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Gift baskets go beyond cute

Profits require marketing, hard work, business owners say

By Donna Bozzo

Special to the Tribune

Published October 27, 2003

A tuxedo-shaped basket filled with salmon pate, wine, cheese spread, biscotti bites, French vanilla coffee, water crackers, chocolate chunk cookies and other goodies won a local company one of the more unusual awards in business.

Northbrook-based BasketWorks recently took home first place for most innovative corporate gift design for its \$75 "Putting on the Ritz" entry at Basket Connection, the national gift-basket convention and trade show held this year in Nashville.

Owners of gift-basket businesses from 36 states, two Canadian provinces, Jamaica and the Virgin Islands competed in five different categories.

For owner and designer Lise Schleicher the award was nice, but like a growing number of basket entrepreneurs, she founded BasketWorks for the revenue it could bring.

"I went about this from a business perspective," said Schleicher, 36, who created BasketWorks seven years ago after earning a master's in human resources and working in retail management.

"Most people say I make nice gift baskets, I should start my own gift-basket business," she said. "I said, 'I want to start a business. What's a business that I have skills for that I can really grow?'"

Schleicher began her home-based business by doing her homework.

"I researched the industry for over a year and half," she said. "I wrote three business plans until I came up with one that worked. A lot of people come at this like it's a cute job. I said, it's a great business, how do I make it work? ... That's how you have to look at it. Most people go out of business in 18 months in this industry."

Those who watch the industry say gift baskets are a growing business because companies are trying to enhance relationships when sales are slow. And everyone has less and less time to shop.

"It's \$3.8 billion business--and that's still on the conservative side," said Shirley George Frazier, a gift consultant and author of "How to Start a Home-Based Gift Basket Business."

"Those numbers don't account for many of the big companies that sell gift baskets," she said. "I've seen a lot of people find success with this--success meaning anything from people who make more than \$50,000 a year from home to people who have a storefront and make more than a million a year."

Some local entrepreneurs said they consider it an ideal opportunity to make

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money and keep control of their lives.

Elaine Essary of Calumet City used to make gift baskets for family and friends. But when her corporate job was eliminated two years ago, she started her own business, The Basket Bar.

"I love it. I absolutely love what I do," she said. "I loved my other job, but ... I would have never quit my job to start and run my own business--and that was my dream. It was the best thing I've ever done."

"I just woke up one morning and decided I wanted to do something different, something for myself," said Juliane Callis of Hawthorn Woods. She started her gift-basket business, Utopia, two years ago. "I wanted my own hours. Even though I was working for a great company and making good money, I wanted to be my own boss."

Making each gift unique

Some say the key to success is specializing in unique items and making each basket unique.

"I specialize in baskets that reflect the giver," Schleicher said. "Customization is the key. I build every basket to my client's specifications--like a wedding basket with a fishing theme. Let me tell you, you ain't going to find that at Costco."

Betty Ann Lartey, owner of Lartey's Gallery & Gifts Ltd., located in Gurnee, agreed.

"The right basket has all the things they would want to give themselves, and they don't have to shop for any of it. We make their life very easy," she said. "People like to buy gift baskets because it's something that's different, and it sends the exact kind of message they want to send."

Essary said she decided to focus on corporate gifts after analyzing the market for three months.

"I just started approaching different companies," she said. "I don't sell them on gift baskets, instead I sell them on the opportunity to enhance their relationships with their customers. I'm selling relationship marketing--the importance of retaining your clients or making employees feel appreciated with gifts."

Frazier said if you can do that, you'll do well in the business.

"It's easy to start a gift-basket business," Frazier said. "What's not easy is finding and courting those customers and getting those customers to remember to buy a basket from you every time they need to buy a gift. Doing that right separates those who do this as a hobby from those who make it a career."

Most baskets sold from home

Although some depend on street traffic to build their business and open a storefront like Lartey, most start their businesses at home. Callis said running her business from home allows her flexibility--something she didn't find in her corporate job.

"I had a two-year plan," she said. "I wanted to be set up in a situation where I had my own business and a regular clientele by the time I started having children. It worked out perfectly. Now my business is established, and I can be home with my daughter while I work."

Though most businesses start at home, there are costs for equipment, Web sites and inventory.

"You have to have capital to start this business," Frazier said. "If you don't have at least \$1,500 to start, you could be mispending your money. And that's the bare bottom."

"There's a misnomer that many individuals see the gift-basket business as sweetness and light. They think it's easy," she said. "But this is a serious business with income potential that has exceeded the wildest dreams of longtime professionals."

"I stuffed a thousand envelopes by hand," Schleicher said. "That's what it's all about. I work weekends, evenings. My husband is not allowed to travel in December. ... I had someone say how cute my little business was. I almost bit her head off."

Growth, they say, is their reward for hard work.

"The general population loves to give gifts for all occasions to say thank you, congratulations, even for bereavement," Frazier said. "The gift basket business will only continue to grow as our need to give for more and more occasions grows. We're gift-service providers. We are a total gift-giving service for people who love to give gifts."

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