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Retail venture sends Vestal siblings in new direction

BY ELIZABETH COHEN • PRESS & SUN-BULLETIN • AUGUST 24, 2008

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When one door closes, as the old optimistic saying goes, another one opens.

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At least, so one hopes.

But sometimes it just doesn't happen that way. And if another door doesn't appear on the horizon, you might have to take a page from Christine Marchuska's notepad and build one yourself.

When the economy took a serious downturn last winter, Marchuska, 28, became one more Wall Street casualty. Back in February, the rumors started rolling at an investment banking firm where she was employed in New York City. By May, the rumors were becoming reality.

"They treated us like cattle," Marchuska said.

"You'd get a call and go into a conference room, and then they would escort you from the building."

She has one word to sum up what happened: "bloody."

Start-up from a letdown

Losing a cushy job in the finance sector was a blow not just to Marchuska's ego but to her pocketbook, too. With an Upper East Side apartment and a lifestyle to match, Marchuska needed to get back to work.

"Just about nobody sees a recovery for about two years -- it's bad out there," she says of the job scenario for someone like herself, a Cornell graduate with a corporate background.

The Endicott native, who comes from a family of entrepreneurs, owners of apartment houses and an automobile dealership, chose to view her predicament as an opportunity.

"I decided to build a business, with my brother Justin as a partner, from scratch," she said.

Small biz trend

Marchuska is not alone. There are quite a few brave souls who are taking the plunge and starting a business after getting pink-slipped. Three out of four adults said they have considered starting a business, according to the Yahoo Small Business poll in April. But in an economy racked with fears of a recession, entrepreneurs need to be cautious with launching new ventures, said Howard Van Auken, a



CHUCK HAUPT / Press & Sun-Bulletin

Siblings Justin and Christine Marchuska of Binghamton founded a eco-friendly clothing line.

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How does an online clothing business take off?

You have to market yourself using online tools.

"We have been doing a grassroots effort with marketing by utilizing social networks such as Facebook and Seeking Designers (www.seekingdesigners.com)," Christine Marchuska said.

The team also hired Internet experts who link the site using metatags to various search terms. So, for example, if someone types in shirts and "green," the Marchuska Web site will pop up.

"We have sold a decent amount of shirts since we launched the site at the end of July but expect sales to grow after a few media pieces and events we have planned take place in the upcoming weeks," Marchuska said.

-- Elizabeth Cohen

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* Find out if people will buy your product or service.

* Determine how to create your product or service.

management professor at Iowa State University.

His advice: Develop a financial plan for the business that includes a cash budget, and don't invest excessively.

That is what the siblings have done, starting an online T-shirt company with \$5,000 in seed money. "Eventually, we will look for some venture capital," Christine Marchuska said.

Marchuska's first order of business was educating herself about the fashion world. She took a course in Manhattan, taught by a woman with 30 years in the garment industry. "It was called 'Stitch and B---h, and we learned basic sewing. I felt, if I was going to run a clothing business, I needed to know how clothes are made."

Keep it local

Next, she set about developing the business plan, and when she did, Marchuska looked homeward, to the Southern Tier.

"My brother and I have a lot of hometown pride, since we grew up here" she said. So the models they used, the Web designer, the product designer and the advertisement team were all local.

"Our tag will say 'designed in Upstate New York.'"

Green dream

The siblings also wanted a business that was politically correct. They created shirts that had "green" or organically produced fibers; they created ads and packaging that came from recycled materials. And, most important, they say they "were not comfortable with the company structure until we could find a way to give back to different charities and organizations we support," Marchuska said.

They decided that 5 percent of all revenues would be donated to Safe Horizon, an organization that works to aid victims of violence; Streetwise Partners, a non-profit that links low-income individuals to volunteer professionals to help build workplace skills; and the Red Cross Society of China, where the shirts will be manufactured.

This summer the fitted silhouette tees, in black and white (more colors to come) with trendy epaulettes went on sale on the Web site, www.marchuska.com, for \$39. A business was born: Marchuska, LLC.

The siblings, who started with an inventory of 2,000 shirts, also plan to sell their product at street fairs in New York City and at their 326 Airport Road, Endicott, office.

What's next?

"I am still going on finance interviews, just to keep my contacts," Marchuska said, "but I wanted to get this Internet-based business rolling now. This is my dream."

It is a green dream, she says. It is a local dream, about employing local talent and keeping as many jobs as she and her brother, who runs a construction business with their other brother, can create in the community. Eventually, they want to move the actual manufacturing and sewing aspect of their business, stateside, too, to Greater Binghamton.

Being downsized, it turns out, doesn't have to mean the end of something, said Marchuska, "It is a beginning, just a beginning, of something new. We had our launch party in the Hamptons! It is so exciting."

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* Calculate business expenses.

* Estimate your business income.

* Consider whether starting a business is a good idea for you. Surviving an economic downturn

* Create contingency plans.

* Work closely with lenders and suppliers to develop payment schedules, if needed.

* Track accounts payable so that collections don't fall behind.

* Avoid ordering unneeded merchandise and/or equipment.

* Avoid expensive credit cards for short-term financial solutions.

* Focus on customer service.

Sources: Rose Mary Hullett, ISED Ventures, and Howard Van Auken, management professor at Iowa State University

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