

Next courseMagnolia will blossom from closed Grand Vu / **Page 8****Embracing diversity**New business group leader recruiting more women of color / **Page 11****New scoreboard**A better way to follow market rates makes its debut today / **Page 14****GOOSEBERRY from 1**

mailed, e-mailed and telephoned into their new headquarters at Delaware Industrial Park. Not only do book sales constitute more than half of their annual sales, but they've become a hot commodity with more than 2,000 stores buying the books from Gooseberry Patch's wholesale division.

The business got another boost Saturday when *For Pies & Me*, their spiral-bound, hand-illustrated collection of backyard entertaining tips, garden recipes and gift ideas, was among 20 Ohio products featured on QVC's home-shopping broadcast from the Ohio State Fair.

"We would love for it to really work," Martin said before the QVC show. "I could see being on two or three times a year."

With the Friedman-Fairfax oversized books, Gooseberry Patch will have broadened into three styles of books.

The paperback, \$6.95-each Country Friends Collection introduces readers to hand-drawn friends Mary Elizabeth, Kate and Holly, each with her own foibles and sense of humor. The trio guides readers through a variety of home projects in 11 volumes.

Spiral-bound, \$14.95 hardbacks account for another 13 volumes. Longer and larger versions of the paperbacks, the stars of the hardbacks are Gooseberry Patch customers who supply anecdotes, household tips, recipes and other traces of human contact.

Amy Nicol of Marysville, Ohio, offered a cranberry nut bread recipe in the *Family Favorites* cookbook: "A 4-H entry in 1982 ... I think I

prepared it seven or eight times for my family in the week prior to the county fair."

More than 750,000 hardbacks have been sold in three years.

Casi Dodd of Frederick, Md., captured the essence of Gooseberry Patch's message in a letter reprinted on the book's inside cover:

"When a Gooseberry Patch catalog comes in the mail, it's not only a catalog, but also a connection to home and family in a world where people are finding it harder to keep in touch," she wrote.

Martin said that connecting with the human side of customers is what has taken the business from her kitchen table to 23,000 square feet of offices and warehouses. Although the 400-item catalogs still feature plenty of candles, centerpieces, cookie cutters and other country collectibles, it's the little tips that set the business apart.

"Kids love pancakes rolled around peanut butter and jelly," advises one. "Cut holes in apples or oranges just large enough to slip a tea light in ... smells wonderful," is another.

"It's warmth, it's comfort. That's what Gooseberry Patch is. It's not just country," Martin said.

It's also telling women that life with style is attainable. "We're not claiming that you have to bake everything from scratch," Martin said. "You can simplify your life. You can enjoy things and don't have to do it all."

Martin and Hutchins plan to take that message farther from central Ohio soon. They've hired a New York public relations firm to help

build awareness of the company and are considering a monthly column in a noted women's magazine. They travel in search of artisan-suppliers and expect to do more special events around book releases.

They see possibilities in wholesaling in the corporate-gift and fancy-food realms. They predict breaking the \$10 million sales mark next year.

And yet, they still try to act as hosts to an employee potluck twice a month and to get use out of the fitness room they included in their new headquarters.

"We try to make it fun as much as we can," but running the increasingly sophisticated business is making its demands on the partners, Martin said.

Three months into their new offices, they're trying to get used to a formal work environment where conversation can't be overheard easily. And Vickie and JoAnn spend less time together as each pursues different ends of the business.

"It feels a little different. I won't say we love it yet," Martin said.

But any discomfort isn't showing through to the nearly 5 million who received catalogs this year or others in the industry.

Portland, Ore., catalog consultant Susan McIntyre says Gooseberry's ability to create customer-written books puts it in a class by itself.

"That's doggone clever," she said. "When you look at something nontraditional like that, you have to recognize a paradigm that's not already out there. What terrific leverage they've got; there's nobody else who can do what they've done."

Business Today

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Picking the right ingredients

Gooseberry Patch crop of how-to books ripe for sales burst

By Debbie Gebelys
Dispatch Business Reporter

DELAWARE, Ohio—JoAnn Martin and Vickie Hutchins plan to send gift packages to 110,000 of their closest friends this year. The friends will return the favor by sending them an estimated \$7.3 million.

That's how it is for the former neighbors, now business partners, who created Gooseberry Patch. For the past 13 years, the women have made it big by thinking small, staying friendly and knowing that most consumers crave homestyle touches and neighborly talk.

Their mail-order business is built around the nearly extinct art of sharing recipes, how-to tips and family stories. Along the way, they sell trinkets for the garden, kitchen and coffee table. But the real hit is their 24-volume collection of books.

The collection is about to get a bit higher profile, too.

In the works is Gooseberry Patch's first collectible book, due out Aug. 26 and selected to be a Book-of-the-Month Club feature. First run is 40,000 copies of the \$24.95 volume containing Christmas entertaining and decorating ideas supplied by customers and growing number of employees. A follow-up, due in February, will offer ideas for outdoor entertaining, also through New York Book-of-the-Month Club publisher Friedman-Fairfax.

From over-the-fence neighbors, Martin and Hutchins are becoming nationally recognized for the unique collections culled from suggestions



Vickie Hutchins, left, and Jo Ann Martin see a growing number of items move through their Gooseberry Patch warehouse.

Chris Russell / Dispatch

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CASH DODD / Frederick, Md.