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Gift-basket biz gears up for season



Snohomish County Business Journal/ KIMBERLY HILDEN
"Showing appreciation is key to client retention," said Anji Cozart, co-owner of Art of Appreciation. With the slow economy, Cozart said she is seeing an increase in smaller corporate gifts that are high in quality but lower in cost. Another gift trend: the gift tower. "There's excitement in opening each separate box," Cozart said.

By Kimberly Hilden
SCBJ Assistant Editor

When Anji Cozart uses the term "utter chaos" to describe the holidays at her house, she is factoring in more than just the gift wrapping, card sending, cookie baking and party hosting inherent with the season.

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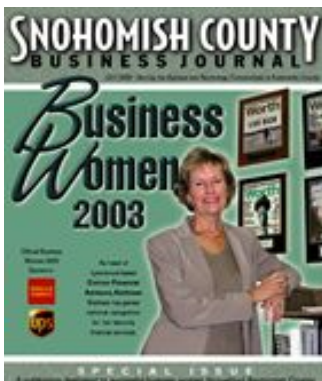
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The co-owner and founder of the Art of Appreciation is also factoring in a garage full of holiday goodies that make it into the hundreds of gift baskets ordered by clients, not to mention assembly sessions that run into the night at her Marysville home.

Art of Appreciation

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Helping her out are family members, who fly in from across the country, and her husband and business partner, Bill, a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy.

“He’s my supporter,” Anji said of her husband. “He’s holding up the basket bags as I drop them in. But he doesn’t do bows — that’s where he draws the line.”

The couple’s two boys, ages 4 and 8, are “good go-getters” for supplies,

Anji added.

It’s a scenario that has played out for the past three years, since the Cozarts began the Web- and catalog-based business following Bill Cozart’s military transfer from Virginia.

“When we moved here, I decided I wanted to do something that would enable me to be home with the boys,” said Anji Cozart, formerly a shareholder account representative for a mutual fund company.

With a talent for making gifts and an interest in crafts, she was encouraged by her husband to look into a gift-basket venture that she could operate from home. The two spent a year researching the industry — pricing products, talking with others in the business about their operations and reading, reading, reading.

“A lot of it was self-education,” said Cozart, who has a bachelor’s degree in business administration. “My mom and dad always taught me that if you want to do anything, grab a book. Nothing can stop you.”

With that, the Cozarts entered the gift-basket industry.

It’s an industry worth approximately \$4 billion in sales annually, according to Shirley Frazier, author of “How to Start a Home-Based Gift Basket Business” and founder of Sweet Survival, an industry resource and consultant based in Paterson, N.J.

“This industry grows every year due to individuals who start gift

basket businesses out of college, after layoffs or as income in addition to traditional jobs,” Frazier said via e-mail. “Annual revenues have increased in the industry approximately 3 percent per year since 1992.”

For Art of Appreciation, business has increased steadily over three years, starting with catalog orders and client networking before the addition of a virtual home on the Web, www.artofappreciation.com.

“We spent the summer researching how to use the Internet,” Cozart said. “It’s a wonderful tool that keeps costs down.”

Along with marketing on Web search engines, the Art of Appreciation has joined Amazon.com’s “Z Shop,” becoming an associate retailer with the Internet giant, Cozart said. There also are plans to distribute an opt-in e-mail to Fortune 500 companies in coming months.

“Corporate is the bread and butter, where you actually want to target,” Cozart said, noting that a single order can number in the hundreds of gift baskets.

According to Frazier, corporate sales make up 60 percent of total gift-basket sales. “Aside from Christmas sales, corporate buyers are the largest/most profitable market.”

As for Art of Appreciation’s product line, the company, which started out with a handful of gift-basket selections, has grown to 17 gift-giving categories that serve occasions the year-round, from children’s gifts and seafood specialties to corporate gifts and weddings/showers. And every year, Cozart attends gift shows, meeting new vendors, trying new goodies and taking note of industry trends.

To enable her business to grow without having to move to larger facilities, Cozart subcontracts with gift-basket wholesalers that have warehouses in Texas, New York and California. These companies, who Cozart researched for quality service and selection, create many of the standard baskets in Art of Appreciation’s stable of products.

But a number of the selections are creations of Cozart herself, using local goods from Kasilof Fish Co. and Biringer Farm Products of Marysville, among others.

Some of those creations include the “Gentleman’s Cigar Chest Gift Basket”: chocolate cigars and cigar cookies, mocha cappuccino, two high-class cigars and the “Cigar Aficionado’s Pocket Guide” packaged inside a wood-and-copper gift box.

Or there's the "Thoughtful Gift Basket," filled with smoked salmon, cheese, crackers, chocolates and candies. Priced at \$19.99, it has proven to be Cozart's best seller.

She also designs made-to-order baskets depending on clients' needs, from the Miss America Organization, for which Cozart has created gift baskets for sponsors, to the Stuntmen's Association of Motion Pictures, for which she has put together baskets for stunt drivers and martial-arts experts.

"In Los Angeles, I'm getting a lot of work," she said, recalling Egyptian-themed baskets she created to mark the film opening of "The Scorpion King," as well as custom baskets for the Screen Actors Guild.

The Hollywood niche is small, Cozart said, but one that she would like to grow into.

"It's all in whom you know and whom you impress," she said.

For now, her focus is on the coming holiday season, the quickly filling garage and the long nights ahead.

"But family comes first," Cozart said, harking back to the reason she started a home-based business.

For that very reason, the cut-off date for holiday custom orders is Nov. 25; all other basket orders are due 10 days before Christmas — giving Cozart a week or so to bake cookies, wrap presents and spend quality time with those she loves.

"The boys are at that age where you don't want to miss anything," she said. "They grow up so fast."

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