

THE POWER TO FIGHT

WITH TONIA GALATI, FOUNDER OF TG CONSULTING LTD

Fraudsters, who seem perfectly legitimate, are finding new and creative ways to steal not only our money, but our reputation, confidence and livelihood too.

Becoming the innocent victim of a highly sophisticated and far reaching fraud set up to target and exploit individuals and small businesses is something that could so easily happen to any of us, if the timing is right and the story convincing.

This is what happened to Tonia and this article tells the story of the horrendous personal trauma she has experienced and the major challenges she has had to overcome to survive. It's a true testimonial to the courage and resilience she's found in herself to fight back and start to rebuild her life and her business all over again. >>



PR Extravaganza Competition brought to you by Brand You Magazine. In collaboration with Yolande De Vries for the photography, PR advice and training by Boss your PR, photoshoot location supplied by Styled Home Studios.

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Hi Tonia, what happened to you certainly qualifies you to feature as an inspiring Brand You She-Ro. Let's begin by finding out a bit more about you and your business.

I was born and raised in Lincolnshire to Italian parents, the eldest of three girls. My sisters, Maria and Frankie, are both involved with TG Consulting in various ways (which I love), and are most definitely my She-Roes.

Having graduated from the University of Hull, I moved to London to start working and have been here ever since. I've worked mainly within professional bodies and higher education, and set up TG Consulting two weeks before the global pandemic hit. I decided to become a business owner because I wanted to work with multiple clients and individuals to make a difference, and also create a business that individuals would really want to be a part of.

TG Consulting is an education consultancy, focused on employability, student engagement, social mobility and racial equity. Our clients are education providers and employers and we look to create partnerships and bespoke consulting opportunities where students are the beneficiaries; where barriers to employment are broken down; and where they are encouraged to be their authentic selves and learn to celebrate their differences. At TG Consulting, we look to create positive action and positive outcomes.

There's an ongoing investigation underway, so we can't go into details, but you ended up losing a significant amount of money and your business was seriously jeopardised. Can you share with us how you felt the moment you found out it was a fraud and how that affected you and your business?

It's really hard to describe...I always used to think that would never happen to me. But these things are very sophisticated and complex. Initially, there was a mix of emotions; firstly I felt like I was losing the plot and having an out of body experience, that this was not happening to me; then disbelief, shock and anger that individuals existed who would go to such lengths to con people. It made me feel sick that these fraudsters have no moral compass and don't care in the slightest how they are impacting individuals' lives. It took a few days for it to sink in and for me to fully see the implications, which started to build over a few weeks and then a couple of months. This all started around September 2021, and then really consumed me until August 2022.

I was in quite a bad way mentally but there was also a huge impact on me physically. My sleep was impacted and I didn't have any motivation to do anything. I threw myself into work as I needed to try and regain control of the situation and fix things - for myself, my team and the business.

"I remember being in the middle of Bushy Park and I just felt completely broken."

While we don't always have control over situations that life can bring, we do have a choice as to how we react to them. Many would have crumbled after such a ghastly experience, but you didn't. What was the trigger for you to decide to fight back?

The day that sticks most in my mind was back in March when I had my weekly call with Accounts, and we knew that things were really bad for us financially. I closed my laptop, left my flat and went out for a walk; I was in a bit of a trance as everything just started to hit me. I remember being in the middle of Bushy Park and I just felt completely broken. That's when the tears started to come, for the first time - it was proper ugly crying and thankfully, there was no one there to see!

I sent a voice note to a friend of mine, Tim, saying that I didn't know what to do (I don't even think I was coherent), but he texted me to say he would call me later. We spoke for almost three hours, discussing everything business-related - finances, my options and the decisions I had in front of me. Tim didn't sugarcoat it. He said, "Tonia, you have two options: you give up or you fight." That night, I barely slept as I was so stressed and anxious but I woke up the next day and I knew I had to fight. I couldn't let these people ruin my life and everything I had worked so hard to build.

In addition, I came across a group of other female business owners who'd been conned by the same people and I think that has helped. It's quite scary to think about it all but knowing others have gone through the same thing has been reassuring - we have been able to work together to get things done in terms of bringing individuals to justice, but above all, we can support each other through our shared lived experiences. We literally have an army of business founders from across industries working together. >>



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Have you always been a fighter or have you had to work on your mindset to develop the attitude needed to cope with the intense pressure?

I'm not sure I would describe myself as a fighter but I will fight to protect those things that I care about. In this situation, I wanted to fight for my business, my team and all those individuals that we, as a business, look to support. Once I'd made the decision to get back on track, that is what I did. We have weathered the storm (or tsunami!) but either way, we are out the other side and have learnt so much.

The aim of TG Consulting is to build confidence for others and help them to access opportunities, overcome barriers and achieve great things. I had to look internally and apply some of that to my own thinking. We've also had lots of client projects and partnerships that needed to be delivered to a high standard, and ultimately that had to be the focus. Funnily enough, we have also won numerous industry awards over the last 15 months, which have given me that extra boost of positivity to keep going.

How have you managed to keep your business afloat? What approach did you take to move forward?

Fraud is something that happened to us – it doesn't define us. I made a decision to separate that from work and almost compartmentalise it. Yes, I spent a lot of time looking into the fraudsters and trying to figure out my rights, but I wanted to focus on operating.

The priority was to go lean and reduce outgoings, which included staffing, external suppliers, subscriptions, everything. I also had to contact our suppliers (many of whom were small business owners) to explain that there was a 'slight' cash flow problem and payments would be delayed – one gave me absolute hell, but all of the others really stood by me. They also motivated me to keep going because I wanted to create more opportunities that would benefit them.

I knew in my head that the aim was to rebuild, no matter how long it took, so I just explored every business opportunity possible and really went for it.

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Doing this alone is quite an undertaking. Did you have support around you - both personally and professionally? How did your community respond to your situation?

There is no way I would still be standing if I had gone through this alone. I'm very lucky as I have a brilliant support network. My family and friends have helped to keep me sane and it's good to have outlets where people know what you are going through. You can just have a bit of a rant or a cry and then get on with things, but also laugh – sometimes you have to laugh about these things.

Straightaway, I felt it was important to be open with my immediate network. I messaged many of my business contacts to tell them what had happened and to see if they might be able to help – and they really did help in all sorts of ways. I had contacts meeting me for a coffee and a chat, those who picked up the phone to text and check in; I had others referring contacts to me that needed some work. There was a contact who referred me to a pro bono criminal lawyer, and another to a fraud investigator – my network really did come together for me and I'm so grateful for every single one of them. >>

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"I felt so positive and a million times more confident."

How has the fraud affected you, personally as a woman, but also your approach to business?

I would be lying if I said this hasn't had a negative impact on me – I feel that I have my guard up quite a lot and find myself questioning myself and my decisions more. In fact, I probably check in with my support network before making major decisions which I wouldn't have done before. I still don't feel 100% myself health wise, but I will get there.

I believe that everything happens for a reason. During the really bad days, I used to remind myself of that, and it would give me the motivation to keep going. Yes, this situation has massively impacted me, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone – but sometimes you have to take back control and create something positive instead. I've done that and am excited for what the team and I have planned for 2023. The business turns three on 23rd February and I'm really proud of that achievement.

Do you think you'll ever get closure?

If I focus on closure, I think I might be waiting a long time. Of course, I hope that the individuals concerned will be brought to justice but that is not in my control, and so a waste of my energy. It's been a very emotional, traumatic experience which I think will always be with me in some way. We are all on a journey, and this is just one of the things I have had to overcome.

Finding out about all you've been through, it must have taken a lot of courage to apply for our PR-Ready Makeover Competition – we're so glad you got in touch and that we can give you an opportunity to tell your story and showcase some of the gorgeous images from your photoshoot. What made you decide to give it a go?

I felt it was a great opportunity for me to share my experience because it really is something that could happen to anyone. I was a little apprehensive as the scars from the fraud haven't quite faded but it was an important thing to do for me and TG Consulting, as I need to focus on rebuilding my self-confidence. 2023 is going to be a positive year for us and this is another opportunity that has come along as a result of a negative experience.

It's been such a beneficial experience. On photoshoot day, I didn't feel comfortable at all, but Yolande really helped to put me at ease and find my 'best side'. My coaching session with Fiona at Boss Your PR was so cool and I felt so positive and a million times more confident at the end of the session. I can't thank everyone enough for being so lovely.



You have certainly demonstrated that with the right attitude, you can come out of a bad situation stronger and wiser. What advice would you give to our readers, should they find themselves going through a difficult period in their business and aren't sure if they have the strength to bounce back?

I think it's really important to try and be kind to yourself – these are really sophisticated operations with professional fraudsters, and blaming yourself won't help you or the situation. There's lots of support available for victims of fraud, but you really have to search for it. My advice would be to focus on what you can control as that is the quickest way to rebuild and maintain your confidence. Also, make sure you confide in individuals close to you who won't pass judgement. You need people that you can just call who will listen and be an outlet for you.

In which direction would you like to see yourself and your business going over the coming years?

I'm really keen to speak about my experiences and I'm focusing more time on speaking engagements, particularly focused around being impacted by fraud and leading a business through crisis, my lived experiences around mental health, and women in business. My focus will also be on growing TG Consulting, so we can positively impact more individuals and support them on their journeys. I have a great team and brilliant, creative and innovative clients, and we have some exciting plans for the future.

Oh...and we will definitely be eating cake and drinking champagne in February! •