

Small business spotlight

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## Novi woman's bottle bib catches on via online marketing

Melissa Preddy / Special to The Detroit News

Doting aunt Jennifer Edison loved helping care for her infant niece, but knew there had to be a better way to prevent the sticky mess caused by formula the baby Olivia dribbled from her bottle.

"Every time we fed her, she seemed to spill half the milk," said Edison of Novi. Traditional baby bibs weren't catching the spills, which led to more laundry and extra bath time for the infant. "When the second baby arrived we said, 'Oh, no, here we go again.' I said, 'We have to find a solution.' "

Soon, the Scrunch Bottle Bib was born. Edison is trying to carve out a niche for her absorbent pad that attaches to baby bottles with a Velcro strap in the growing infant feeding accessories market by tapping into social media.

She formulated a plan that includes a Web site, online retailing and social media sites like Facebook. She also shot a one-minute instructional video and posted it on YouTube. In fact, Edison got her first overseas order when a sales representative from Japan spotted the Scrunch Bottle Bib online.

Since then, Edison has filled orders from merchants in Kuwait, Singapore and other countries. Doing business overseas is nearly as easy as shipping to domestic clients, she said, because she can send orders via carriers like UPS and obtain prepayment from customers through her PayPal account. "That's why it's so important to be online," she said. "You just never know who is going to drop by."

Targeting an audience of mothers and caregivers via online networking -- especially with a niche product like a bottle bib -- is crucial, said Mary Hickman Kruszewski, head of MHK Marketing Group LLC in Royal Oak.

"Ms. Edison has done a great job of creating buzz for her product by using social media," Kruszewski said. "Using tools like Facebook and YouTube, she has created a following with an easy and inexpensive way for those that like her product to share their thoughts with their own community and network. Great ideas travel fast, especially in the virtual world."

Generating Web and mail-order sales is relatively low-cost, but getting into brick-and-mortar stores is tougher. Competition is stiff in the \$7 billion-a-year baby care sector, but Edison does have an edge: Feeding accessories have been among the top three infant care growth categories since 2005, according to market research firm Packaged Facts, and are garnering an increasing share of baby supply dollars.

Edison, who had taken courses in fashion design, took some baby steps to create the product. But after she whipped up samples on her sewing machine and received enthusiastic feedback from her sister and other moms, she said, "I decided to jump in with both feet."

She moved in with her parents to save on expenses and developed a system for assembling the bottle bibs, which sell for about \$8. "But I didn't have any contacts in the industry or any idea how it worked," Edison said. So she took the plunge and invested another \$1,800 to snare an exhibitor's booth at the ABC Kids Expo, a major trade show for juvenile products. There, she received an order on the spot from a merchant in Georgia.

Edison also connected with a retail distribution firm, which got her into Overstock.com and other channels. Although the distributor takes a bite out of the selling price, using one relieves small entrepreneurs of worries like liability insurance and product-placement fees, Edison said.

She's hopeful that a deal with Target.com will be closed this summer. She has struck a deal with an ISO 2000-certified Hong Kong factory willing to fill small orders, designed and approved a packaging plan and has other products on the drawing board.

"This year will be a turning point for us," Edison said. "If I can get into one or more of the national chains, the company can easily sustain itself."