

Kitchen-table business turns into golden Gooseberry for pair

JoAnn Martin and Vickie Hutchins depend on 50 mostly home-based craftspeople to design and sew specialty items for Gooseberry Patch, their Delaware, Ohio-based mail-order catalog company. Their catalog, illustrated by artists, features 400 items, most for under \$20.

Depending on distant vendors is a challenge for Gooseberry Patch as the demand for decorative products grows. If an item is a big hit, artisans are pressured to boost production. Gooseberry Patch, which ships 5 million catalogs a year, must balance the needs of its vendors with filling pending orders promptly.

"A lot of the vendors we work with don't know much about running a mail-order business," said Martin, who co-founded the company in 1984 with her neighbor, Hutchins. "We look at it as an educational experience. The artisans are educating us on what it takes to make handcrafted work, and we are educating them about how to run a mail-order company."

The business started by two friends at their kitchen tables 14 years ago has grown into a thriving mail-order and book-publishing company with sales approaching \$8 million this year. In addition to selling candles, cookie cutters and decorative objects, they publish colorful cookbooks and books on decorating and entertaining.

Gooseberry's double-digit annual growth has pushed many of their small vendors to hire employees and rapidly expand production. The biggest sales are in the spring and around the winter holidays; catalogs are offered through the toll-free number 800-85-GOOSE.

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One of Gooseberry's most successful vendors is Alice Bachman, owner of Alice's Cottage in Hagerstown, Md. Bachman has 16 employees and 100 free-lance seamstresses working for her business, based in her 18th-century home located on 44 acres in rural Maryland.

Bachman started selling handmade crafts at craft fairs and later made collarless shirts for history buffs. Her homey kitchen accessories are sold through thousands of small gift shops as well as through the mail.

"I come up with a new line for Gooseberry Patch every six months," Bachman said. "We fax them sketches and start working on new ideas together."

Bachman's patholders, decorative hand towels and other items have been strong sellers in the Gooseberry Patch catalog. Bachman, who also sells through her own Alice's Cottage catalog, said her sales this year will reach \$3 million.

Up the coast in Massachusetts, Elizabeth Timmins has turned her passion for herbs into

another thriving home-based crafts business.

This year, her company, Hidden Brook Herbs, based in North Dighton, Mass., will ship about \$200,000 worth of herb-filled hot pads and other items to Gooseberry Patch.

"We've developed a really nice relationship with Gooseberry Patch," Timmins said. "If they see trends, they'll tell me."

To make sure Timmins really understands their scheduling and shipping needs, Hutchins and Martin flew her to Ohio to meet with their staff last fall.

"I was really pleased to finally meet everybody I talk to over the phone all the time," Timmins said. "We work very collaboratively on products from the beginning right through to the end."

Martin said Gooseberry is going a step further to help Timmins keep up with Gooseberry's big order this year. They plan to advance her money to buy supplies. This is the best way to ensure that a steady supply of herb-filled goods will meet their deadlines.

Timmins, who buys baskets from Germany and China and spices from around the world, said the financing help will boost her cash flow. She also made it easier to keep in touch with Gooseberry Patch by buying a computer and fax machine.

While Timmins is expanding her business, Chuck and Beth Reynolds are happy to keep their company, Ash Tree Lane, small. They produce tin ornaments and cookie cutters for Gooseberry Patch at their home in Millersburg, Ohio.

"We make the kitty and the Jack Frost snowflake for them," said Beth Reynolds, who works four to six full weeks a year to keep up with demand.

Her husband, a soil conservationist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, cuts the tin and prepares it for two free-lance workers.

Gooseberry Patch accepts one out of 250 new items presented to them, co-owner Hutchins said. They currently are buying candles, tin cookie-cutters and decorative soft goods from vendors around the country. Most catalog companies, including giant Lillian Vernon, buy products from outside sources.

Here are some tips for artisans looking to pitch their goods to catalogs:

- Review the catalog to familiarize yourself with the merchandise sold.
- Contact the company first to find out exactly how they want to be pitched.
- Some companies prefer to receive photographs and descriptions. Sending unsolicited products is a waste of time and money.
- Figure out how much it will cost to produce your product.
- Make sure you are prepared to mass-produce your items if they are accepted and begin to sell.

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