

Truckee woman leaves software for wool

By Angela Haines, Forbes

It's getting easier to make a living doing what you really enjoy. Especially since there seem to be enough customers who can afford to indulge their taste for artisanal or handcrafted products. Jimmy Beans Wool was founded in 2002 by software engineer Laura Zander who, afraid of losing work during the slump in Silicon Valley, decided to move to Truckee. Spending a lot of time in the car on weekend ski trips Laura had become obsessed with knitting. When she took a part time job building a website for a graphics designer, she sold an ad to a local hand-dyed Yarn Company, which sparked the idea for what has become Jimmy Beans Wool. A shop built around her knitting hobby seemed like a good idea, and with their tech backgrounds, Laura, with her husband Doug, figured in time they could extend their reach with an internet business. They invested \$30,000 of their own money in a 500-square foot retail store offering coffee to the knitters too. And customers came and loved the yarns and the service.

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Today, 10 years later, after dropping the coffee, Jimmy Beans Wool (Jimmy is Laura's nickname and beans were for the coffee) offers knitters around the world a wide selection of the finest yarns and knitting supplies available. With more than 98% of revenues derived from internet sales, Jimmy Beans Wool customers are spread across the US, Canada, Australia, with a recent order from Uzbekistan too. The company imports yarns from South America, Turkey and Italy. Revenues have been increasing by 30%, every year, and are expected to exceed \$7 million in 2012.

Laura Zander attributes her success to timing because she started the company when “magazines were filled with pictures of Sarah Jessica Parker, Cameron Diaz and other celebrities knitting.” Then too scarves were in vogue, so a group of Lake Tahoe women would pop in and spend \$100-\$500 on yarns to take home to knit into scarves. But the other ingredient in Jimmy Beans’ success is customer engagement, which has won the company several awards. Along with her tag line, “your local yarn store—online,” Laura writes bimonthly newsletters keeping her online customers informed of trends and fashions; her site also offers 1100 free instructional videos, helping customers with everything from the practical, such as how to turn a heel, to the more exotic, such as how to do Tunisian crochet. In addition, all the instruction is explained in simple, encouraging words which make a customer feel she is asking a good friend for help. Whenever there is a question about an order, or a pattern, customer service is a click or phone call away—always answered promptly by a friendly voice.

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