

# A Business In Stitches

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## A Business In Stitches

They were housewives and mothers of young children. Now they are also budding entrepreneurs, Ellen Meehan and Mary Walker discovered a way to remain at home with their children, continue in their roles as homemakers, while contributing to their family incomes and broadening their own horizons. "In Stitches" is a small home-operated business featuring quality handcrafted items. Their line of crafts, which initially consisted of ribbon baskets, macrame plant hangers and a variety of Christmas items, has now expanded to include fabric frames, quilted wall hangings, a variety of other decorative items, and a seasonal line for spring/summer and fall/winter.

"In Stitches" began with a \$400 joint investment, funds each of the women took from their household "pin" money. Six months later, not only has their original investment been returned, but they are showing a profit! Initially, to launch the business and cover the costs of supplies, inventory and advertising, Meehan and Walker had reinvested all of their profits back into the business. At the six month mark, however, they began to enjoy the monetary results of their venture. The percentage of the profits farmed back into the business has now be drastically reduced from 100 percent to 40 percent, or 20 percent for each woman! And prospects for the future look still brighter.

What makes Meehan and Walker's success story so exciting is that neither of these women were formally trained in their skill; neither had ever had experience in establishing or operating a business; and neither relies on day care services to provide for their children's needs. They are, rather, average homemakers, different only in that they had the courage to invest in a dream and work hard to make it become a reality.

The first step Walker and Meehan took prior to investing any capital, was to attend a free lecture offered at the local library. The speaker was a women who outlined the appropriate steps to take when considering any small business venture. "We had not started at that point, so it gave us a lot of things to think about; how to determine whether there was a viable market for our crafts; how to determine the selling price. These were several points requiring careful consideration. The speaker told us that home craft is a booming business. There is a large market of people interested in well-made home crafted items rather than store-bought items. We were also told about the different ways to sell home-crafted items in shops outright, wholesale, or on consignment. But the speaker indicated the best way through home parties. And that's what originally gave us the idea and the impetus for home parties."

Incorporating many of the ideas they had heard and read about, Meehan and Walker were ready to begin their business. Initially a parallel venture, Meehan's line was called "Ribbons N Things," and Walker's "Not Just Knots." Each woman had her own line of crafts, was financially responsible for only her line, and received profits only from those items she sold. Within a short time, however, both agreed to merge, and "In Stitches" was born. As Meehan points out, there are many advantages to this. "It cuts our time in half. Depending on the item, we make it either in assembly line fashion or one of us takes total responsibility. Division of labor is determined simply by who is more talented in each particular task. For example, I might design, sew and stuff a satin balloon, but it is Mary who will personalize it because her handwriting is more professional.

Selecting their craft line was not a problem for the women. Simplicity patterns and craft books were carefully scrutinized, and a wide variety of saleable crafts resulted. There is an emphasis on usable decorative items such as quilted tissue boxes, macrame towel holders, and door stoppers. The women avoid fad items because of their short selling life. They concentrate mainly on seasonal items; they've learned through experience that there is a ready market for them. There is no pat formula for determining which items will be the best sellers or the most lucrative. Thus, they offer a variety of items at prices they feel are affordable.

At the onset, both women agreed that selling via home parties was the most logical and viable route for them. To launch the business and exhibit their crafts, their venture was an "open house" conducted at Meehan's House prior to the winter holiday season. The open house was conceived with a dual purpose; to formally introduce the business and market its craft line, and to initiate the booking of home parties. It was successful in both respects. Not only was their entire stock sold out but, perhaps still more important, additional orders were taken and several buyers agreed to host a home party. Now they were truly on their way!

## ADVERTISING

A business cannot succeed without advertising, and both women stress the importance of professionalism. Printed business cards are highly recommended as they are impressive and readily available upon request. They can help to gain entrance into discount houses selling needed materials and, upon presentation at retail stores, can often result in a 10 percent discount off the total purchase price. Fliers should be neatly typed and professionally printed for distribution. However, both women are quick to point out that neither flyers nor business cards are

distributed indiscriminately. Initially, their mailing lists was composed solely of relatives and friends. By word-of-mouth, their business, and their mailing list, has greatly expanded.

Guests at each home party or open house are asked to sign a "guest book" and the names are included in subsequent mailings as well. There is no blind advertising, by mail or through local publications. As Meehan wisely points out, "Since we are working out of our homes, we want to know the people who come into the house. There is, one thing, the liability factor to be considered in the event of an accident. We also want to prevent access to our homes by "undesirables" who might have ulterior motives."

## PRICE

Determining the selling price of the craft items becomes difficult and involved. To avoid confusion, the women follow a simple formula: they double the cost of the item and add \$1.00 for overhead. This was the method suggested at the lecture they attended, and they find it works well for them.

Although they are sympathetic to the taste, needs and purse of the buyer, Walker and Meehan above all are business women. For orders to be filled, they must be paid for, in full, the day of the party. This is true for side orders as well. They take their business seriously and are careful to live up to their commitments. To ensure this, they schedule their parties carefully, allowing adequate time in between events to replenish their stock. Seasonal open houses are prepared for months in advance. Samples are designed and produced in sufficient quantity to ensure that they have not overextended themselves and can meet their production schedule. Both women take great pride in their work and are not willing to sacrifice quality for quantity. "It's easier when you have inventory," Walker says, "because you can choose from it rather than go home and fill a hundred orders in two or three weeks."

She also advises that you make sure you live up to your commitment. When people place orders with us, we have to fill them. If you're not going to be committed from the start, then don't bother. And be careful not to bite off more than you can chew. If you do, you'll fall behind, get a bad reputation and it will be a bad experience rather than a good one.

Both women point out that their major commitment remains to their families and their work schedule must be flexible to meet the demands of their children who range in age from two to seven. But their business has taken on a personal importance.

"It gives me something else to think about," says Walker. "I have to feel I can accomplish something other than housework. This is for my self-fulfillment, my own self-worth."

Meehan agrees. "I feel like a functional adult again," she says, "rather than just a caretaker. Yet I don't feel I'm depriving my children either."

In less than one year, "In Stitches" has emerged as a small but profitable business. Not only has its line of crafts expanded, but in order to increase the line, Meehan and Walker have engaged other women to make crafts for them. These are sold on consignment. As Walker explains, "We can only produce so much. At home parties, we've noticed people want not just a variety, but a multitude of things. They don't want one or two picture frames to look at, they want to see frames made up of just about every fabric."

"We're still a pin money operation," Walker says in describing "In Stitches." "we're not big bucks yet. But we want to keep it small for a while if we can and not overwhelm ourselves." But, Walker continues, "If this craft business continues in the direction it's going, the possibilities are endless. Perhaps once our children are in school full time we can sell to stores or open our own."

"I'm a new person," Meehan adds, as Walker nods her head in agreement, "and I'm much happier with my life now. The extra money is great, but it's more than just that. It's the feeling of self-worth I get, and the pleasure I derive out of seeing what I have thought was only a "pipe dream" become a reality.