FINDING HERSELF

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**THERESA GATTUNG IS WHAT** you might call a bit of a talker. Words flow out of her in a steady, ceaseless stream; her voice – with its New Zealand heartland inflections firmly in place – fills the room and spills into the corridor. She discusses everything from her hobbies (collecting vintage linen), to her sleep patterns (“I do best on nine hours”); covers subjects as disparate as her pets (three horses and two cats), through to the New Zealand wool industry (in which she has recently taken a great deal of interest, more on which later).

Most profiles of the ex-CEO of Telecom – as well as being a talker herself, the 46-year-old is much talked about – have tried to describe her idiosyncratic conversational style, but none quite do it justice; the scope, the sheer scale of her conversation is difficult to convey. It is slightly overwhelming, in person, just how much she manages to say.

# THERESA

Former Telecom CEO Theresa Gattung tells Jo McCarroll why she's never been happier

## REINVENTED

PHOTOGRAPHS EMMA BASS

With barely a pause, and rarely a stutter, she covers her past – she's the oldest of four girls raised in Rotorua and was joint dux at school (“I was a bit of a girly swot”) – and zips through the career trajectory that saw her become head of New Zealand's largest listed company at 37, a \$2.9 million-a-year job she did for eight years before stepping down in 2007.

And she talks about the professional and personal journey of reinvention she's been on since she left that corporate world. There's that new role with the newly created Wool Company; she's determined to reposition and build the beleaguered New Zealand wool brand: “I am intrigued by doing something like this which could matter so much to the country as a whole.”

There's also work she's done recently for the SPCA. “There's so much you could do to help, you eventually have to decide what matters to you. And I love animals and have seen for myself the joy having animals brings.” →



**THIS PAGE:** Since leaving her high-profile job at Telecom, Theresa has been relishing life away from the rigid corporate world. “I still can't decide whether the weather really has got better or whether I have just been preoccupied for a decade or two.”



**ABOVE:** Theresa, aged 11. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Theresa's family in 1969. Back row: Mother Marion, grandmother Betty Clay with granddaughter Marion, father John. Front row: Sisters Yvonne, Theresa and Angela.

There's also the corporate queen's emergence as a small-business owner. On Valentine's Day she and her business partner, American woman Sinda Mandurrigo, are opening a clothing store, Charlotte Grace, on California's Monterey Peninsula. It will sell solely New Zealand designers with a particular focus on one of Theresa's favourites: Trelise Cooper. A small business but with, Theresa says, huge potential to grow.

The idea for the store came when she was on holiday in the area soon after she left Telecom. Introduced to Sinda by mutual friends, the two women became pals and quickly discovered they shared a few similar ideas. Wandering around the sunny, beachy Monterey area, Theresa also noticed how often she was stopped by strangers wanting to compliment her on something she was wearing, always a New Zealand piece and usually from Trelise, whose designs she wears most days.

"I had already been wondering if there would be a market for New Zealand design in the US. I go to the US a lot but always come back to buy clothes. I've never found design or materials as good as you get here.

"So the medium version of the story is that Sinda and I have started Charlotte Grace together – the Grace is after my mother; it's her middle name. The store is going to have New Zealand wool carpets and sheepskins as well but it's not about New Zealand per se. It's just that New Zealand designers are the best in the world. It might be ballsy to start something new because you know the economy's tough, but my view is there's no point saying we can't do anything because the sky

is falling. If you believe that, the sky will be falling. Whereas I am the sort of person who would rather think that anything is possible."

Theresa hadn't been travelling looking for another business opportunity. When she left Telecom she assumed she would eventually take another corporate job, probably offshore. Before that, though, she wanted to take a holiday. So she spent six months revisiting a few of her favourite places – including stays in London and New York – and making time to go to countries she'd always wanted to visit, like Argentina, where she spent several weeks riding polo ponies on a ranch.

She travelled around New Zealand too, and the time out of the rigid corporate environment in which she'd spent her whole adult life allowed her to start to explore a different, more spontaneous approach to life.

"It was summertime and the weather was beautiful. And I remember just wandering around thinking, *Has the weather always been this good in January? Has New Zealand always been this beautiful? Have I just been too busy and missed it?*

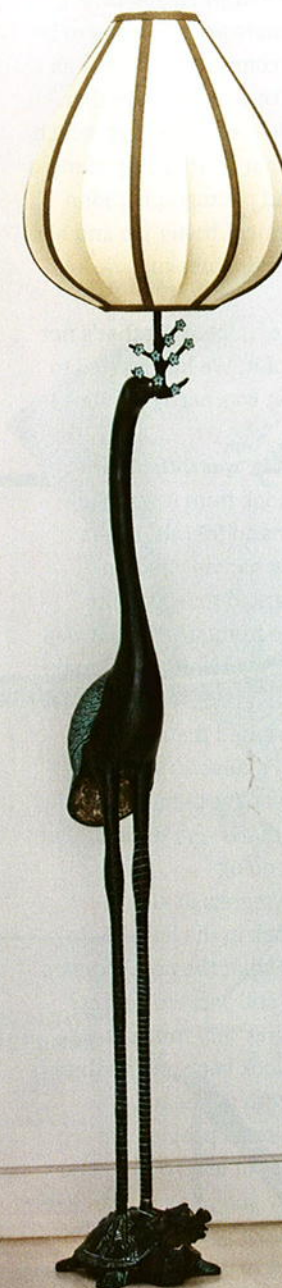
"I still can't decide," she admits, "whether the weather really has got better or whether I've just been preoccupied for a decade or two."

She has been rather single-minded ever since, as a teenager, she decided she wanted to be the head of a public company before she turned 40. Having finished a degree in marketing at Waikato, she worked first at TVNZ, then National Mutual and the Bank of New Zealand before starting at Telecom in 1994. In her downtime she was studying fulltime for her law degree.

At 26 she spent a whole year with chronic toothache and underwent several unnecessary procedures before it was diagnosed, eventually, as stress-related.

"I don't even remember being 26 – that year is gone," →

I GO TO THE US A LOT BUT ALWAYS COME BACK TO BUY CLOTHES. I'VE NEVER FOUND DESIGN OR MATERIALS AS GOOD AS YOU GET HERE





she says. "I just dragged myself around with the pain of an abscess all year. Eventually my dentist said, 'I don't think this is a problem with your teeth.' Then a dental surgeon at Wellington Hospital diagnosed TMJ Syndrome and said it was triggered by stress. And I said, 'Don't be ridiculous. Who, me? Stressed?'"

She has got better, luckily, at dealing with stress over the years; she doesn't drink much alcohol or coffee now and has regular massages. And she swims every morning, without fail. In the past 21 years, she tells me, she'd only have missed five or so mornings. When she was working at Telecom she was hit by a car on her way home after her swim, and went to hospital with a twisted knee, bruising and shock; she was back at work, and the pool, the next day. Which is, I point out, still a little fanatical, especially since this is the activity she does to relax.

"Well, you could write that I am a little bit obsessive and a touch driven," Theresa admits cheerfully. "How could that not be the case? I think that might already be a little bit obvious."

She also deals with stress by remembering that

**THIS PAGE:** Horseriding is one of Theresa's great passions. She owns three horses. One (pictured), she rides herself, one is ridden by a young New Zealand eventer, and she also owns a share in a racehorse.

nothing, whether good or bad, lasts forever and few experiences are entirely positive or entirely negative.

"What I've learned over the years is you have times in your life where you feel in flow. Like now, for me. You need to make the most of those times because it isn't going to stay like that. But even when you face more obstacles and difficulties there are still going to be nuggets of good times and good connections in that as well. And it's not going to stay like that forever either."

Like the year before she left Telecom, she says, which held particular challenges since her relationship of more than 20 years with economist and photographer John Savage broke down. Her commitment to her job and her extreme workload was a factor in the breakup, she admits.

"I don't want to say it was all of it, because that's not true," she says. "But it was part of it. We had started to go in different directions and that was partly because I was hardly ever home."

The split, while not acrimonious, was difficult for them both, but the positive she took from it was the unasked for support from family and friends. It was easier too, she says, because they had no children; neither she nor John had ever wanted to be parents.

"I don't know where that came from or why that was but I knew from quite young. I'm worried this will make me sound hard and unfeeling – and honestly I think children are delightful! If I had wanted them I would have had them although I think I'd have struggled. I take my hat off to women who manage to have a family and a full-on career. I still think that's very difficult. But that's not something I regret not doing."

In fact she doesn't have many regrets at all.

"If someone had shown me, back in the halls of residence when I was 19, 'This is what the next 25 years are going to look like – so do you still want to do this?' I'd have said yes. I truly don't regret very much at all. Because there's not much that I look back on and think, 'well, I didn't act in accordance with my heart'.

"Relative to a broad cross-section of people I am probably still quite goal-oriented. But less so than ever before. Right now I'm more happy and relaxed than I've ever been, and one thing is just leading on to the next thing. I have no idea what the future will hold. But I can't wait to see what comes up next." ■