

Ask SCORE for Business Advice

Green Bay Press Sat., June 27

Greener and Better by Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt

Start with a person who is concerned about the environment, add a group of consumers who feel the same, and come up with a business concept that will provide a great product that helps the environment. When you mix it together, you get A. Design Studio, a business started by Andrea Martin.

Martin, who started her business in 2007, wanted to see things “reused and repurposed”. An interior designer by trade, she began with interior design and upholstery. By re-upholstering furniture, she saves the furniture from the landfill and provides an economical alternative for customers. Her best idea came while promoting the business. She decided to give away tote bags to clients, and Trendi Totes, a bag made from used billboards, was born.

“One slow business day, I was watching the Rachael Ray show and they were talking about a different company that does the same thing,” Martin explained. “I thought I can do that, created my own designs, found the material and away I went.”

The billboards are either purchased or donated. To make the tote, Martin prepares the vinyl and cuts the patterns. Then she washes the vinyl, sews the totes, and sells or ships them. Customers have been impressed.

Martin noted, “Once I tell them that it was a used item and that it might go into a landfill or be burned, they understand how these bags are really trash to treasure. Some of my customers give me more ideas for the vinyl. In fact, I have gotten my best ideas from those who want to help keep trash out of landfills.”

Although most customers buy the tote because of the environmental aspects, Martin says that others buy because it is sturdy, practical, and priced well. Her customers also help with marketing and the bags are making their way into stores, the local farm markets, and on websites such as etsy.com and adesignstudiollc.com.

Her business growth is due to her passion for the environment and reflects a desire to encourage others to take the small steps that make a big difference. Martin recycles everything she can, and brings her own reusable bags when she shops.

“I get into environmental conversations with most of my customers. Most people don’t realize that billboards are made of vinyl. When they think of that huge chunk of vinyl being tossed in the landfill, they see the value of the totes,” Martin said.

Martin doesn’t plan on stopping at totes. She wants to make old indoor furniture into new outdoor furniture by upholstering it with the billboard vinyl and using other materials to make it weather resistant. As a graduate of the E-Hub, she feels that her mentors have equipped her with the knowledge to become a larger company with local labor and material, and regional customers. It is a model that Martin feels she could duplicate in different regions of the country and the world.

If you'd like to learn more about starting a business, 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.