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**NEWS**

Updated: Wednesday, Oct. 4, 2000 at 08:03 CDT

**She's got a handle on gift baskets****By Elizabeth Aguilera  
The Orange County Register**

Sylvia Munoz dreams about baskets. Little ones, round ones, big ones and brown ones. They are in the hallway, on the tables, in the storage room and almost out the door of her office in Cypress, Calif.

Better the office than her home, where Basket Elegance was born six years ago.

Munoz, of Cypress, didn't start Basket Elegance to escape from her corporate digs at PepsiCo. in Buena Park, Calif.

She left the high-pressure job to care for her newborn son Anthony, now 5, who was born intolerant to formula.

Two weeks after leaving the company, Munoz, now 37, delivered a 240-basket order for her former employer, now one of her best clients.

Since then the business has grown 30 percent each year, Munoz said. About 80 percent is corporate, and the busiest time is during the holidays.

It's about time again for the staff at Basket Elegance in Cypress to start spreading holiday cheer.

The season for Munoz officially began a month ago when the Christmas catalogue rolled off the presses.

Munoz is prepared this year for the 24-hour race to deliver quality gourmet gift baskets before the end of the season. Christmas shopping and Halloween costumes: done. She is already telling her five employees to make Christmas cookies in November and freeze them.

It wasn't always this way for Munoz. Six years ago she was the human-resources manager at PepsiCo.

She got her undergraduate degree from UCLA and a master's in industrial organizational psychology from California State University, Long Beach.

After two older children, Jose, 9, and Alexandra, 7, were born, Munoz went right back to work.

But it was little Anthony, born intolerant to formula, who changed her

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course. A baby gift basket from her then-boss started the wheels turning.

Her occasional hobby of making gift baskets for friends and family and her need for an income prompted her to work from home.

According to the Small Business Association there are 14.6 million home-based business in the United States, more than 3.5 million owned by women.

Most home-based businesses are born out of a need for extra cash, a hobby or an interest, said Barbara Brabec, a nationally known home-business expert and author of "Homemade Money."

Munoz moved out of that category last year when she transferred the basket inventory, gourmet goodies and all the decorative materials into a business complex.

The four rooms and lobby of Munoz's new digs in a business park are brimming with basket-type trimmings. Gourmet items are shipped in from places as far as Texas and Oregon, where Munoz's favorite chocolate pears are made. Other items include chocolate biscotti, chocolate money boxes, baby-booty chocolates, chocolate spoons, Brie, pasta, bath products, wineglasses, fuzzy bears and butter-crunch popcorn.

In a storage room where baskets are piled from floor to ceiling sits a Nintendo and videos.

"When I was with Pepsi, I didn't see the children very much," she said. "Even though this intrudes on our home life during the holidays, I don't miss anything."

Sometimes she tucks in her kids, reads to them, kisses them goodnight and returns to work.

Especially since she's begun packaging other services into her own, such as framing, catering and varsity wear. She also is creating gift baskets for Giuliano's, an Italian specialty shop.

Basket Elegance is part of the basket business' annual 5 percent growth since 1994, said Shirley Frazier, president of Sweet Survival, an information clearinghouse based in New Jersey for gift-basket businesses. She estimates 15,000 gift-basket providers exist nationwide.

The business has become a family affair. Husband Alan Munoz takes days off during the holidays to help out. Father Frank Marquez Jr. delivers baskets in his Ford Ranger. Mother Sally Marquez baby-sits and assists with assembly. Sister Frances Marquez gives marketing advice on a door-to-door, grass-roots marketing campaign.

Even 5-year-old Anthony peels stickers off baskets and transports baskets between artists.

A family business is not a new idea for Munoz, who is the fourth of six children. She grew up working the Marquez family farm, called Frank

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Marquez & Sons, based in Whittier, Calif.

The children worked one of three stands, where they picked vegetables, such as corn, peppers and watercress, and weighed them and sold them.

She says it taught her to not be shy, to speak up and get things done.

"I think this is a good lesson for the kids," she said.

And she has gotten things done. Munoz has sold baskets to big businesses, made presentations and most recently set up a booth at the Latino Business Expo in Los Angeles.

She credits her customer-service ethic to lessons learned at Pepsi, particularly "flawless execution," a Pepsi slogan.

"My success rests on my clients doing well," she said. "We can't cut corners; we have to have a great product."

**Guide to customer service**

The Orange County Register

Sylvia Munoz credits the steady growth of her business to customer-service standards she sets for herself and her employees. She uses this guide:

- Exceed your client's expectations. Go above and beyond what is required.
- Flawless execution: Strive to handle every step of your interaction with the client in a seamless manner.
- Listen: Learn from your clients in order to better serve them. Find out what their needs are. Ensure that you are meeting their needs.
- Partner with your client: Become a partner in your client's success. Work with clients to help them meet their goals (and look good).
- Acknowledge mistakes: If something has gone wrong with a client's order, acknowledge the error and take steps to correct the problem. Let the client know what you are doing to fix the problem so they don't worry about it.
- Quality, quality, quality: Ensure that your products are of excellent quality.
- Education: Stay abreast of the latest trends within your industry and niche by attending trade shows and seminars, and reading industry periodicals.

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Visit the Register on the World Wide Web at <http://www.ocregister.com/>

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