

# A success story to give you the warm fuzzies

A product of humble origins has proved to have global appeal, writes Kate Stanton.

In 1992, when drought and plummeting wool prices threatened the survival of the tiny outback Queensland town of Tambo, three local women at a community brainstorming session came up with an unexpected solution: teddy bears.

Mary Sutherland, Charm Ryrrie and Helen Sargood thought a cuddly, premium product made from high-quality local sheepswool would aid the wool industry and appeal to international tourists and Australians happy to support a struggling outback community. They were right.

When the first Tambo Teddies launched the following year, they became an instant hit with people in the region and beyond.

“The response was fabulous and overwhelming,” says Tambo Teddies co-owner Alison Shaw, a Tambo local who took over the business with friend Tammy Johnson in 2014.

“It was a cottage industry business that people just latched onto and loved straightaway,” she says. “They used to travel around to all the regional shows and markets — to the egg show and to the Ekka — and it went really well.”

When the original Tambo Teddies trio eventually retired, Shaw and her co-owner took the helm with plans to



**When Tambo Teddies launched in 1993, they became an instant hit with locals and tourists alike.**

modernise and expand the company. “The product had a great name, and there was already a lot of emotional attachment to the teddy bears,” says Shaw. “We bought Tambo Teddies to grow it, and to share our beautiful product with the world.”

But they also knew that moving production overseas wouldn’t be an option for a business so dependent on its reputation as a regional Australian product.

“It is absolutely critical for us to be certified Australian Made,” says Shaw. “It’s just one of those incredible trust symbols. People want to know that their products are made in Australia,

and they want to support Australian businesses. By buying Australian Made, they also know they’re supporting jobs in our small town and our regional communities.”

Overwhelmed by production needs, Shaw and Johnson decided to explore alternative opportunities for growth. After implementing a new digital strategy, they participated in a Mentoring for Growth program through the Queensland government, and worked with Multicultural Development Australia to set up a production hub in nearby Toowoomba.

The Regional Sewing Hub, which opened in 2019, is staffed by five

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Alison Shaw

sewers, including four migrant refugees, who sew the teddy bears. The rest of the team live in Tambo.

“We love employing new migrant Australians, and it’s a beautiful part of our business,” says Shaw.

Today, Tambo Teddies are still crafted from 100 per cent Australian and New Zealand wool and sheepskin. They come in a range of styles, including Mr Stockman, Digger the Dog and Little Aussie Ringer Teddy.

Shaw says they are working hard to grow their Australian stockists and to develop their overseas customer base. They have created a website for New Zealand buyers and have secured a distributor in the United States.

“There’s always more we can do to grow our product internationally, but we’ll always be Australian at heart,” says Shaw.

“It’s always going to be a special purchase for people,” she adds. “Our main market is grandparents buying a bear for their grandchildren, and they want it to last forever.”



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