

Oprah speaks, and orders boom

Local stationery business gets a boost when notecards appear in magazine

AMY BALDWIN

Staff Writer

Gillian Dewberry doodled her way into a profitable business. Success she owes to a whim and good instincts. Good enough to catch the attention of Oprah Winfrey.

Dewberry, 38, designs high-end stationery -- birth announcements, party invitations, notecards -- much of which features her own drawings on heavy-weighted paper and cardstock. She recently added monogrammed notecards, which Oprah touts in the current issue of her magazine, O.

The buzz has sparked a big uptick in orders for Dewberry's Dewdrop Inc., some from as far away as Australia.

The Charlotte entrepreneur's monogrammed cards, which are packed in a stainless steel cube of 100 cards and 75 envelopes and sell for \$50, share a magazine page with a hot pink peacoat by Jennifer Lopez's JLo clothing line and chocolate chunk caramel popcorn by an Indiana company. The products have been chosen for "The O List," a standing feature where Oprah endorses her fave products.

Of Dewberry's cards, Oprah writes: "I'm a firm believer in showing appreciation. These cards, with your personal monogram, are terrific when you just want to drop a quick note of thanks or congratulations."

Dewberry's stationery has been featured in other magazines, including Southern Living, Parents, Parenting and Modern Bride.

But media maven Oprah's nod of approval is the most significant yet. When Oprah mentions a product, sales boom. She picks a book for her show's book club and it becomes an instant best seller.

Not only did Dewberry snag more orders, now other big magazines, including Time, are calling.

Dewberry owes the attention to serendipity and savvy. Before she had children, Dewberry worked in public relations, writing corporate brochures.

This is how she got noticed by Oprah: Six months ago she was toying with the idea of offering monogrammed cards. One day her printer called to say that there was room left over on the end of a press run and asked how she wanted to use it. She told him to print the extra cards with Winfrey's signature O.

She sent the cards to the editor of "The O List" and three weeks later the magazine called to say they would be featured in a later issue.

"I just thought I would see what their response was. I thought it was a good thing for her, because it's her letter," Dewberry said.

Within a week of subscribers getting the latest O, Dewberry had received orders for 1,000 sets, including an order from Oprah. It was Dewdrop Inc.'s biggest week of Internet orders in the six months its Web site, dewdropdesigns.com, has been live.

A makeshift assembly line has taken over the dining room inside Dewberry's New Orleans-style home in Dilworth, where she runs Dewdrop. Daughter Niki, 8, has been helping count out cards to fill the orders.

Getting noticed by Oprah wasn't all luck. Business owners trying to sell their product to stores or score some ink in celeb magazine must do their research like Dewberry did, she said.

"If it takes another week or two to find out who the appropriate buyer (or editor) is, that is what you do," she said. "You are wasting your time sending stuff to magazines and stores if you don't research who the right person is."

And, she said, don't discount a good idea. If she had, Dewdrop wouldn't exist.

Dewberry had searched in vain for "interesting, unique" birth announcements after her children Drew, 10, and Niki were born. She ended up drawing the one for Niki herself. It featured a pink baby carriage with a little head poking out.

"I got so many compliments that I thought, 'Hmmm...,' " Dewberry said.

She took a handful of drawings to The Buttercup, a stationery store in Myers Park, and scored her first order. That was 1998 and she's been in business ever since, for the last three years supporting her family by selling her paper. It's what others would consider her full-time job, though she'll tell you several times over it's being a mom.

Dewberry sells her paper to stores, from Paper Skyscraper in Dilworth and B.D. Jefferies at Phillips Place to Kate's Paperie in Manhattan, as well as online.

Yes, this self-proclaimed "paper freak" loves the Internet -- but for sales, not for correspondence.

"There is nothing like getting a handwritten note in the mail ... to feel the weight of the paper," Dewberry said. "Those are the things that people put in a box and save."

Getting a Celebrity to Notice Your Product

Here are some tips from Judy Safern, president of Leading Thinkers, a Los Angeles public relations firm. Safern's clients have included John Gray, author of the book "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus," which thanks to publicity from Oprah has been an international best seller for a dozen years.

- Watch the show or read the magazine. Try to understand what the producers or editors need from you. Your publicity efforts must concentrate on developing content for their audience, not on your desire for fame or product sales.
- Don't idol-worship. Don't address your correspondence to Oprah or Regis Philbin. Research the show (or magazine) and contact a specific producer whose job is to screen queries like yours.
- Pitch appropriately. Don't pitch a "Today Show" segment to "60 Minutes." Don't pitch a Family Circle article to Glamour magazine. Don't pitch a feature when what you really need is a mention in a product-review column.