

MOMPREENEUR

BIRTH OF A HOME GIFT BUSINESS LETS HER BE THERE FOR THE KIDS

[City Edition]

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Growing up as an Air Force child meant Mandy Fristoe's cityscapes changed as per her father's assignments. Home, then, was about the people who remained constant, and Fristoe's stay-at-home mom, especially, was a monument.

"It's hard to pinpoint one [defining] thing because that's how it was," Fristoe said of her mom, Sue Levin. "She was always there and that was important."

Fristoe and Aron, her Virginia Tech sweetheart, husband and product of a stay-at-home-mom family, craved the same solid, comforting presence for their children when the time came. But Mandy Fristoe, a former advocacy coordinator for the American Heart Association in Richmond, still wanted to contribute financially.

She also longed to satisfy Mandy, the Creative Woman. She made dried flower topiary centerpieces for her wedding six years ago as well as the chocolate lollipop favors and the muslin seed pouches stamped with "Love."

Fristoe's crafter's touch extends to the window treatments, table skirts and bulletin boards in her West End home. And the presents she gives friends and family? Aron Fristoe called them thoughtfulness gift-wrapped.

For example: For her mother's 50th birthday, Mandy Fristoe made a quilt of appliqued hands - hands traced from the real ones of her mother's friends and family.

Aron Fristoe said such creativity and thoughtfulness are reflected in the product

line of his work-at-home wife's Internet- based business - polkadots & moonbeams (www.polkadotsonline.com).

The flexibility of the mompreneur venture plants his wife in the thick of the wonder years of their two children.

"When she gives a gift, she wants it be a thoughtful gift and when people get a gift from polkadots & moonbeams, they have to put thought into it because of the personalization," he said.

This, corporate and retail clients said, is part of the line's lure.

"It's a nice surprise for the families. It's just a little something to let them know we're thinking of them at a special time in their lives," said Karen McManus, a Richmond-based human resource adviser at the accounting firm of Cherry, Bekaert & Holland LLP.

Since 2001, the firm has ordered Fristoe's baby blanket/burp cloth set, embroidered with baby's name, as gifts for employees and partners in the seven states where the firm does business, McManus said.

"Her line really has a charm all its own" with its "simple understated elegance," said Vicki Powell, owner of What's in Store, a home-decor store on Patterson Avenue and Richmond's sole retailer of Fristoe's line of chenille baby and children's accessories.

"Everyone who comes in comments and everyone touches," Powell said of the products, which she said have become best sellers in the few weeks they've been in the store.

"They really take us back to a simpler time," Powell said. "Since 9/11, we're all looking for comfort in our lives and while (the products) are made with new materials, they're reminiscent of a time when we were more safe and comfortable."

Powell said such feelings can be traced to childhood.

Mandy Fristoe, perhaps indirectly, drew on the essence of hers to create a product that stems from a business that allowed her to re- create the comfort zone her stay-at-home mom built. The 21st- century twist is how the Internet has made staying home with the children - while still contributing household income - a viable option for women like Fristoe.

"When you have an Internet business, people come to you," said Alice Seba, work-at-home mom and founder of InternetBasedMoms.com, a resource site for WAHMs with Internet businesses.

"There are people out there who are interested in what you are selling and you're not out there bothering your friends or neighbors," trying to sell them

something, she said.

Yet without effective marketing and compelling copy - ingredients Seba said are more important than good design - those interested people won't find you.

"The notion of just building it and having them come is not true," said the Canada-based author of the e-book "An Internet Based Mom's Guide to Marketing Your Website" (\$17.95).

In fact, many of the business basics that apply to careers outside the home apply to Internet pursuits: Make sure you have a salable product. Research your market. Know your customer. Educate yourself about rules and regulations that will affect you. Network with other businesses to build relationships.

"I don't think it's rocket science," Seba said. "You just have to take the time to learn it, apply what you've learned and then re- evaluate it."

Statistics for work-at-home moms with Internet businesses are mostly anecdotal. Seba said that even with all the people who visit her site - which is ranked in the top five for visitor traffic by the Internet traffic ranking site, Alexa - "I'm reaching a small population of how many thousands there really are."

Mandy Fristoe said women who want to be home with their kids and start businesses quiz her frequently about how she made the switch. Fristoe said it starts with defining a talent that can be turned into a business.

"It has to be something they really enjoy because if they don't ... it's not going to be a lasting business. It's going to be a chore," she said.

Fristoe's creative talents for sewing and design made Step 1 easy and thus began polkadots & moonbeams. Created in December 2000 after the birth of the couple's first child, Mason, the business offered stylish gifts for babies. The original line included chenille bibs, burp cloths and tooth fairy pillows. All items were designed and produced by Mandy Fristoe, who worked during nap times and after her son's bedtime.

"Since I had just had a baby, that was my whole life," she said of her decision to make baby accessories. "At the same time, there's always a market for baby gifts. People always want to spend money on a baby."

Time has changed the business and it has grown with Fristoe's family, which now includes 15-month-old Peyton.

Lackluster sales at school-sponsored craft shows led Fristoe to court retail stores, the first of which she found while on vacation in North Carolina. E-mailing photos and price lists to stores made finding more retail clients a travel-free experience.

Fristoe said she recruited family and a few friends to help with the sewing that

continued nonstop. Then sales slowed after the terror attacks of Sept. 11 and Fristoe decided to focus more on Internet sales.

What began as an outlet for baby and children's accessories that were sold online and in more than 70 stores nationwide is now a virtual artist's gallery of "unique gifts for new beginnings."

Handmade by local artists or those based elsewhere in the United States, the baptism, christening, birthday, housewarming and wedding gifts range from original wall art and hand-painted trivets to wedding tiles and whimsical crosses. Many of the items can be personalized, adding to the thoughtfulness factor Fristoe's husband mentioned.

"I was just finding other people's products that I really liked and I thought, why reinvent the wheel?" Fristoe said of her decision to retail others' work instead of making all the items herself.

Fristoe, who posts an "artist wanted" ad on her site, said she has plenty to do keeping up with her line, maintaining the site, filling orders and fielding calls. All of which, she said, continues to take a back seat to the boys, who come first with their own demands.

"A lot of people think being a stay-at-home mom is a social group," because of play groups, she said. It's not.

"By the time the second (child) comes around, there is no time to do the essential things," she said. "It's an all-day process and I'm lucky if I get two loads of laundry done."

Multitasking and prioritizing are essential for making the most of hour-and-a-half nap times while flexibility is key for days when the boys won't nap.

"I'm certainly not "up" 100 percent of the time. I struggle and I think, 'Maybe I should go back to work,'" she said.

Then her husband, a technology trainer at Tuckahoe Middle School, reminds her of the benefits.

"He says, 'Are you glad you did or would you wish you had? When it comes to your kids, you don't want to look back and say I wish I'd been there,'" Mandy Fristoe said. "I literally get to see them grow up before my eyes. I wouldn't want someone else to see that before me."

polkadots & moonbeams

WHAT: Gifts for new beginnings, including babies, baptisms, christenings, birthdays, housewarmings and weddings.

AVAILABLE AT: Online at www.polkadotsonline.com.

DETAILS: Corporate, retail, individual and artist inquiries should be directed to info@polkadotsonline.com or (866) 876-8106.

SOME IDEAS FOR GETTING STARTED

Here are tips for starting an Internet business from Mandy Fristoe, founder of polkadots & moonbeams, and Alice Seba, founder of InternetBasedMoms.com.

- * Give your business a name and create business cards. A professional looking business card and company name can really motivate you to get the ball rolling.

- * Make sure there is an interest in your products before you start a Web site. Try to wholesale your products to local stores to gauge the market and demand. Also, take your products to local craft and gift shows for customer feedback.

- * Take the time and money to become computer savvy. Learn how to create and maintain your own Web site. Web design fees can add up very quickly.

- * Network, network, network and ask lots of questions. Other stay-at-home moms who have created successful businesses can be your most valuable resource.

- * Register your domain name and host your site with a reputable company.

- * If you have a Web designer design your site, make sure all information - domain registration, hosting, shopping cart, etc. - is in your name.

- * Develop a marketing strategy to drive people to your site.

Resources:

- * www.internetbasedmoms.com

- * www.wahm.com

- * www.mothersworkathome.com

- * www.moneymakingmommy.com

Credit: Times-Dispatch Staff Writer

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