

“Ask SCORE” Column
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Quitting and Starting Again by Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt

Last week, this column began following the journey of Mary Wolff, owner of Honest Pet Products. Having seen her pet Yorkies get excited about a fabric coaster, she developed an eco-friendly line of cat and dog toys. She met with SCORE counselors and SBDC and was in the process of having ASPIRO manufacture a prototype. It was early this year and she was encouraged. Then, the problems started.

Wolff called her hemp canvas importer in California to place a large order for the first-run of her product and discovered that the inventory was completely depleted. She needed to find a pet safe, eco-friendly ink for doing a screen print on products. There were hours spent developing a logo, and numerous meetings to protect her products with a patent.

She continued to meet with Chuck Brys of SBDC to learn manufacturing processes and profit margins. At almost every step, costs were higher than anticipated. Her start-up funds were gone.

“I was having great concerns about setting up the business part of the company and questioned my ability to handle it all,” Wolff said. “In March, I decided to quit and go back to my former career in insurance.”

The quitting lasted only two days. She borrowed funds from family members, and was encouraged by business associates, Abbie and Carl Nordholm of Allegra, Travis Herber of Team Apparel, Tom Feld of Foxwood and Associates, and Tony Moon of Fire-Pixel. They had worked closely with Wolff, and felt vested in the business. She was convinced to forge ahead and decided to do everything possible to stay afloat.

Requests for the toys started flooding in, and Wolff refined her company vision to be both eco-friendly and socially responsible. In addition to ASPIRO, she sought out other companies that would provide jobs for the disadvantaged.

“The other unique aspect of all my products is the people who make the toys. The two dog toys are made in Green Bay by adults with cognitive disabilities through ASPIRO. The hemp cat toy is made by adults with mental illnesses by a company in Newfoundland

Canada, and the two wool cat toys are handmade in Mongolia by nomadic herding women as an important means of income for their families' basic needs," Wolff explained.

She now has patents, materials suppliers, a logo, packaging designs, a business advisor, manufacturers, and a website, www.honestpetproducts.com. The next most pressing issues are distribution and marketing of the current inventory. Retail locations are listed on the website, and on-line ordering will be available soon. Wolff believes in her products and thinks that any dog or cat owner who is concerned about their pets can be confident that her toys are the most natural that are available.

She says, "I have been the recipient of the most amazingly generous and genuine people working and living here in Green Bay. I have lived the proof that it takes a whole business community to make a new business!"

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.

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