



## Ask SCORE for Business Advice

"Ask SCORE" Column  
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### **From Job Loss to Business Owner, Nov. 26, 2009 by Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt**

Sometimes everything just comes together. You have a pet that you make treats for and other people start asking for them. You have extensive experience in sales and marketing. Sales of pet products have doubled in the past decade and despite the recession show no signs of slowing. Then you lose your job and find limited opportunities in your field. Before you know it, you are thinking about turning your hobby into a fulltime business. Your past experiences have created the perfect opportunity.

That's the background that led Michele Oostenbrug to begin planning Maxwell's All Natural Party Treats in August, 2008. "My husband, Jeff, is the one that suggested the business," Oostenbrug explained. "I really didn't have the inspiration that he did that it was going to be such a phenomenon."

As the owner of an English Setter, Oostenbrug spent years on the dog show circuit. Her dog would sniff at the pockets of other dog owners, and she discovered that beef liver was the enticement. She decided to perfect a 100%, all-natural beef liver snack and has been making them for about 25 years. She produced the treats for her and her friends' pets. She wasn't thinking that it was a potential business.

But friends and neighbors kept asking about the treats. "Most of our competitors freeze dry their product. With our product, the flavor and aroma are locked in and the pets go absolutely nuts for the taste and smell," Oostenbrug said. When she decided to take her husband's advice, the product already had a small, but loyal customer base.

For start-up assistance, Oostenbrug visited the Fox Cities SCORE Chapter and got advice on writing a business plan, licensing, certification, and marketing. She and her husband decided to launch the business Memorial Day weekend by selling at the Downtown Appleton Farmer's Market. The market proved to be the ideal place to start, and it gave them the opportunity to network and listen to customers.

The growth was astonishing. By the end of the summer, Oostenbrug had opened a manufacturing plant at 107 E. Second St., Kaukauna, and had product at dozens of retail locations. That total has now climbed to 70 locations through Wisconsin, Illinois, Nebraska and Arkansas with steady sales in all markets.

To accommodate growth, Oostenbrug has hired two employees and looks ahead to continued market penetration. Her goal is to have her products nationwide by 2011 with a growing team of employees. She is considering adding product lines like lamb and chicken. Packaging may be modified for a longer shelf to attract some of the big box retailers.

Through it all, she plans to remain a family-operated business. “Working with my family and friends has been the carrot I’ve always been looking for,” Oostenbrug said. “Owning your own business is extremely rewarding, difficult, and fun all wrapped in one emotion. I once read that you truly know if you can handle being a business owner if you can laugh and cry in the same minute.”

If you’d like free counseling, contact the Green Bay Chapter of SCORE. Visit [www.greenbayscore.org](http://www.greenbayscore.org) or call Cindy Gokey at 920-496-8930 for information.

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