

PROFILE: HOW I DID IT: SHABNAM REZAEI

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**Big Bad Boo spawns big B.C. business bonanza: Vancouver company arrives at major business goal via Sesame Street**



Shabnam Rezaei

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Business in Vancouver's "How I Did It" feature asks business leaders to explain in their own words how they achieved a business goal in the face of significant entrepreneurial challenges. In this week's issue, Shabnam Rezaei of Big Bad Boo studios describes how she and her husband, Aly Jetha, partnered with one of the world's biggest children's TV entities – Sesame Street – to provide the content and name recognition they needed to build their own educational cartoon distribution company.

"I was working on Wall Street implementing software solutions for clients like JP Morgan and big banks like ING. It was a very boring industry.

"I started an online magazine called PersianMirror.com to explain to the world about Iran. This gentleman in L.A., Dustin Ellis, who is half Iranian and half American, was in the animation industry. He wrote a script called Babak and Friends – A First Norooz. He contacted me through PersianMirror.com, and he asked, 'Could you interview me and help me get some traction so I could raise some money to produce this film?'

"I thought this is such a good idea – to teach kids about a new culture through cartoons. Dustin had worked in the industry, but he really didn't know much about production, so we put in a bit of our own money and then got some sponsors to come in and produced Babak and Friends – A First Norooz.

"Norooz Productions was formed in New York and L.A. We moved animation from the Philippines to Vancouver in 2007 for our new show, Mixed Nutz. [My husband] Aly is originally from Vancouver. We were here on Christmas break to visit his mom, and we discovered there's a whole animation industry here. When we opened in Vancouver, we renamed the production company Big Bad Boo Studios.

"Over 2008 and 2009, we came across this problem. We would go to PBS and try to sell Mixed Nutz, and they didn't know who we were. Sales were really, really difficult. Expanding and scaling is very difficult when you're unknown. That's when we thought, 'Wouldn't it be great if we could partner with an already known brand to achieve what it is we want to achieve, which is teaching culture and language?'

"The long-term strategy that Aly and I came up with was we need to build our own distribution channel, and that's what Oznoz.com is. We realized the people that make the most money are the people that are directly connected to the consumer. Hence, we need our own distribution channel. But we can't build everything on there because we can only do one show per year, so we need more content.

"We're a production and distribution company that nobody knows. In order to fuel the scaling of it, we needed something big, and that's where Sesame Street comes in. We asked them, 'Do you have stuff in Mandarin, Korean and Hindu? They're like, 'Yes, it's sitting on the shelves, it's collecting dust, iTunes won't take it – do you have a channel?' We said, 'Yes we do.'

"They have 50,000 hours of content. What we're banking on is that it's going to bring us fame and scale very quickly, because the Elmo calling card is a big calling card, whereas Mixed Nutz is not."

Tags: digital media, Islamic Republic of Iran, JPMorgan Chase & Co., software, film

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**Q&A**

**Q:** Why did you decide to open a studio in Vancouver?

**A:** I think you have to credit the animation schools, the BC film and tax credit community. There's a film industry here and there is a lot of voice-over talent.

**Q:** What has been the biggest challenge in growing the studio?

**A:** On the Oznoz.com front, building the technology for streaming and downloading has been difficult.

**Q:** What are the market opportunities for cartoons in foreign languages?

**A:** More than 60% of the population in North America within the next five years is going to be non-white immigrant families, and these are people that want to retain their language with their children.

**K Babak and Friends help build Big Bad Boo and the road to TV exposure**

**2005:** Rezaei launches PersianMirror.com, which leads the company to its first animation partner, Dustin Ellis

**2006:** Rezaei and husband Aly Jetha form Norooz Productions and raise money to help produce Ellis' educational cartoon Babak and Friends – A First Norooz

**2007**

**Norooz Productions opens Big Bad Boo animation studios in Vancouver**

**2009:** Big Bad Boo starts production on 1001 Nights animated TV series

**2010:** Online store for Babak and Friends expanded into a distribution channel for more than 100 educational products in nine languages and relaunched as Oznoz.com

**2012:** Exclusive agreement signed with Sesame Street to provide foreign language TV episodes via the Oznoz.com distribution channel

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 The Terminal City Club  
 Mar 05 12:00 pm

**Unified Communications Lunch n Learn**  
 Terminal City Club  
 Mar 05 12:00 pm

**Communications Case Studies: Award-Winning Strategies**  
 Sutton Place Hotel  
 Mar 06 5:00 pm

**ACG Lower Mainland Luncheon**  
 Sheraton Guildford Hotel  
 Mar 07 11:30 am

**Introduction to Balanced Leadership**  
 Flack Building  
 Mar 08 9:00 am

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