

Nothing ventured, nothing gained

Tough times or not, these local entrepreneurs are giving new businesses a shot

By ELLEN GOSS GOLDSBERRY
For the Monitor

Is this a good time or a bad time to start a business?

Launching a business can be scary in the best of times. When credit is tight and consumer spending is down, it can be downright terrifying. Yet despite poor economic conditions – and sometimes because of them – some brave souls are staking their current jobs, savings, personal time and future security and are forging ahead with entrepreneurial dreams.

Four startup business owners recently shared their challenges and successes and noted the impact the economy is having on their pursuits. These entrepreneurs are rooted in optimism but are pragmatic about enduring what may be protracted economic challenges. Whether starting their business out of aspiration or necessity, these owners shared a determination to capitalize on their abilities and talents and control their economic destiny.

One such new business venture is Home

Transitions, a senior citizen moving service started by Kathy Ashton of Henniker. The impetus for her business came when Ashton, an office manager for a local company, and husband David, a bank manager, realized they needed to find a way to boost their income to make ends meet.

"Right now, with our two jobs, we're not making it," Ashton said. "We'd been trying to come up with something that would bring in extra income. Senior move management just seemed to have all the components of things I love to do, like organizing and working with seniors."

Ashton got the idea from her dad, who pointed out the special needs that senior citizens have when transitioning to assisted living or nursing care. With an initial outlay of about \$4,000, Ashton designed brochures, developed a website and enrolled in a certification course in Philadelphia for senior relocation specialists.

Since then Ashton has spent early mornings, many evenings and any days off from her

current job networking with senior care administrators. She hopes eventually to make senior move management her full-time job.

So far marketing the business through networking has been better than she had anticipated.

"There's a whole group out there helping me make inroads, being encouraging," she said. "I've had a great reception."

Translating her networking into customers has been trickier. The economy, she said, works both for and against her.

"It is now difficult for children with elderly parents to take time off work, or to pay to fly back and forth to manage a move," Ashton said. "My service is a cost saver."

The downside: "People are very afraid of what will happen with their money. They are waiting to sell their home."

Eight weeks to a profit

Sara Adams of Concord launched her new marketing business, SKA Works, after being laid off from a marketing agency in the spring.

"The layoff was the catalyst but not the motivation," Adams said. "I'd been thinking about starting my own business for a long time."

SKA Works helps small businesses develop individualized marketing strategies. Adams positions herself as an ad hoc incremental employee at businesses that do not want to bring on full-time marketing help. Some companies now have time to tackle marketing projects that were put on hold during times of growth, and she steps in to manage these projects.

While Adams's business required some startup funds, her most valuable assets were "experience, knowledge and my network," she said. She managed to recoup her cash outlay of less than \$10,000 by her eighth week in business. Since then she has been making a profit.

Adams works out of her home, but her two-year goal is to have an office on Main Street in Concord and four or five employees. Like

See **NEW BUSINESSES** – E4

[NEW BUSINESSES, CONTINUED BELOW]

Ashton, Adams is building her business through networking. It seems to be working.

"I have been pleasantly surprised with the number of small businesses interested in learning about marketing strategies," Adams said. "Business is coming in a little faster than I thought it would."

Adams recognizes the risk to starting her own business, but sees risk in employment too. "Anyone in business for themselves, there's no guarantee in income. I was laid off, so there's no guarantee there, either. Starting a new business is definitely risky, but the potential return is good."

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Chuck and Debbie Spencer of Webster took on the Scoopy-Doo yard services business a means to make ends meet. The Spencers acquired the dog-waste pick-up service from a friend in January as a way for Debbie, who has fibromyalgia, to bring in some extra money. Then in the spring Chuck was laid off from Priority Same Day Express when the company closed its New Hampshire branch. This made growing their fledgling business more urgent, said Debbie.

The Spencers inherited a handful of clients from the previous owner. To grow, they tried various advertising strategies: putting up flyers, handing out refrigerator magnets, distributing “doggie bags” with treats and information about their company.

“That didn’t yield anything,” said Chuck. “It’s disappointing that with all the work we put into advertising, it didn’t yield one single customer.”

The Spencers say they took on the business “under somewhat desperate conditions” but are quick to add that they like the work. They bring their own dog, Duncan, to entertain the clients’ dogs. And they enjoy their customers – both the human and canine kind.

Scoopy-Doo is not the lifeline the Spencers had hoped it would be, but with start-up costs only in the hundreds of dollars, the business was almost immediately profitable and provides a small but steady income. The business requires only one to two days a week of their time and grants them much-needed flexibility as Chuck continues to look for full-time work and Debbie deals with health problems. If Chuck does land a job, they would still keep the business.

“Any extra income helps,” said Chuck.

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Michelle Pratt-Lienhart of Webster started Just Be Products, a line of T-shirts and onsies that declare “Just Be” and add various adjectives to make a statement about the wearer, despite the bad economy.

She was confident enough in her company’s success that earlier this year she withdrew her name as a candidate for a full-time teaching position at Southern New Hampshire University and has since submitted her resignation as an adjunct teacher at the New Hampshire Institute of Art. Some of that confidence was sparked by winning a contest for “inspired innovations” run by Inc.com in July. Her product line was put to a public vote on Inc.’s website and won by a landslide.

“Both feet hit the ground running at that point,” said Pratt-Lienhart. She took her \$5,000 in prize money and the \$8,000 proceeds from the sale of her beloved ’68 Mustang and bought a digital T-shirt printer, which is installed in her house.

Pratt-Lienhart has had some success placing her T’s at local retail outlets, but her marketing results at area craft shows have been disappointing.

“I’m not selling anything at these shows, or almost nothing,” said Pratt-Lienhart. “I don’t think (consumers) have that extra money. Even T-shirts are considered a luxury.”

While Pratt-Lienhart isn’t making money yet, she hopes to turn a profit by the first or second quarter of next year. She recently contracted with an independent sales rep “who will be hitting the pavement for me to bring in the sales so that I can make money,” Pratt-Lienhart said. As it is she is putting in “way too many hours

to count” and has reached the conclusion that she and her husband, a plumber by trade who goes with her to all the craft shows, need to finish off half of their garage to accommodate the business.

Despite a discouraging economy, Pratt-Lienhart’s optimism can’t be suppressed. “Hopefully it won’t take very long to get out of this economic slump,” she said. “When people stop and look at my products, they immediately get a smile. That’s what I’m going to be banking on.”

Each entrepreneur affirmed that the dreary economy presents difficult challenges, but each is determined to ride it out. Still, there is some amount of second-guessing. Pratt-Lienhart summed it up: “I don’t know whether I’m insane or brave.”

Side Bar

RESOURCES FOR ENTREPRENEURS

- For most new business, registering a name is a first step. The Secretary of State’s Office in Concord is the place for this.
- How many new businesses are there? Through September the office registered 13,879 trade names and 13,387 limited liability corporations in the state.
- The Small Business Administration has a plethora of resources for starting your own business. On Thursday afternoons from 1:30 – 2:30 a representative from the SBA is at the Secretary of State’s office – a good way to kill two birds with one stone.
- SCORE, a branch of the SBA, offers free, one-on-one counseling by their experienced volunteers. Does it get any better than FREE?

[Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained front page images]

YOUR LIFE



KEN WILLIAMS / Meritour staff

Debbie and Chuck Spencer of Webster run a dog waste pick-up service called Scoopy-Do.



KEN WILLIAMS / Monitor staff

Sara Adams runs her marketing business out of her Concord home.



KEN WILLIAMS / Monitor staff

Kathy Ashton of Henniker runs a senior citizen moving service.

[Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained inside page image]

YOUR LIFE

SSSES Continued from E1



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"I don't know whether I'm insane or brave," says Michelle Pratt-Lienhart of Webster. Her company, Just Be Products, makes a line of T-shirts and onesies with a variety of decorative messages.