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Interview with Megan Ducket of Sew What? Inc.

July 27, 2006 in [An interview](#)



Megan Ducket is owner and founder of [Sew What?](#) a custom theatrical drape maker (no, seriously, [read on](#)). Megan started out tiny, working and sewing at her kitchen table. Today she has 33 employees making backdrops for the likes of Maroon 5, Slip Knot, Green Day, Avril Lavigne, Prince, Sting, Elton John, and Madonna. Plus red velvet curtains for the cover of *Rolling Stone* and even stage curtains for elementary schools. Last month, [Dei](#) and the National Federation of Independent Business ([NFIB](#)) awarded her their annual [Small-Business Excellence Award](#). Megan has graciously agreed to share some of her entrepreneurial journey with us.



Read on for insights on how to build a successful business dominating a tiny niche.

1) Megan, tell us a little about how you got started.

Admittedly my interest and abilities as a seamstress came as a bit of a surprise to me. I began by accepting the challenge of some theatrical “prop” projects as night and weekend work. Although I am the craft oriented type, I never thought it was a calling of mine. I actually had taken an apprenticeship in Australia as a theatre lighting technician!

So there I was, on the kitchen table, sewing unique items for special events and movie premieres. The more unique the piece, the more I was challenged by customers! I recall when the projects became too big for the table and I moved onto the floor in the garage – even spilling out onto the driveway at times. My husband and I both worked full time for a Rock and Roll staging company named All Access, so as you can imagine, adding the sewing hours by night definitely kept me busy.

When tax time came in 1997, the realization that I had nearly matched my day job income with the income from my night work inspired a decision to quit my day job and rent an 800 square foot unit at the local airport. After the initial investment of the warehouse and one sewing machine, I was able to sustain a self-funding business such that the profits covered all growth and expenses.

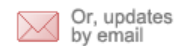


2) You've made a name for yourself in some pretty high profile markets, to what do you attribute your continued success with this crowd?

I try never to assume that any client's business is a given. By trying to always present services and products as if each contact is our first opportunity to make a good impression, we have pushed ourselves to pursue excellence. We are creative, and passionate about what we do, and that is clear when speaking with any of us on the telephone, or reading any page on the website for that matter. I hope that Sew What? Inc will become a household name in the high profile markets for creativity, flexibility, passion and product. Our continued success will rely on providing these factors to each customer again and again.

3) The high profile customers surely bring buzz, but what portion of your business are the less glamorous customers. e.g. the schools, community theatres, trade show booths, etc? How important are they to your success as a business?

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We respect the business we receive from all customers – both big and small. Some of our most rewarding projects are for small churches or under-funded schools, where we are able to help them by creative manufacturing and cost saving suggestions. It is exciting to hear from the congregation or students that the stage drapes and theatre supplies we provided have had a positive effect. This type of customer currently accounts for around 50% of our business.

4) I notice one of your titles (besides President) is Marketing Manager. Can you share a bit of your marketing philosophy with us?

Well let me warn you Carson – when I get to talking about marketing and branding I can go on for hours! In the beginning, marketing is not an area that interested me, so during the first four years or so, I made no efforts to market the company. I was guilty of the small business owner trap, by thinking: "I'm busy without it – why bother?" Not until I lost a large bid in 2002 due to a "lack of credibility" did I realize the importance of branding and the business credibility built by sharp marketing.



Realizing that the "clip art" letterhead was not going to cut it anymore, I decided to seek assistance – not simply with a new logo and stationery – I needed to create a brand. I found (and connected with) [Star Marketing](#) by way of a referral. Owner Chris Sandberg and his talented team have become an extension of our business and a part of my day to day. Chris' team really "got" what we were about – so much so that when I read the branding strategy they penned for us, I felt very emotional. I found myself thinking: "Finally, someone who understands me and what I am doing here!" Most small businesses are "niche" in one way or another. Our challenge is that we offer theatrical draperies and exhibit supplies to a broad range of customers. While a theatre may want to order a backdrop or stage drape, they have no interest in exhibit supplies or pipe and base. What immediately connected me to Star Marketing was their ability to understand these different markets and help me develop a plan that brings it all together – web, print advertising (coming soon), PR, and so on.

The power of the web is incredible. Our website has been designed and redesigned – three times in fact. Don't settle for second best. If you can make something better, then look for a way to achieve it sensibly. Once your site is built, the secret is to optimize it to get the full benefit of traffic. I contract with Cindy McMahan of [Search Marketing Pros](#), who is top in her class. Cindy has helped us reach both national and global clients.



My marketing philosophy is as follows: Position carefully, maintain a customer-centric focus, develop a brand that speaks for who you are (not what you think the client base wants you to be), let your passion for your product show in every piece of literature, correspondence and advertisement. Last but not least – be brave!

5) What marketing efforts have you attempted which turned out to be stinkers?

So far I haven't suffered too many blunders, but I will say that there have been some monies spent unwisely at times. I am a stickler for quantifying results, so I usually catch the problem / lack of results sooner rather than later.

There were the discount coupons I distributed without an expiration date – that wasn't cool. Also some monies wasted on printing unpolished and brandless literature – that was not very wise. I am very careful now to really assess the expenditure before signing the check. The several dozen business and marketing books in my collection help as well, and gathering opinions from others to consider when making my decisions is extremely helpful.

6) As a successful entrepreneur and businesswoman, you have many important demands on your time, yet you still manage to accomplish much. What's your secret to time management?

Time management can be a struggle. I am extremely regimented when it comes to completing tasks in a timely manner – I don't allow projects to linger. I try to keep some sort of schedule at work in terms of time committed to certain tasks. For example email correspondence in the morning, sales calls and customer service throughout the day, marketing tasks for at least 1.5 hours in the afternoon. I stay late if necessary or log into the system from home to finish up work after putting our 3 year old son to bed.



One of the greatest lessons for time management I learned (at a women's business convention) is to get help in the home. Since hiring a college student to assist with household tasks three mornings a week, I am now able to focus home time on family rather than chores. This has been life changing.

7) What inspires you?

I believe there are benefits to surrounding yourself with the types of people you admire and those you want to learn from. I find myself greatly inspired by people. I attribute the success of the business in part to the mentorship of other business owners whom I greatly admire and respect.

I am also inspired by those characters that I may not have met, such as Michael Dell for example. His is a story that is truly inspirational. I learned much from the story of his business, which is shared in [his book](#). It will be a tremendous honor to actually meet him in September as a result of winning the NFIB/Dell Small Business

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Excellence Award for 2006. I would encourage other small business entrepreneurs to participate in this award program that is so generously sponsored by Dell and the National Federation Of Independent Business.

8) Any parting advice for other aspiring entrepreneurs hoping to take their niche by storm the way you have?

I am a firm believer that many types of business can be grown incrementally. (Granted – not all, and so I speak only from my personal experience) Take your vision and break it into the smallest and lowest common denominators. With your final goal in mind, you can choose wisely where to start and how to spend you money. Surround yourself with those whom you admire, always do your own research, and only risk what you are willing to lose. True passion will soon bubble to the surface and you will be able to build a strong and successful business from the ground up.

Just remember there will be bumps in the road and doors that close, so be prepared with a thick skin and a determination to get up and try again. Persistence, self-education (learning from your mistakes) and determination are keys to success.

Thanks Megan for sharing your ideas and inspiration. We wish you continued success.

Comments

As the granddaughter of a New York City seamstress, I am drawn to all stories related to what wonders one can create with fabric -- and as a girl growing up under the kleig lights of Los Angeles -- I found your story of combining fabric with theater (entertainment) to be so exciting. Congratulations to you ---

Kind regards,
Maura
"SHE'S ALL EYES: MEMOIRS OF AN IRISH-AMERICAN DAUGHTER"
A Memoir published by Time Warner

Posted by: [maura conlon-mcivor](#) | Jul 27, 2006 2:43:21 PM

Carson, I wanted to thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this interview with you. The world of theatrical drapes, theatre backdrops and exhibit supplies certainly has proven to be a successful one. I thank you for your interest in our story and hope that your readers will enjoy it.

Thanks also to the kind words from Maura as posted above.

Megan Duckett, Sew What? Inc Theatrical Drapery Manufacturing

Posted by: [Megan Duckett](#) | Jul 28, 2006 9:41:33 AM

As an employee of Sew What? Inc. for the last three years, it still amazes me how much we have changed just in the time I have been here. Megan inspires us all daily with her commitment to excellence, her far-reaching goals, and her belief that all of us here at Sew What? Inc. are a family and that our success is a joint effort.

I came into the business with absolutely no knowledge of stage drapes or the theatrical supply industry. I certainly had no idea that fire retardant fabric was required for public venues, or what the difference was between apparel-weight velvet and theatrical velour. With Megan's mentorship, my body of knowledge has increased exponentially over the last three years, allowing me to be promoted from Office Manager/Receptionist to my current position of Purchasing Manager. She is too modest to say this, but she is truly an inspiration to all of us at Sew What? Inc.

Posted by: Lynda Vaughn | Jul 28, 2006 9:56:43 AM

@Megan - it was my pleasure.

@Lynda - Thanks for the inside view. I believe every word.

Posted by: [Carson McComas](#) | Jul 28, 2006 10:14:14 AM

Wow, what an incredible story. A shining example of how vision, determination and hard work can lead to great things.

I was struck by the seriousness with which you approached turning a hobby into a thriving business. Your success seems to have been planned every step of the way. I am also impressed with your passion and commitment to excellence.

Thanks for sharing your story, Megan. It truly is inspirational.

Posted by: [Angela](#) | Jul 30, 2006 5:25:26 PM

Megan, what business values did IT gave in your business?

Posted by: Kah Heng | Dec 12, 2009 9:36:11 PM

Haha..Mr Yeoh...
let me tell u LOL...
go and search other website =D
LOL LOL

Well, as the role information technologies play a major role in our business now, it serves as the core business value to our business. We specialize in theatrical industries, so information technologies now helps our corporation identify prospects, segment the customers and finally retain all the core customers. Additionally, now information technologies also help us to organize and maintained our customer database fresh.

Feel free to ask anymore questions.

Megan Duckett, Sew What? Inc Theatrical Drapery Manufacturing

Posted by: Megan Duckett | Dec 14, 2009 7:28:16 AM

Hello Megan,

How would you evaluate the business performance of Sew What Inc for now?

What do you think about Sew What's competitors? Besides, who or which market will be your future prospect?

Posted by: Jamie | Dec 14, 2009 7:42:21 AM

Hi Jamie, our business performance? I would say that the performance had reach it's peak and we are actually planning to go more professional. Since the E-Business had reached its peak for our corp, we are going to concentrate on P-Business, Personal Businesses. We hardly got any competitors, we are the monopolist in the industry now so the answer is none. As I said, we are going for P-Business so we will more focuses each and every individual, we had been focusing on big businesses for so long so it should be time for us to focus on them.

Thanks.

Megan Duckett, Sew What? Inc Theatrical Drapery Manufacturing

Posted by: [Megan Duckett](#) | Dec 14, 2009 8:16:03 AM

Hi Jamie, our business performance? I would say that the performance had reach it's peak and we are actually planning to go more professional. Since the E-Business had reached its peak for our corp, we are going to concentrate on P-Business, Personal Businesses. We hardly got any competitors, we are the monopolist in the industry now so the answer is none. As I said, we are going for P-Business so we will more focuses each and every individual, we had been focusing on big businesses for so long so it should be time for us to focus on them.

Thanks.

Megan Duckett, Sew What? Inc Theatrical Drapery Manufacturing

Posted by: [Megan Duckett](#) | Dec 14, 2009 8:16:03 AM

hah

Posted by: PukuDoply | Dec 14, 2009 8:33:04 AM

Puku, why laugh? Oh and by the way, do you guys know someone by the name Shelle and Jevon? Maybe you can ask them about your questions, they are the consultants.

Thanks.

Jevon Duckett, Sew What? Inc Theatrical Drapery Manufacturing

Posted by: [Jevon Duckett](#) | Dec 14, 2009 8:44:57 AM

i believe many students are doing a case study regarding Sew What? Inc. lol i am also currently doing it =) mine to share some info?? haha

Posted by: jazz | Dec 18, 2009 1:33:53 AM

mind*

Posted by: jazz | Dec 18, 2009 1:34:30 AM

to jazz..

i also doing my case study about sew what?

may i know that who is sew what?inc target customer or target segment?

and

how sew what?inc. continue business success?

Posted by: shann | Dec 19, 2009 4:16:53 AM

to shann

i wish i knew the answer to that...nobody from sew what? seems to be replying us. lol

Posted by: jazz | Dec 19, 2009 10:31:36 PM

may i know where you come from?

Posted by: shann | Dec 20, 2009 12:12:12 AM

To Miss Megan Duckett/whom may it regards,

SewWhatinc being a successful company must have had it's rivals and competitors. That would definitely contribute to the growth of the company. So,may i know who is SewWhat's most competitive rival in this industry??

Thank you.

Posted by: Vox | Dec 20, 2009 6:51:14 AM

check out this two...i put them as the competitor =)

<http://rosebrand.com/>
<http://www.northeaststage.com/store/>

Posted by: jazz | Dec 22, 2009 10:47:56 AM

kool.. this is the answer in my homework... hahahahah..

Posted by: kim | Jul 3, 2010 10:28:55 PM

Congrats on your success Megan! We are studying your business from an IT standpoint in a class I'm taking.

All the best,

Pete Hawk

Posted by: Pete | Oct 21, 2010 6:45:37 PM

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