

ForwardFocus

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Plus

8 Ten-Points
for Success

Marching Toward Success One Leg at a Time

by Deborah Nash, MMEC



Sarah Calhoun

Entrepreneur Sarah Calhoun of Red Ants Pants LLC, received hurrahs! From 230 conference goers at the recent Compete Smart Manufacturing Conference in Helena after seasoned businessman Bob Ricketts presented her as an example of Montana's bright future.

"It makes my heart happy to have met a young lady like this taking the initiative to get something started", he told the audience as he walked to where Calhoun was seated. "This is the new blood of Montana's economy.... This is our future."

Ricketts, CEO of Doctor Down in Polson, was the delightful, surprise entertainer for the conference closing luncheon. He brought Calhoun to the attention of the audience after meeting her just a short time earlier at a conference session. There she had told him of the grand opening of her specialty garment business in White Sulphur Springs coming up that weekend and shared a bit of her story.

Her business, Red Ants Pants, is the first-ever company dedicated to manufacturing workwear for women- specifically, cotton duck work pants. Opening the business was actually the culmination of two years on a fast learning track for Calhoun, who is no stranger to hard work. She has a long-standing personal awareness that workwear has not been made to fit women as she grew up on a farm in New England and later led trail crews in five states across the U. S., from Maine to California, and peeled logs for extra income. She has also instructed kids in the backcountry while working for Outward Bound. The experiences exacerbated her frustration with poor fitting work pants, which up until now have been designed to fit men.

Problem Begets Solution

"The problem with women wearing men's workpants is that the pants are cut very straight - without any curves whatsoever." Calhoun explains, "so you have to get a waist size big

enough to fit over your hips. And once buttoned, the waist is too big, creating gaps in the back and the dreaded 'plumbers crack' when you bend over."

Poor fit also limits range of motion. Traditional work pants have other shortcomings. Red Ants Pants is fixing that, offering two cuts of work pants, one for women with curves and one for those with a narrow hip but wider waist. Both contain other preferred design elements that, like the name implies, get work done day in and day out without stopping. Calhoun has even defied the traditional single sizing scale used for women's clothing in favor of a waist/length measuring system - "straight forward and consistent between styles." And she's already exploring additional fabric options.

Clothing and Community

A look at the company Web site www.redantspants.com will reveal that Calhoun is not just designing and selling workwear for women but working to create connections and community within the world of working women. Her line is currently manufactured

in the USA by a women-owned manufacturing center in Seattle and sold and distributed from her storefront in the small central-Montana town of Whit Sulphur and through her Web site. There you can learn more about the "Red Ants Challenge" and brand promotion intended to foster fun, community and a sense of camaraderie among wearers and sewers alike.

With assistance from Al Deibert from the Montana Manufacturing Extension Center, she has explored additional in-state sourcing, but hasn't found contractors with the necessary "spendy" equipment at this time. Deibert also worked with her to understand and make grading (standards used for sizing by the industry) decisions and assisted with cost management, looking at her price/volume mix and other issues to help her price her product correctly.

"It's very common for niche manufacturers to undercharge compared to the value they are producing." Deibert says. Looking at costs and competing niches helps put into perspective.



Mari, a typical hard-working Montana rancher, part of a clever marketing strategy.

Following Ten-Point Plan

Asked how she felt being singled out at the conference luncheon, Calhoun said, "It was fantastic. I met Bob at Al's cost sensitivity session. The whole conference was excellent. I liked the sense of being part of something much bigger."

She attended Compete Smart as part of a continuing effort to gain background in business and finance, which she admits has been a several year self-study that started off with a chance meeting at a local coffee shop where she was reading a book on how to start a business.

Even before she heard the "Ten Point Plan for Success" presented by plenary conference speaker Darrell Miller from Marks-Miller Post and Pole, the young entrepreneur had begun intuitively applying several success tenets from the presentation. Starting her business right, Calhoun has embraced and learned from competition and has begun involvement in trade associations and with industry experts and groups that have outdoor interests and a need for her product. She recently attended an experiential learning conference where market potential for her product is evident and is currently exploring trade show opportunities. She also strives to make her company name consistent with quality.

Miller, co-owner of a successful 30-year-old company in Clancy, Montana, had advised listeners not to view competitors in the industry as enemies but rather as a resource because "we are all in the same boat." There is great value in sharing ideas and garnering help to deal with issues faced within the industry, he said. "Competition is beneficial," he added, "It keeps you on your toes and helps to ensure stability. More importantly, lifelong friendships often evolve." (See related Ten-Point Plan on page 8)

"When I got the idea to develop women's workwear," Calhoun recalls, "I didn't even know what a business plan was..... I had an idea and naive optimism. If not so naive, I never would have had the courage to jump in."

Learning from Industry Specialists

At the fateful coffee shop encounter, she met Richard Soberly, a designer who has had a 20-year career with Patagonia, the now renowned garment company. Meeting him that day is what made her decision, she says. "He was the voice of experience telling me I was onto something big and to go for it. I thank him for that and for all the help along the way."

To learn more about the process of manufacturing, she attended MMEC Lean Manufacturing workshop last year and Deibert, from MMEC, put her in touch with more colleagues in the garment and outdoor industries, leading to the sourcing that has helped move her dream forward.

"Learn from people who are doing." Deibert recommends. He has maintained a network of friends and colleagues from his experiences and consulting in the sewn products/outdoor gear industry.



Happy customer finds work pants that fit.

Calhoun has been in touch with a number of experts including Jim Markel of Red Oxx Manufacturing in Billings who uses a direct sales model like hers, and Mark Terwilliger at Simms Fishing Products, the world's leading manufacturer of premium quality fishing gear, located in Bozeman. As sourcing manager at Simms, Terwilliger is in charge of all the sourcing operations, monitoring fabric trends and production, etc.

"Mark has been a phenomenal mentor," Calhoun says. He helped her find a quality sewing factory that would accept small runs and provided the quality and inspection she requires. Knowing he had experience with the firm gave her much-needed confidence to build the relationship.

Terwilliger, in particular, reaffirmed for her that it's okay to be very assertive, which has been very important."

It's important, as an owner, to be able to say what you want, what you expect to get, and that you are willing to pay for important extras. Terwilliger explains. "I told her to always be firm but fair. As contractors, factories work for us. But they are the experts and might have a better idea, so listen to what they say. But be assertive if you feel strongly about a design element."

It's important to do it in a professional manner so both parties walk away feeling good. "I look at it as a partnership. And a partnership definitely can be long term," Terwilliger says. "The more they help you, the more you grow your sales."

Calhoun's mentors have taught her the industry lingo, the process of working with contract manufacturers, how to talk about the specifications, quality expectations, and what the standards are for the industry. She received tips on the sampling process with a prospective vendor and how to do final signoff. Sampling involves having a prospect sew a single unit, evaluate and correct; arranging a sampling of ten, correct; and then a larger sample; working through the process until both you and the vendor are satisfied with the result to develop a working relationship.



Shop is registered historic site- built in 1880, originally a saddle shop.

Phenomenal Startup Support

There's something about a small business taking off, that people appreciate; they get really excited, Calhoun says. "The full-on support and encouragement from everybody that I'm on to something good has been phenomenal. Then you are struggling on your own, hearing a voice of wisdom really helps."

It's really inspiring to see someone start a clothing business in Montana; and a woman-owned business; that's huge," Terwilliger notes. "Al [Deibert] and I are friends and talk all the time about manufacturing. It's not easy today... Sarah has the heart of a lion to really do this. Any assistance she needs, she's got it."

In manufacturing, Calhoun is marching toward her dream of excellence, mutual benefit and making the world a better place as she outfits women in harsh working environments with durable pants that fit. Hurrah!