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# No end in sight to the tattoo craze

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Nigel Bowen

As ink becomes more widespread, there are more business opportunities than ever for body artists.

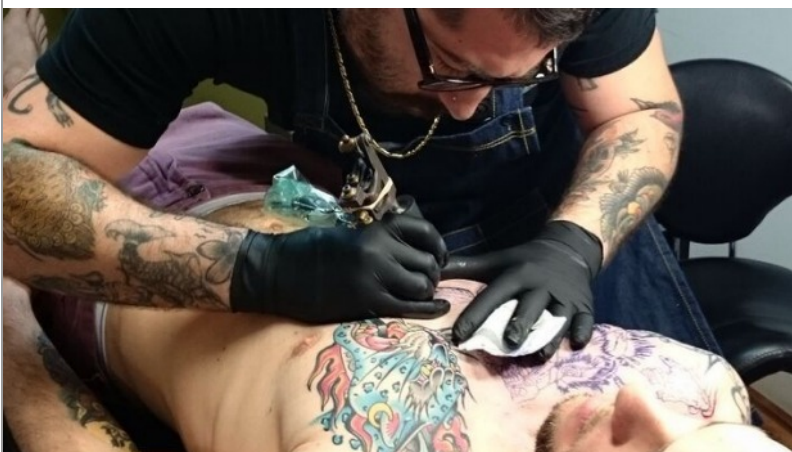
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Tashi Dukanovic says tattooing can be a lucrative career. *Photo: Supplied*

Fancy owning a lucrative business with low start-up costs? One that for the foreseeable future seems immune from technological disruption or the depredations of a margin-slashing competitor?

"Tattoos continue to grow in popularity as a form of fashion and self-expression, especially as media exposure of tattooed celebrities and athletes increases," IBISWorld senior analyst Ryan Lin says.

IBISWorld recently released a report showing the Australian tattooing industry has enjoyed 3.9 per cent average annual growth over the last half decade and is now just shy of achieving revenues of \$100 million a year.



Dave Mezoghlian: Tattoos have become commonplace. *Photo: Supplied*

"Tattoo studios often attract business by promoting their skilled and experienced artists, so it would be difficult to disrupt the current business model with a high-volume, low-margin franchise operation," Lin says.

Tashi Dukanovic, vice-president of the Australian Tattooists Guild and owner of Melbourne's Green Lotus Custom Tattoo Studio, agrees her industry can provide a lucrative and long-term career but points out breaking into it isn't easy.

"There's currently no law against someone who isn't a tattooist owning a tattoo parlour, but it's not common," she says, adding that, "there's currently no formal qualification required either, so most people get into the industry by demonstrating to a tattoo studio owner they have the necessary artistic ability then doing a three-year traineeship. After they've finished their traineeship they become a junior artist and operate as a sole trader in a studio, handing a 50 to 60 per cent cut of what they make to the studio's owner. Even while still a junior artist, it's possible to earn good money."

She says junior artists in some busy, high-end studios clear \$2000 a week.

After five to 10 years, they become a senior artist and can either demand higher prices from customers and a bigger cut from studio owners, or launch their own business. Opening a studio involves jumping through hurdles to get the green light from the local council, health authorities and possibly a state government department wanting to ensure there are no organised crime links. But it usually doesn't involve much more than a \$40,000 outlay.

Senior artists charge about \$180 an hour for their services. Celebrity tattooists, of which Australia has several, can name their price and still have waiting lists years long. "These days it's all about building your personal brand online," Dukanovic says. "You need to get your work on Pinterest, Instagram and Facebook and establish a fan base."

As the tattoo industry has become less disreputable, its clientele has become both more female and affluent. It's a development Dave Mezoghlian, owner of the Darling Parlour Tattoo in the salubrious Sydney suburb of Balmain, admits he didn't foresee. "Our customers are from a wide range of backgrounds and we do get doctors and lawyers coming in. Tattooing has become much more socially acceptable during the 12 years I've been in the industry. There are reality TV shows about tattooists, it's all over the media now."

Dukanovic, who has a BA in Visual Arts, says the proportion of customers from professional backgrounds keeps growing. "And I've got more female clients than ever before." "They'll pay decent money to get tattooed in a safe, professional environment by someone they trust. They often get large, elaborate tattoos but in areas they can cover up if they wish to."

Once the heavily-tattooed Gen Y gets its hands on the levers of power it seems likely tattoos will lose any remaining stigma. And while in the past most people stopped getting tats once they reached their 40s, those who've grown up getting inked regularly may well continue to do so throughout their lives.

Both Dukanovic and Mezoghlian are optimistic about their industry's future, though quick to point out it's less bohemian than it might seem. "There's a lot of artistic satisfaction, as well as the ability to travel the country and world taking part in tattooing exhibitions," observes Dukanovic. "That said, I can't over-emphasise the amount of hard work involved in establishing yourself. You work long hours in this job and have don't have much of a social life."

"It's a small business like any other, with exactly the same stresses," Mezoghlian says. "I enjoy what I do but I approach it with a business mentality. I had a business plan before I launched. I've had to work hard for four years, using tools such as social media, to build the business to the point where it is now generating a substantial income."

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