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ICE QUEEN DEBORAH'S

STRICTLY FUN-FILLED AWAY FROM THE DEN



EXCITEMENT: Deborah still finds the business world invigorating – and says she has a lot of fun with the entrepreneurs

My Dragons & other animals

DOES Deborah Meaden have a fantasy product she is desperate for someone to invent?

She has spent 12 years as an investor on Dragons' Den, which is back on Sunday. And she has pumped her money into more than 60 different companies – making everything from plasterboard fixing to doggies' ice cream.

But is she still waiting for that elusive, once-in-a-lifetime invention that'll have her shrieking: "Yes! That's it! At last!"

"Surprisingly, it doesn't take her long to answer my question. 'A cat flap for flies,' she tells me. 'At the moment we've got loads of flies in our house and they can't actually open the window to let themselves out.'

"So, yes, a one-way cat flap would be perfect."

"Er, right. So how exactly would that work, Deborah?"

"Oh, don't let's worry about the actual mechanics of it, Mike," she chuckles. "I just think it would be brilliant!"

You are probably wondering why a scary, no-nonsense businesswoman such as Deborah wouldn't just spray them with Vapona – and maybe even cackle like Cruella de Vil as she did so.

So at this point I should probably clarify one little detail – Deborah Meaden isn't actually that scary. Not when you get to sit and chat with her.

Buzz

I dare say she's intimidating if you're one of those jittery, sweaty-palmed entrepreneurs who shuffle into the Den with a business proposition and a begging bowl, hoping to persuade her – or fellow dragons Peter Jones, Touker Suleyman, Jenny Campbell and Tej Lalvani – to cough up tens of thousands of pounds, investment-wise.

But that's different. There's a reason for that. "I never want to be cruel to anybody," she assures me. "I'm not inhuman. But I do need to remember I'm in Dragons' Den as an investor, so I've got to behave like one."

"It's never nice to watch people struggling with their pitches. It is very uncomfortable. Sometimes you want to jump in and help."

"But I also feel business is difficult. So the reason I'll sometimes sit there with a stony face is I need to see if they can recover. Because actually business doesn't pat you on the head and say: 'There, there, it's going to be all right,' you know. You've got to get your act together."

Away from the show, it's still the business world that gives Deborah, 59, her biggest buzz. "I just love it," she says. "It fascinates me, it invigorates me. I'm someone who likes to grab life



PUBLIC FACES: With James Caan, Duncan Bannatyne, Peter Jones and Theo Paphitis on Dragons' Den in 2009. Right, on Strictly in 2013

bit more on cutout pls...

THE MIKE WARD INTERVIEW
Deborah Meaden
DRAGONS' DEN STAR

with both hands. I'm aware we're not here for very long so I like to engage."

As for those Dragons' Den hopefuls who do manage to get Deborah on board, it seems they soon get to see the other side to her. "I have a lot of fun with them," she assures me.

"I never want them to see me as a Dragon, to be scared of being open with me. I find humour, and actually enjoying what you are doing, is a great leveller."

Talking of fun, it sounds as though signing up for Strictly Come Dancing in 2013 had a big impact on her public image. "Strictly finally allowed people to see more of me," she says. "They saw me being vulnerable, they saw me laughing, they saw I knew how to enjoy myself."

"Since then, I've noticed a real difference in the way people approach me. I honestly haven't changed – just ask my family – but people's perception of me has. After I came out, people would actually come up to me in

the street and hug me! I must admit it made me jump a bit at first when they just dived in, but it was really lovely. That would never have happened before."

"Before, I was just that scary woman off Dragons' Den!" Deborah is also nuts about animals. She wasn't entirely kidding me with that crazy fly-flap idea.

"We've got three dogs, two cats, 14 horses, two pigs, five sheep (all rescue), along with ducks, chickens and guinea fowl."

"All those, and three very angry geese. Six years we've had those, and they've never, ever been nice to me."

Oh dear. So has Deborah tried different techniques to win their affection? "I have, Mike. It's a waste of time."

Hmm. Maybe some sort of miraculous geese-taming product might be a better investment? Deborah laughs. "I think you may be right!"

PROFITABLE FAVOURITES

- TV SHOW:** Blue Planet II.
- FILM:** L'Incredible. It's French, a real feelgood true story.
- ACTOR:** Matthew McConaughey.
- COMEDIAN:** Tom Davis. I did Murder In Successville with him.
- SONG:** Smooth Sailing (The Temptations).
- FOOD:** Pickled gherkins.
- DRINK:** English sparkling wine.
- APP:** WhatsApp.
- CITY:** London.
- HOLIDAY DESTINATION:** My husband Paul and I spend quite a lot of time in Africa. I'm involved with a wildlife conservation charity there called Tusk.
- ANIMAL:** All animals. I couldn't possibly single out one species.

