Dr Dilesha Perera: Crafting a Distinctive Path in Sri Lankan Women’s Fashion

Dr Dilesha Perera is the co-founder and chairperson of La Vivente, a women’s wear brand launched by her and her husband, Suneth Korala, in 2020. La Vivente differentiates itself by blending contemporary fashion with Sri Lankan cultural elements and by empowering skilled women through its production network.

Speaking with Business Today, Dr Dilesha discussed how her banking background shaped the brand’s disciplined approach to finance, operations, and growth, shared insights into La Vivente’s unique social enterprise model, and reflected on the strategies that have helped the brand balance quality, affordability, and exclusivity in a competitive market.

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Suneth Korala and Dr Dilesha Perera, Co-Founders of La Vivente.

What specific gaps in the women's fashion market did you identify while still in banking that gave you the confidence to pivot into retail?

I spent 17 years in banking and, during that time, was also involved in manufacturing and sourcing for several leading retail brands. Through this experience, we identified a gap in the market for contemporary womenswear reflecting Sri Lankan identity—a space with a growing customer segment craving modern silhouettes combined with subtle cultural elements, yet largely underserved. La Vivente was created to fill that gap by blending international fashion trends with Sri Lankan-inspired design elements, offering women a distinctive style that is both modern and rooted in local character, thereby setting it apart from brands that focus solely on Western or traditional aesthetics.

When did you launch La Vivente?

La Vivente was launched in 2020, a year that proved exceptionally challenging with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our original plan to open a physical retail outlet had to be put on hold, prompting us to pivot and introduce the brand as an online-only platform. This shift aligned well with the rapid global move from offline

to online shopping during that period.

Despite the challenging environment, the brand performed strongly, resulting in increased customer engagement and higher online sales. Our distinctive product designs and carefully executed digital marketing strategy set us apart. As a new entrant in online retail, we recognized that customer trust was critical—especially given that many were disappointed by misleading online purchases. To directly address this, we launched 360-degree videos for all products, enabling customers to assess the quality and fit of each garment before purchase, resulting in greater satisfaction and fewer returns.

We were the first fashion brand in the market to implement 360-degree product videos for every garment, ensuring transparency for online customers. Additionally, our strategy of launching a new collection every week, accompanied by immersive product presentations, distinguishes La Vivente from other online retailers, building credibility and providing customers with a unique buying experience.

Could you elaborate on the gap you identified in women's fashion in Sri Lanka?

The majority of women's textile brands in Sri Lanka were offering largely similar collections, heavily influenced by Western fashion trends. However, we identified a growing segment of customers who valued contemporary designs that also reflected Sri Lankan aesthetics and cultural sensibilities—an area that was largely underserved at the time. Having worked closely with leading retailers, we observed this gap firsthand. Before entering the market, we conducted extensive research and product testing to confirm demand and market viability. When La Vivente was eventually launched, the response was extremely encouraging. Customer feedback consistently highlighted the absence of fashion that felt both locally inspired and stylish, yet modern. While many established brands focused on a more Westernized, trend-driven aesthetic, a clear demand remained for a more refined, culturally resonant, and moderately conservative style. We aimed to blend elegance with Sri Lankan identity.

How did your banking background influence the way you structured La Vivente from day one—especially in terms of capital discipline, inventory management, and cash flow?

My background in banking had a profound impact on how I structured La Vivente

from the outset. With over 17 years of experience in the banking sector, I have observed how successful entrepreneurs build and scale their businesses, and where and why others fail. That exposure taught me to assess risk carefully, to recognise opportunity, and to act decisively while maintaining financial discipline.

Entrepreneurship, particularly for women, presents its own set of challenges. My banking experience equipped me with the skills to navigate them. It instilled in me a strong understanding of capital management, cash flow discipline, and prudent risk-taking. Having seen the consequences of both sound and poor financial decisions, I am always mindful of the long-term implications of every choice we make. Financial discipline and strategic thinking, developed through banking, directly fueled La Vivente’s steady growth and sustainability, guiding decisions that shaped the brand’s enduring success.



Was La Vivente built as a passion project that evolved into a business, or was it conceived as a scalable commercial enterprise from the outset?

La Vivente was conceived from the outset as a scalable commercial enterprise, supported by a clear growth strategy. At the same time, we have always seen ourselves as social entrepreneurs rather than simply a fashion brand. Since 2013, we have been working closely with skilled women across the country to source

products for supply to established retail chains, enabling many of these women to build their own small businesses and become entrepreneurs in their own right.

Alongside my banking career, I was actively involved in sourcing merchandise from apparel manufacturers for leading retail brands. Over time, this evolved into the development of our own production network, built around highly skilled women who now manufacture garments based on our designs and quality standards. Every collection starts with our in-house design team, which conducts extensive market research to create styles that align with customer preferences and current trends. Understanding and responding to consumer demand precisely is central to our success. Our team executes this exceptionally well.

La Vivente's empowerment model supports skilled women artisans by guaranteeing a monthly volume of orders, ensuring a stable, reliable source of income. This financial consistency enables women to plan, invest, and grow both personally and professionally. By directly integrating women's economic empowerment into its business model, La Vivente creates measurable social impact while differentiating itself as a purpose-led social enterprise within the fashion industry.

What were the biggest misconceptions you had about fashion retail before entering the industry—and how did reality challenge them?

Like many outsiders, I initially underestimated the complexity of the fashion retail industry. It is far from the glamorous image often associated with the industry. In reality, it involves rigorous inventory planning, stock management, cost control, frontline staff supervision, and, above all, brand stewardship—where even a single misstep can damage years of brand-building efforts. Fashion retail demands constant vigilance, agility, and the ability to swiftly adapt to shifting consumer preferences and market conditions. The industry is inherently dynamic, and success depends on the willingness to continuously test ideas, refine strategies, and pivot when necessary.

Fashion is disciplined execution, rapid decision-making, and continual adaptation. I learned that success stems directly from rigorous operations and the ability to reinvent oneself quickly when reality demands it.

La Vivente positions itself as both affordable and exclusive—how do you operationalize that philosophy across sourcing, pricing, and the store experience?

We operationalize this philosophy by deliberately working with limited production runs. Typically, we produce limited quantities for each design. While this increases the cost per unit, it allows us to preserve exclusivity while maintaining a strong balance between quality and affordability—three pillars that define the La Vivente brand. Our sourcing and production processes are highly hands-on. My husband and I are personally involved in every stage, from fabric selection and design development to quality assurance. We source most of our fabrics and other accessories from overseas to ensure our collections remain aligned with global trends, seasonal color palettes, and evolving print designs. In fashion, even prints change with the seasons. Staying current is essential. This hands-on approach to sourcing, design, and production allows us to create garments that reflect our craftsmanship and deliver real value to our customers. As a result, La Vivente reliably offers high-quality, affordable, and truly exclusive products.

Based on what you have said, it appears you are on a constant learning curve.

Absolutely. Continuous learning is fundamental to delivering a product that truly resonates with the market. It is essential to remain closely informed about our competitors, their offerings, and their pricing strategies, as all of these factors directly influence our own positioning.

At La Vivente, research guides every strategic move we make, directly driving our ability to anticipate trends and respond effectively to market shifts. Our dedicated team’s study of fashion, consumer preferences, and broader dynamics leads to actionable insights that keep us competitive. In today’s rapid retail landscape, learning fuels our business growth and relevance.

How do you balance trend-driven fashion with timeless designs that avoid fast-fashion waste?

We achieve this balance primarily through limited production and a strong emphasis on craftsmanship. Our collections are produced in very small quantities, and mainly our designs feature value additions, making each piece distinctive, durable, and less disposable than typical fast-fashion items. By focusing on design individuality and high-quality materials, we create garments that are intended to be worn and valued over time, rather than quickly replaced. At the same time, we carefully plan each season to ensure our collections remain aligned with current fashion trends. This approach enables us to remain relevant while upholding our commitment to

sustainability, quality, and timeless appeal.

What does La Vivente mean emotionally to your customer, not just in terms of clothing, but in terms of identity?

As a social enterprise, La Vivente has built a deeply loyal customer base from its inception, founded on trust and consistency. By maintaining a strong balance between affordability and quality, we create an emotional connection with our customers that goes beyond the product itself.

We are where we are today because of the confidence our customers place in us, and we take that responsibility seriously by consistently delivering on our promises. Over time, this reliability has fostered a strong sense of attachment to the La Vivente brand, as customers know they can depend on us for well-crafted, thoughtfully designed clothing that reflects both value and integrity.

Sri Lanka's women's wear market is saturated with boutiques, online brands, and imported labels. What makes La Vivente structurally different rather than just aesthetically different?

I believe La Vivente's structural difference lies in its foundation as a social enterprise—a model not commonly embraced in business. Unlike many brands that focus primarily on profitability and the bottom line, we deliberately integrate community wellbeing into our business strategy.

Our business model supports this ethos by empowering skilled women and creating sustainable opportunities for them to grow alongside us. This approach makes La Vivente fundamentally distinct from other labels, ensuring that the brand is defined not only by its aesthetic appeal but also by its positive social impact.

How is La Vivente's business model designed to remain profitable while keeping prices accessible?

From the outset, we made strategic decisions that have allowed La Vivente to remain both profitable and accessible to customers. Cost management is central to our approach: we maintain strict budgets, particularly in marketing, and have structured processes that enable us to control expenses efficiently.

Sri Lanka's economic environment is cyclical, and businesses must be agile to navigate changing conditions. Over the past five years, we have successfully

navigated multiple challenging phases, including the launch of our brand in 2020 during the global pandemic, the ensuing economic crisis, and periods of political and market uncertainty.

Our business model is designed to accommodate these fluctuations, allowing us to manage costs effectively without compromising on quality or affordability. This disciplined approach has been crucial in sustaining growth and profitability while maintaining our products' accessibility to customers.

How do you view sustainability—not as a marketing label—but as a long-term cost and brand strategy?

For us, sustainability is not just a marketing label—it is a critical element of long-term cost management and brand strategy. We maintain a disciplined, linear cost structure, enabling us to operate efficiently while upholding quality and preserving our distinctive brand identity. By combining careful financial management with strategic planning across all aspects of the business, we ensure that La Vivente can continue to grow and thrive over the long term, delivering value to both our customers and the wider community.



Do you see La Vivente expanding through more physical stores, digital channels, or regional markets?

Absolutely. Alongside our online presence in Sri Lanka, Australia, and New Zealand, La Vivente operates seven physical stores across Sri Lanka, and we continue to explore expansion both internationally and within the local market.

Our growth strategy is highly strategic and research-driven, ensuring we enter markets with strong long-term potential. While we continue to explore opportunities to open additional outlets locally, we are equally open to expanding overseas where there is financial viability and alignment with our brand objectives. Our expansion strategy is therefore measured, research-driven, and focused on sustainable growth.

How do you divide roles between the two of you—and how do you manage disagreements in a high-pressure retail business?

We have clearly structured our roles, which has been key to the brand's success. My husband oversees finance and production, while I focus on branding and design. For critical financial or strategic decisions, we discuss and decide together, ensuring alignment and shared accountability.

Our collaboration is guided by clear guidelines and mutual respect, which has allowed us to maintain a healthy working relationship even in the high-pressure environment of retail. This clarity and trust have been instrumental in growing La Vivente into the brand it is today.

What do you think are the strengths of running a family business, and what are the opportunities that you see in a business being family-owned?

One of the key strengths of running a family-owned business is the supportive and collaborative environment it fosters. This trust and alignment provide a significant competitive advantage, particularly when discussing and implementing strategic decisions, where confidentiality and a shared vision are essential.

Another important strength is our ability to provide constructive checks and balances for one another. We openly point out potential missteps and consider the implications of our decisions, which ensures that our strategies are carefully evaluated from multiple perspectives. This level of understanding and collaboration is a distinct advantage that family-run businesses can leverage to navigate challenges and drive long-term success.

Five years from now, what would make you say La Vivente has truly succeeded?

I believe that the true measure of La Vivente's success is determined by our

customers and the industry, not by ourselves alone. Over the past five years, I have received numerous personal recognition, including: Asia’s Top Outstanding Woman Marketer of the Year 2022 – Asian Marketing Federation, Best Woman Entrepreneur (Small & Medium Sector) – South Asian Business Excellence Awards 2023, Most Admired Marketing Leaders – World Marketing Congress & Awards 2023 (10th Edition), The Best Entrepreneur of the Year Diamond Award – Sri Lankan Iconic Awards 2023, Women’s Chamber in Commerce Prathibhabhisheka Awards 2024 – SAARC Women Entrepreneur of the Year 2024 & National Woman Entrepreneur of the Year 2024, Best Entreprenuer of Large category and Best Entreprenuer of Western Province of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka Iconic Woman 2025 Celebrating SLBC’s 100 years at the Iconic Woman Awards 2025 with TOP C Magazine and Global CEO Top Businesswomen Awards 2025. While the Brand awards for La Vivente include: SME Local Brand of the Year 2021 – Gold Award, and Best New Entrant Brand of the Year 2021 – Bronze Award at the SLIM Brand Excellence Awards 2021, Best SME Website of the Year – Gold Award at the BestWeb.lk Awards 2022 and Best Fashion & Lifestyle Website of the Year – Gold Award under BestWeb.lk Awards 2024, Emerging Fashion Entrepreneur of the Year under SLIIT Voguefest’24, and Management Excellence in Retail Sector at the National Management Excellence Awards 2025. These accolades, judged by independent third-party committees, affirm that our strategies and execution have been effective.

In just five years, La Vivente has crossed significant milestones while navigating multiple challenges, from shifts in consumer behavior to economic cycles that affected Sri Lanka. The competition is intense, with hundreds of online fashion brands in the market, yet we have managed to establish ourselves as a trusted and respected brand. While we anticipate new challenges in the years to come, we remain confident in our ability to continue growing and succeeding over the long term.

How have you ensured that your teams integrate with your vision?

Our team has a clear understanding of our vision and what we expect from them. We are fortunate to have a loyal workforce, with many members of our senior management and sales teams having been with us for a significant period. We place great emphasis on treating our team members fairly and respectfully, ensuring they feel valued and motivated.

We make it a priority to clearly communicate the brand’s objectives and long-term plans, ensuring everyone is aligned with our goals. Performance expectations and

targets are conveyed transparently, enabling the team to execute their roles effectively and advance La Vivente’s vision. This clarity and alignment are key to translating our strategic plans into results.