

# Friends and Neighbors

Can you imagine building a business with your neighbor? That's precisely what Vickie Hutchins and Jo Ann Martin did when they met over their backyard fences 16 years ago in Delaware, Ohio.

Sharing a common dream, these women have gone from next-door neighbors to partners in a highly successful country catalog business that is now a household name.

BY AMY HARRISON WEGMANN



**Q: How did the two of you meet?**

A: "We were next-door neighbors and really just a fence divided our backyards. We both had children and they played together, and it was on the way home from a soccer game one night that we talked about opening a store. And for some reason, that wasn't something that really appealed to us because of the hours and the weekend commitments—we were trying to work around our kids. And there were not too many catalogs out there that we really enjoyed at that point. So it seemed like we could have it all if we tried something in the mail-order sense."

**Q: What did your first catalog look like?**

A: "The first catalog was 12 pages and it was full color. We actually did the photography in my home. And Jo Ann picked every last daffodil she had in her front yard for

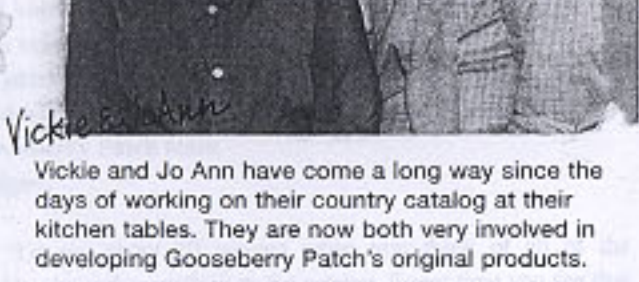
props. The products ranged from a \$425 chair and a \$195 punch bowl set to some \$75 to \$80 bears and a \$70 or \$80 plate. So our price lines were up there. We also sold homespun fabric by the yard. We had chocolate molds and some dip mixes. That was the feeling of the first catalog. It was on the 'slick' side."

**Q: Do either one of you have art backgrounds?**

A: "No, we really don't. We like to think we have a creative sense. Kind of self-taught, but we really don't have any formal training."



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Vickie and Jo Ann have come a long way since the days of working on their country catalog at their kitchen tables. They are now both very involved in developing Gooseberry Patch's original products.

**Q: How did you come up with the first mailing list?**

A: "We borrowed a mailing list from a local retailer whose store we really admired. The list didn't work at all. We quickly found out that people who buy in shops are not necessarily mail-order shoppers. We did do some advertising in a few country magazines early on. And that's where we sold the catalog. We rented a mailing list, but without really using the advice of anybody experienced in that network. We really smartened up on the list rentals. We've hired people to advise us. There's a real science to it."

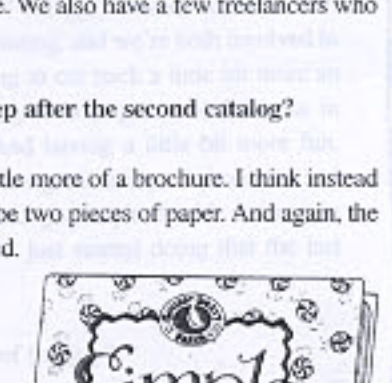
**Q: What kind of a response did you get from your first catalog?**

A: "We had a good response. Not as good as we would have liked, which really forced us to look at it. The second mailing wound up being more in a newsletter format where everything in it was \$25 and under. It was on ivory paper with black ink. Kind of a homespun, crafty feeling. There was no typesetting. It was all

done with calligraphy. We also included a recipe for cider. The new format just clicked. People were excited. We really followed that format from that point on."

**Q: How did you originally choose to use hand-drawn illustrations?**

A: "Photography was expensive, and we really didn't feel like it portrayed the kinds of items that we were selling. So it just seemed natural to keep the homespun feel with line art and calligraphy. From the very beginning, we always had a tip and a recipe so that it was something you would want to keep."



**Q: Do you have a large staff that does illustrations?**

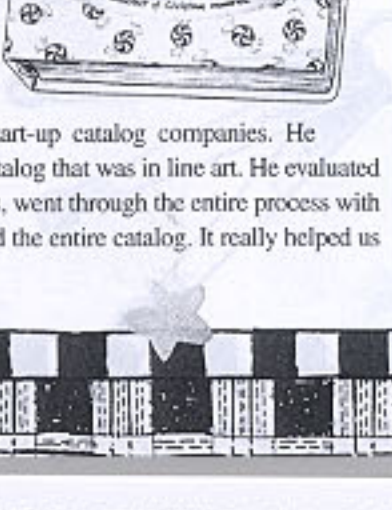
A: "We have a full art department with graphic designers, illustrators and layout people. We also have a few freelancers who work from their homes."

**Q: What was your next step after the second catalog?**

A: "The piece grew into a little more of a brochure. I think instead of the one piece, it was maybe two pieces of paper. And again, the art and calligraphy remained."

**Q: How did you prepare for what was ahead?**

A: "It was really trial and error. We knew what was working; we had really good instinct. We connected with our customers immediately, and we listened to what they wanted. We hired a consultant a few years later who specialized in start-up catalog companies. He analyzed our first official catalog that was in line art. He evaluated the piece, looked at the sales, went through the entire process with us and pretty much critiqued the entire catalog. It really helped us



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understand the mail-order business better."

**Q: Do the two of you help with designing your products?**

A: "Yes. We really pretty much lead that team."

**Q: I know that you work with vendors, but what is the percentage of products that the Gooseberry Patch team designs?**

A: "I'd say about 70 percent when you think of all of the cookbooks and everything in the catalog. Every time you see that little goose it symbolizes that it is an original Gooseberry Patch product."

**Q: What is your best-selling product?**

A: "Books—our cookbooks. Since 1992, our books have consistently been our best-sellers."

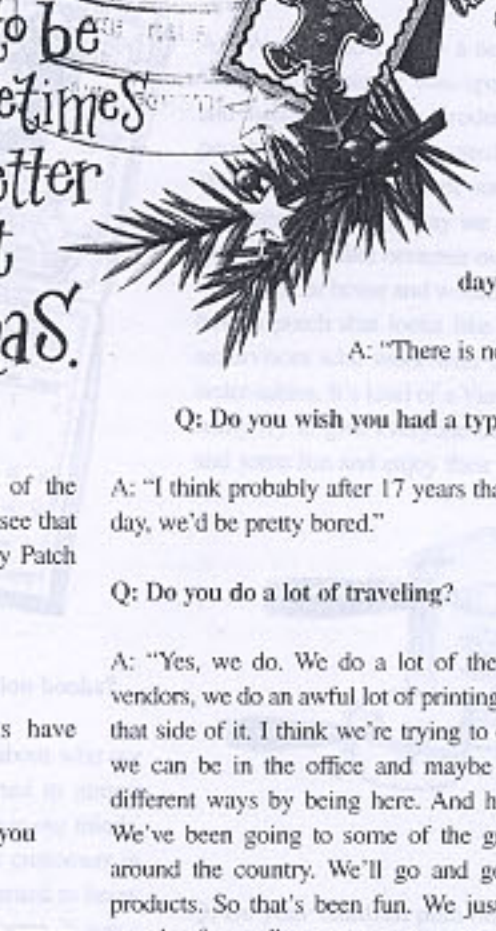
**Q: How do you choose the stories and the recipes that you put in your books?**

A: "We get letters from customers every day. Our customers constantly share with us their favorite family recipes and stories and traditions."

**Q: How would you describe your typical Gooseberry Patch fan?**

A: "Probably someone primarily between the ages of 32 and 55. She has traditional values and leads a full life. Family is very important to her, as are her friends and hobbies. She is someone whom you enjoy being with and want to be friends with. She's very warm. She lives a busy life like everybody else and wants to stay home with family and spend more quality time with them. She wants to simplify her life without totally changing it. Our philosophy is that you can bring all the sharing, warmth and tradition to your family in a simple way. There are easy ways to do things—you don't have to make everything from scratch. Often a really pretty white cake can be embellished with beautiful flowers

*It is good to be children sometimes and never better than at Christmas.*



Proceeds from Gooseberry Patch's Magic of Christmas Candle, \$6.95 each, go to children's charities. Call 800-854-6673 to order.

from your garden. Just sit back and have an ice-cold lemonade and enjoy what's around you."

**Q: What is your typical day like?**

A: "There is no typical day (laughing)!"

**Q: Do you wish you had a typical day?**

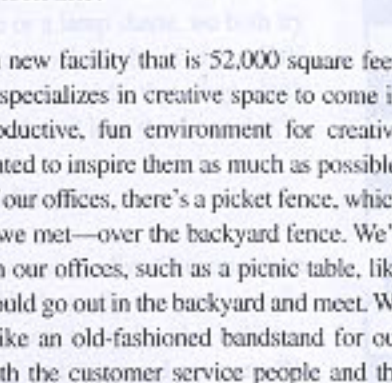
A: "I think probably after 17 years that if every day was a typical day, we'd be pretty bored."

**Q: Do you do a lot of traveling?**

A: "Yes, we do. We do a lot of the gift shows, we meet with vendors, we do an awful lot of printing, and we're both involved in that side of it. I think we're trying to cut back a little bit more so we can be in the office and maybe help grow the business in different ways by being here. And having a little bit more fun. We've been going to some of the great antiques shows in and around the country. We'll go and get inspired with some new products. So that's been fun. We just started doing that the last couple of years."

**Q: What is your favorite part of the job?**

A: "I think my favorite part now, because it's kind of changed throughout the years, is the opportunity to be able to get involved, to grow the business, to explore all the opportunities that are out there and to always be looking for new opportunities. We really want to get away from having to follow through with these ideas every step of the way. We really like finding the new opportunities and the new partners, and then kind of passing it on to someone else to really handle the details. We want to maintain the entrepreneurial spirit, the spontaneity of coming up with something new at the last minute and being able to pull it off very quickly."



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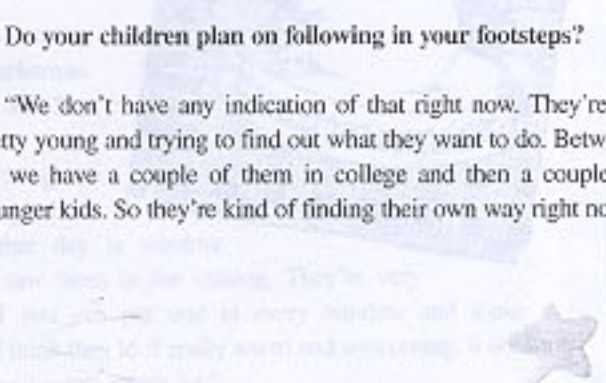
we're really excited about that."

**Q: What do your offices look like?**

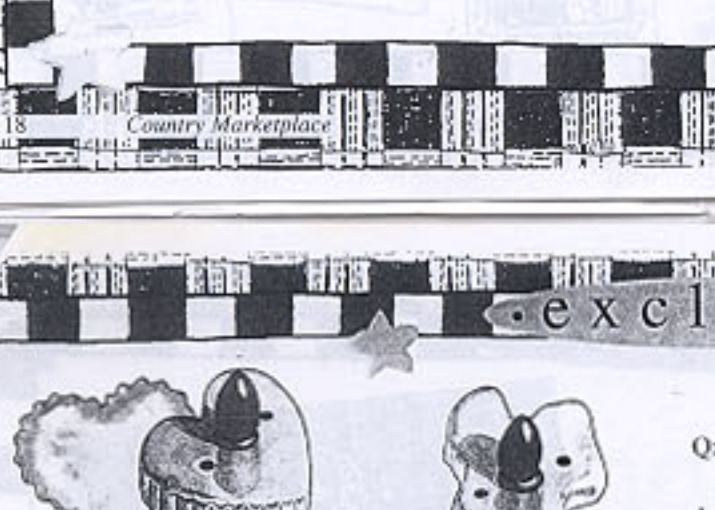
A: "We just moved into a new facility that is 52,000 square feet. We hired a designer who specializes in creative space to come in and make it a really productive, fun environment for creative people to work in. We wanted to inspire them as much as possible. When you walk outside of our offices, there's a picket fence, which is reminiscent of the way we met—over the backyard fence. We'd like to put a table between our offices, such as a picnic table, like if we were at home and would go out in the backyard and meet. We have a porch that looks like an old-fashioned bandstand for our supervisors who work with the customer service people and the order-takers. It's kind of a Victorian bandstand of an old porch. We really try to give everyone the opportunity to feel some freedom and some fun and enjoy their work space."

**Q: Do your children plan on following in your footsteps?**

A: "We don't have any indication of that right now. They're all pretty young and trying to find out what they want to do. Between us, we have a couple of them in college and then a couple of younger kids. So they're kind of finding their own way right now."



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**Q: What inspired the Country Friends Collection books?**

A: "We were sitting around one day and talking about who our customers are, and I think that's when we started to almost visualize them. Our customers kind of came to life in our minds. Kate, Holly and Mary Elizabeth all represent our customers in different ways. We had a lot of customers who wanted to know what we were doing and what our favorite things were. It was a nice way for us to include our customers' personal tastes as well as our own."

**Q: Do you see a little bit of yourselves in the Friends?**

A: "We've been in the books the last couple of years. You'll see us represented in there. But we like to think that we're just like our customers—we all just have a different spin on things. We do have a new licensing agreement with Boston Warehouse. They're going to be producing about 40 or so products with the Country Friends as the theme."

**Q: When do you expect to see those out on the market?**

A: "Around January. We're hoping to have a few other catalogs, and they've really done some great packaging. They've got recipes and tips and little quirky things that the Country Friends would say. They've really included their personalities a lot, so

we're really excited about that."

**Q: Do you make Christmas gifts for your kids?**

A: "We're both involved in creating memories and traditions for our kids. Whether it's making a tree or a lamp shade, we both try to give it a personal spin. We have all kinds of these little homemade things that we do for the kids that they don't necessarily appreciate right now, but they'll love them one day."

**Q: How do you prepare for the holidays?**

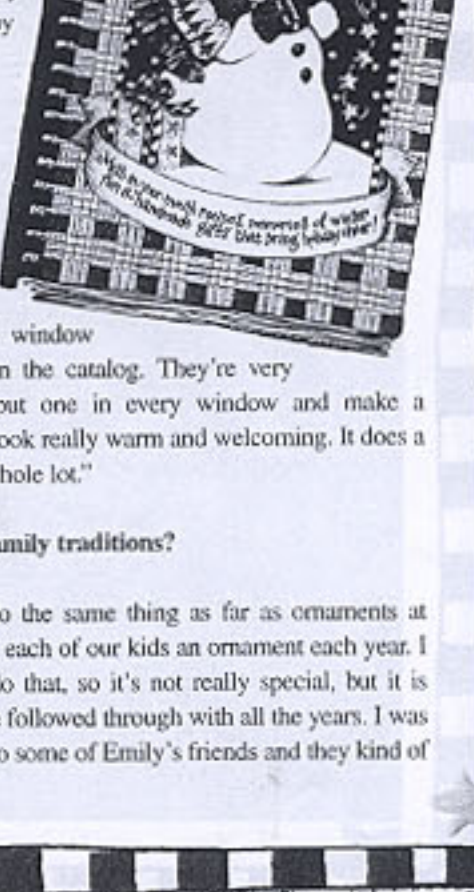
A: "It's a little bit overwhelming because we live Christmas here at Gooseberry Patch year-round. We do really minimal, simple, easy, traditional decorations before we leave for the holidays. Vickie does a lot with natural berries and twigs and greens. We like classic, simple things more so than the trendy and elaborate. For example, you can fill an old wood bowl with red apples or oranges. Or you can do things with lemons and nuts—they're natural things, and they look beautiful. We like simple ways to do things at home, like creating nice traditions for our kids and taking that mad rush out of it all. We do try to start early, too, as far as our shopping goes, so that we're not feeling that crazy mad rush. We like to really take some time and enjoy the holidays."

**Q: What is your favorite Christmas decorating idea?**

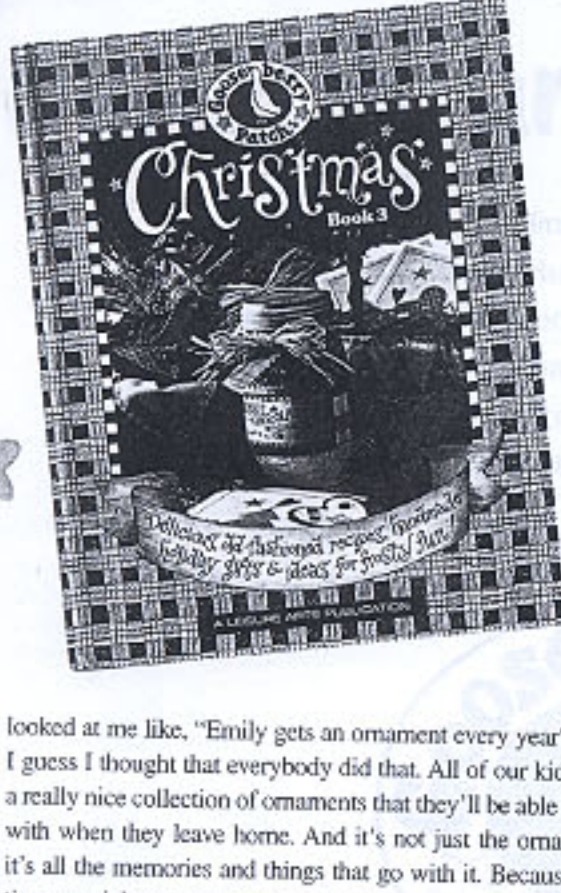
A: "One thing we were talking about just the other day is window lights. We saw them in the catalog. They're very simple, but you can put one in every window and make a statement. I think they look really warm and welcoming. It does a lot and doesn't cost a whole lot."

**Q: Do you have any family traditions?**

A: "I think we both do the same thing as far as ornaments at Christmastime. We buy each of our kids an ornament each year. I think a lot of people do that, so it's not really special, but it is something that we have followed through with all the years. I was amazed when I talked to some of Emily's friends and they kind of



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looked at me, "Emily gets an ornament every year?" And I guess I thought that everybody did that. All of our kids have a really nice collection of ornaments that they'll be able to take with when they leave home. And it's not just the ornaments, it's all the memories and things that go with it. Because each time we pick out an ornament, there's a reason why we picked that ornament. It's very individual, based on the child. We don't buy the same one for all of them. They're all really different based on their personalities."

**Q: I know that you have a brand new Christmas book out with Leisure Arts. Do you have any new books coming out?**

A: "Yes, we have a brand new Gooseberry Patch Christmas book called *Magic of Christmas*. We have one coming out in November called *Simple Joys of Christmas*. It's a new format for us. It's got a lot of color. It's a really pretty design, and it's all about just sitting back and enjoying the simple joys of Christmas. We have a few other books coming out called *Made From Scratch* and *Blue Plate Special*. *Blue Plate Special* is a geographic tour across the United States to old, famous diners. We have it broken down by region. We're really excited about it."

**Q: What does the future hold for Gooseberry Patch?**

A: "We're looking to do some other things—some good, strong companies—to do partner with licensing. We have several books



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