

Ask SCORE for Business Advice

“Ask SCORE” Column
Green Bay Press Gazette: Thur., June 3, 2010

Business Idea Came From Pets by Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt

About a year ago, Mary Wolff of Green Bay flung a fabric drink coaster across her living room. Like a Frisbee, it sailed toward her two Yorkies, Willie and Sophie. As her pets excitedly played fetch, Wolff was amazed. She had purchased all sorts of other pet toys over the years, but none held interest like the coaster. Even as the cotton coaster was quickly torn to shreds, her head began reeling with the possibilities.

Wolff felt she had a product that could develop into a business. However, she needed a product that would last through hours of play. She recalls, “I started investigating different fabrics that might be more durable, and after learning about the amazing durability and eco-friendly properties of hemp canvas, I found a supplier and made some prototypes. Success!!”

She tested the disks with her pets, and then made larger ones that she gave to owners of larger breeds. The reports were all positive. The dogs loved the toys and even the most aggressive chewers weren't destroying them. Friends asked if she could develop other toys. That led to a tugging toy. Next, cat owners requested toys and three more toys were developed.

After a month of experimenting, Wolff met with SCORE counselors, Richard Roberts and Paul Carron. It was November of 2009 and she considered this to be her make or break meeting.

“I remember walking into the building and thinking how important this would be,” Wolff said. “I knew that they were experts in the business world and I would take their opinions very much to heart. They both seemed impressed at the prototypes I presented and the basic business model I had at that early point.”

The counselors encouraged her to think big and consider production and methods of distribution. They also suggested a name change to reflect the eco-friendly aspects of the toys. Wolff had originally called the product a “doggy disk,” but after the meeting, decided to go with the current name “Eco-Fetcher.”

In short order, Wolff developed three sizes of Eco-Fetcher and added an Eco-Tugger. For her cat toy line, she came up with an Eco-Mouser, Eco-Pouncer, and Eco-Pouncer

Mini. She continued her meeting with SCORE counselors and, for help with manufacturing, met with Chuck Brys of the Small Business Development Center at the BAC.

It was now December, and Brys suggested having ASPIRO, a non-profit corporation that provides employment and other opportunities for the disabled, make prototypes. “Using ASPIRO was one of the most crucial parts of how I am able to have any products or a company at all,” Wolff commented. “Any issues of concern were dealt with and fixed in short order at ASPIRO. They saw through every production dilemma and made everything happen.”

Honest Pet Products, the name chosen for the business, was starting to take shape. Wolff was optimistic until issues started arising that had her wondering if she should continue. Next week, we’ll follow her journey and her decision in March, to quit.

If you’d like to learn more, contact the Green Bay Chapter of SCORE. Visit www.greenbayscore.org or call Cindy Gokey at 920-496-8930 for information.

[Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt](#) is co-owner of DB Commercial Real Estate in Green Bay and Assistant District Director for SCORE, Wisconsin.