



SUPER // SELLING

HIGH STAKES, SMART BETS, AND THE PATH TO
SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS

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DATA CATALYST INSTITUTE // **April 2024**

INTRODUCTION

// WELCOME TO SUPER SELLING!



Marco Delli, CEO of Marco Delli, with customer

Small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) drive a large part of the American economy, providing jobs, opportunities, and innovations that have defined the American dream for generations. While much has been written about SMBs, and they have become a favorite talking point for politicians and businesses alike, the inner operations of modern SMBs are poorly understood by those who haven't worked at or led one.

The entrepreneurs and operators who take the leap of small business ownership are serving on the front lines of a transformation in the American economy. Their stories—the successes, savviness, trials, and triumphs—help us understand the fabric of America today and serve as a guide to leaders navigating tomorrow as technology, information, and society continue to challenge the status quo.

SMBs are broadly considered businesses with fewer than 500 employees. In reality, most of these businesses have fewer than 10 employees. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), there are around 33 million SMBs in the United States, comprising 99.9% of all American businesses and employing almost half (46%) of private sector employees in the country. This makes every business problem a small business problem.

INTRODUCTION

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Small business owners don't allow potential failure to prevent them from trying to achieve their entrepreneurial dreams. Leaders of successful SMBs are resourceful, taking advantage of the wide variety of tools available to them. Smart SMB leaders use a plethora of different strategies to source, market, sell, and deliver goods to customers, including both traditional methods and newer digital ones. Contrary to some popular myths, virtually all SMBs utilize multiple selling methods—both online and offline.

SMBs typically spend more time and effort finding and retaining customers than larger or more established companies, and the element of chance plays an outsized role in a business's success or failure. Every SMB owner will tell you about the unique challenges and complicated decisions they face every day.

Excellent publicly available research exists covering how contemporary SMBs operate, particularly examining how they market and sell their products. Our own publications include two seminal reports, [Super Selling: How Contemporary Small Businesses Reach Customers and Sell Products](#) and [Super Selling: Exploring the Diversification and Potential of Rural Small Business Retail Sales](#). However, not everyone learns best by reading reports, and even excellent reports miss the nuance, character, and—frankly—the reality of talking to SMB leaders about their experiences.



Members of the Taara Projects Team

INTRODUCTION

// WELCOME TO SUPER SELLING!



Red Moose Golf Tournament Sponsorship

Seeking to address the lack of engaging and immersive materials for small business education, we created an educational video game rooted in both research data and authentic stories from SMB owners themselves. This became SUPER SELLING! Over the last four years, the Data Catalyst Institute has interviewed dozens of SMB owners and surveyed thousands, from California and New York to Texas and North Dakota and virtually every city, suburb, and rural area in between. This report highlights the stories of nine diverse SMBs that inspired our game. They are based in states across the United States and sell in a variety of product categories. These SMBs sell both online and offline via online marketplaces, direct-to-consumer web stores, social media, wholesale, traditional brick-and-mortar retail, and more.

Most importantly, their stories are real; their anecdotes range from the happy to the sad, the challenging to the easy, gold rushes of opportunities and slow-and-steady growth, the roles of family and friends, in-laws, employees, business partners, vendors, dumb luck, education, raw skill, hard work, and simple perseverance. We are excited to share insights about the inner workings of SMBs and the challenging decisions their owners make every day with you.



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BOWL CUT | LOS ANGELES, CA

// THE FAST FACTS

Building a community and brand that brings both traditional and fresh Asian flavors to a new generation.

Established

2022

Top Product

Chili Crisp Sauce

Primary Selling Method

Wholesale

BOWL CUT

BOWL CUT | LOS ANGELES, CA

// CRYSTAL UNG, CEO AND FOUNDER

Asian food is one of the most popular—and fastest-growing—cuisines worldwide. For Bowlcut founder, Crystal Ung, Chinese flavors have always been part of her life. Growing up as the daughter of restaurant owners, Crystal was inspired by the centrality of Chinese food and culture to her family. She created Bowlcut to share updated takes on family-inspired recipes and traditional Asian flavors with a third generation.

Bowlcut isn't just in the business of flavor: the company strives to create community. Crystal explains, "Modern consumers are value-driven and excited by food and cooking." Bowlcut's core audience is "health-conscious millennials with disposable income." The company also attracts younger customers for whom food is a status item.

Bowlcut tells stories, creates content, and builds a brand that is able to "go beyond what is typical and represent a thoughtful lifestyle." Popular social media posts include creative recipes, Q&As with local purveyors, and sauce reviews from elders in the Asian food business.



BOWL/CUT

STORIES OF SUPER SELLERS

// QUOTES FROM SMALL BUSINESS SELLERS

“

As a brand leader, you need to figure out the formula that works for you. At Bowlcut, we prioritize building a brand, taking calculated risks, and differentiating ourselves. We've built a community founded on great Asian-American flavor that prioritizes health and wellness."

CRYSTAL UNG | BOWL/CUT

Crystal Ung, Bowlcut CEO and Founder

TAARA PROJECTS | BALTIMORE, MD

// THE FAST FACTS

An eco-friendly, ethical clothing brand created by a group of college students passionate about sustainability.

Established
2021

Industry
Clothing

Top Product
Taara Tote



TAARA PROJECTS | BALTIMORE, MD

// SHANTHI RAMAKRISHNA, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER



Taara Projects Team Pictured (L-R): Fatima, Castalia, Michelle, Shanthi, Keerti

GenZ’s concerns about climate change have empowered members to make climate-conscious decisions, particularly when it comes to fashion purchases. Taara Projects, built by college students at Johns Hopkins University, commits itself to sustainability, ethicality, and transparency.

Shanthi Ramakrishna, Taara Projects’ CEO and Founder, explains that launching a small business in college and during COVID wasn't without challenges, "Finding the resources to support our vision of running a sustainable clothing brand was a difficult process.”

Taara Projects depends on its website, powered by Shopify, for the majority of sales. The company dedicates most of its seed funding from university grants and accelerator programs to product development and logistics, leaving limited financial resources for advertising. This prompts Taara Projects to get creative with social media marketing content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Social media combined with word of mouth helps Taara Projects “reach customers and drive them to the website.”

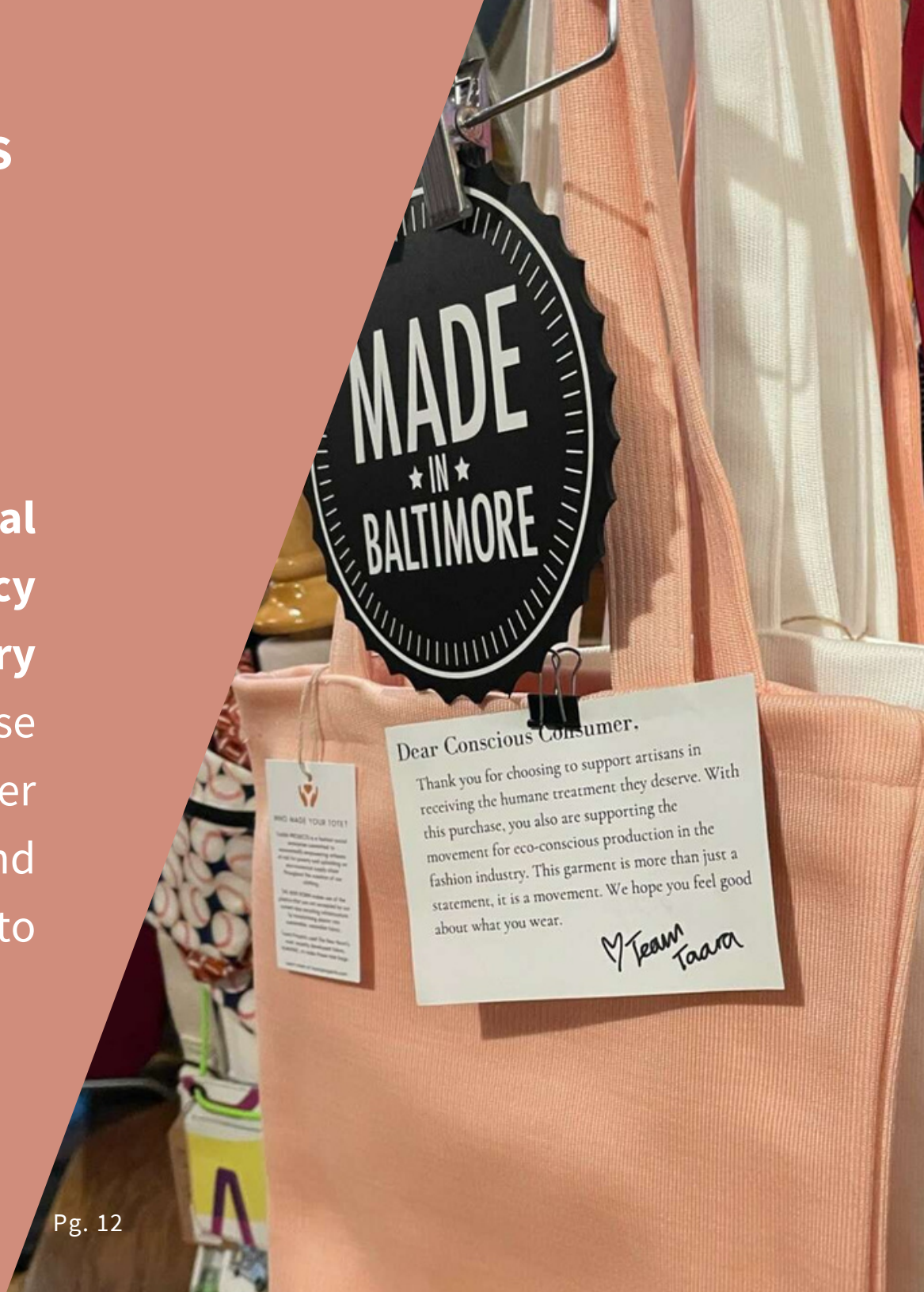
STORIES OF SUPER SELLERS

// QUOTES FROM SMALL BUSINESS SELLERS

“

We believe sustainability, ethical production, and transparency should be at the center of every business. At Taara Projects we use sustainable methods to deliver environmentally-conscious and affordable clothing and goods to our customers.

SHANTHI RAMAKRISHNA | TAARA PROJECTS



PERDIDO VINEYARDS | PERDIDO, AL

// THE FAST FACTS

A family-owned and operated farm and vineyard for customers who like to stop by and visit for a while.

Established

1972

Top Product

Gourmet Vinegars

Primary Selling Method

Local Wholesale



PERDIDO VINEYARDS | PERDIDO, AL

// WILLIAM SANGSTER, GENERAL MANAGER



Jim Eddins, Founder, in the Perdido tasting room

There are over 10,000 independent wine producers in the United States. In 1972, Jim Eddins opened Perdido Vineyards, Alabama's first farm winery since Prohibition. General Manager William Sangster explains that Perdido started as a "brick-and-mortar operation, but now traditional retail makes up about 40% of sales." The rest comes from "farmers' markets and wholesale at the local Piggly Wiggly, convenience stores, and bakeries." When it comes to online sales, the website doesn't contribute many orders, and they don't currently have the manpower to focus on expanding online.

As a family business, Jim's passing in 2021 impacted leadership and the future of Perdido Vineyards. "He was the soul of the company, and the vineyard was in his blood." Determining how to continue his legacy is an ongoing task.

According to William, "As long as people keep traveling from across the region for our award-winning vinegars and muscadine grape juices, we're in business."

STORIES OF SUPER SELLERS

// QUOTES FROM SMALL BUSINESS SELLERS

“

We sell products at our brick-and-mortar tasting room, wholesale to grocery stores, and at farmers' markets. **Having different selling methods available allows us to reach customers both locally and regionally through our wholesale partners.**

WILLIAM SANGSTER | PERDIDO VINEYARDS



LONDON WICK | WASHINGTON, DC

// THE FAST FACTS

A creator's pandemic hobby became a candle business that facilitates collaborative, sensory experiences.

Established

2021

Top Product

Hand-poured Coconut Wax Candles

Primary Selling Methods

Wholesale, Pop-ups

LONDON WICK

LONDON WICK | WASHINGTON, DC

// LONDON COOPER, CEO AND FOUNDER

For London Cooper, candle making started as a therapeutic way to tap into her creativity after long days at work in healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. “The discovery process gave me a thirst for a creative environment and outlet, and convinced me to start London Wick.”

London Wick now sells hand-poured coconut wax candles at local pop-ups, wholesale, online, and at workshops. Workshops offer London predictable revenue and opportunities to “interact with customers, share creative passions, and get direct feedback.” London’s eventual goal is to open “a brick-and-mortar retail and creative space.”

London loves workshops, but she knows “every year you want to grow and expand what your business offers.” This year, boosting website and marketplace sales is her top priority. To that end, London has “participated in Amazon’s Black Business Accelerator and plans to outsource work on her website to an expert to promote the site and connect with new audiences.”



London Cooper, CEO and Founder, leading a workshop

STORIES OF SUPER SELLERS

// QUOTES FROM SMALL BUSINESS SELLERS

“

I do everything for London Wick—photography, social media posts, shipping, managing partnerships, and website design. And I still have another full time job. **New business owners struggle with the decision to go all in on their business.** You can't grow if you don't give 100%.

LONDON COOPER | LONDON WICK

OOGIEBEAR | ROCKVILLE, MD

// THE FAST FACTS

A consumer-friendly infant booger picker that launched an entire product line because a CEO seized opportunities.

Established

2015

Industry

Baby Care

Top Products

Baby Booger Picker & Ear Clear



OOGIEBEAR | ROCKVILLE, MD

// NINA FARZIN, CEO AND FOUNDER



Nina Farzin, CEO, shows oogiebear's product line

The baby care industry is lucrative, racking up a whopping \$98 billion globally each year. A self-proclaimed “accidental entrepreneur,” oogiebear CEO and Founder Dr. Nina Farzin had to learn and grow on the job. Nina initially marketed her product to hospitals but switched to consumers after receiving feedback about how the product would help moms more.

oogiebear's top products, the Baby Booger Picker and Ear Clear, fly off shelves, thanks to Nina's savvy business sense. Early on, Shark Tank featured oogiebear, boosting the company's profile. “It was so much paperwork, but the ‘Shark Tank Effect’ was great for sales.”

Nina values having her products in physical stores where consumers can see and touch them. She feels that oogiebear's spot on the shelves of prominent stores, including Walmart, Nordstrom, Amazon, HEB, and Buy Buy Baby, improves credibility. “We started on online marketplaces to establish proof of concept and get customer feedback; we leveraged that success for wholesale partnerships.”



“

At oogiebear we pivot quickly and don't look back. SMBs have more to lose than bigger businesses, that have the luxury of making mistakes without hurting their bottom line. We try things and if they don't work, we adjust and innovate fast.”

NINA FARZIN | OOGIEBEAR

MARCO DELLI | LOS ANGELES, CA

// THE FAST FACTS

A high-end brand creating hand-crafted, one-of-a-kind, artistic boots with Italian leather.

Established

1991

Industry

Fashion

Price Range

Luxury

M A R C O D E L L I

MARCO DELLI | LOS ANGELES, CA

// MARCO DELLI, CEO AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR

For centuries, Italy has been known for the quality and durability of its leather. Italian-born designer Marco Delli's brand of unique leather boots capitalizes on that famed artistry. Marco “focuses on design and ensures all of the brand’s products meet the standards of quality and creativity their label represents.”

“Pushing more e-commerce on the website” is on the horizon, but for now, Marco primarily sells wholesale to boutiques at trade shows. He also chooses to outsource shipping and distribution. This helps him avoid the time and expense of returns, which are complicated by international suppliers, shipping, and customs.

“I don’t see the orders. Instead, I invest in a team to check the quality and order details before they go out,” Marco says. Outsourcing this aspect of his business gives him more time to design beautiful products and maintain strong relationships with his artisans, buyers, and distributors.



Marco Delli, CEO, shows a customer his designs



STORIES OF SUPER SELLERS

// QUOTES FROM SMALL BUSINESS SELLERS

“

For my brand, I use whatever materials I need to fulfill my vision. **I prioritize delivering customers a style and quality that other brands cannot.** I don't worry about the price because in the luxury market there is less competition.

MARCO DELLI | MARCO DELLI

FRESH PICKLE | CHARLOTTE, NC

// THE FAST FACTS

A retired designer getting in on the up-and-coming pickleball trend with a fashionable line of youthful gear.

Established

2022

Top Product

Lola Gear Bag

Primary Selling Method

Amazon

FRESH  PICKLE

FRESH PICKLE | CHARLOTTE, NC

// LEE OESTERLING, CEO AND FOUNDER



Lee Oesterling, Fresh Pickle CEO and Founder

Pickleball is the fastest-growing sport in America. Serial entrepreneur Lee Oesterling founded [Fresh Pickle](#) to share her love of the sport and bring smiles to anyone who loves to play.

Lee designs Fresh Pickle merchandise in-house and partners with external manufacturers. She explains, “A big but necessary cost was partnering with a broker to manage relationships with all of our suppliers in China’s manufacturing ecosystem.” Fresh Pickle designs “anything you could use on a pickleball court” and sells products on its [Amazon Storefront](#). “We started on Amazon because it gives new sellers leeway and tools. FBA is great when you’re starting out, and you don’t have a real grasp on what you’re doing or the means to hire someone.”

Lee has big dreams for Fresh Pickle. She is launching a Shopify site, planning to attend more trade shows, selling more products wholesale, and becoming a go-to pickleball lifestyle brand.

STORIES OF SUPER SELLERS

// QUOTES FROM SMALL BUSINESS SELLERS

“

We knew from the beginning Amazon would be our first selling channel. Amazon is great for a young business and first-time seller. **It gives me time to focus on other elements of Fresh Pickle, like growing the business, marketing, and product design.**

LEE OESTERLING | FRESH PICKLE



RED MOOSE | TOMS RIVER, NJ

// THE FAST FACTS

A shoe care brand whose hip products, solutions, and memberships reinvigorate a traditional chore.

Established

2014

Top Product

Sneaker Whitener

Primary Selling Method

Amazon



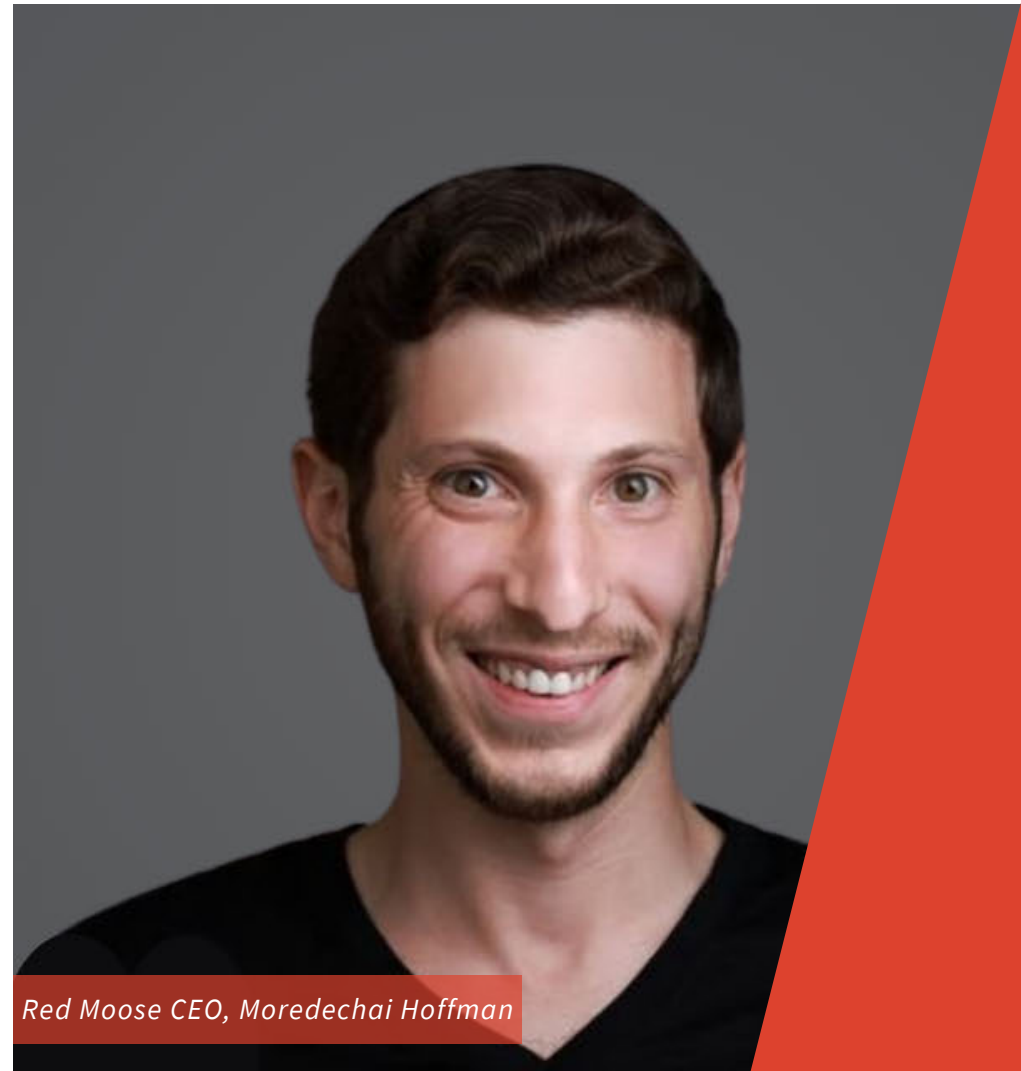
RED MOOSE | TOMS RIVER, NJ

// MORDECHAI HOFFMAN, CEO AND FOUNDER

The average leather shoe only lasts five to ten years, but with proper care, it can last a lifetime. Mordechai Hoffman founded Red Moose ten years ago, selling shoe laces and polish. The company slowly expanded its product offerings to complete care kits for leather shoes, sneakers, and golf shoes. “We have always been a ‘slow and steady’ business with profitability in mind.”

As a business owner, Mordechai explains, “Real life is the biggest challenge. With a growing family, when the lines cross, I have to differentiate between my priorities and increase operational efficiency.” Red Moose produces in the USA “because proximity to high-quality suppliers means we can restock inventory quickly.”

Red Moose prioritizes selling on Amazon so they can “meet customers where they shop.” However, Red Moose rewards loyal customers who order from the brand’s website with membership to the ‘Crimson Club.’ Mordechai recommends membership programs to other SMBs because “they help loyal customers get more value out of your products.”



Red Moose CEO, Mordechai Hoffman



STORIES OF SUPER SELLERS

// QUOTES FROM SMALL BUSINESS SELLERS

“

We are committed to bringing quality American-made products to our customers. We kept the brand traditional and familiar, while making it fresh and modern with offerings like our Sneaker Reset Kit, Build Your Own Kits, and Crimson Club membership program.

MORDECHAI HOFFMAN | RED MOOSE

LOGIC PRODUCTS | IOWA CITY, IA

// THE FAST FACTS

Nontoxic lines of head lice, salon, pet, and child hair care products born out of necessity.

Established

2011

Industry

Hair Care, Pet Care

Top Product

Clear and Free Shampoo

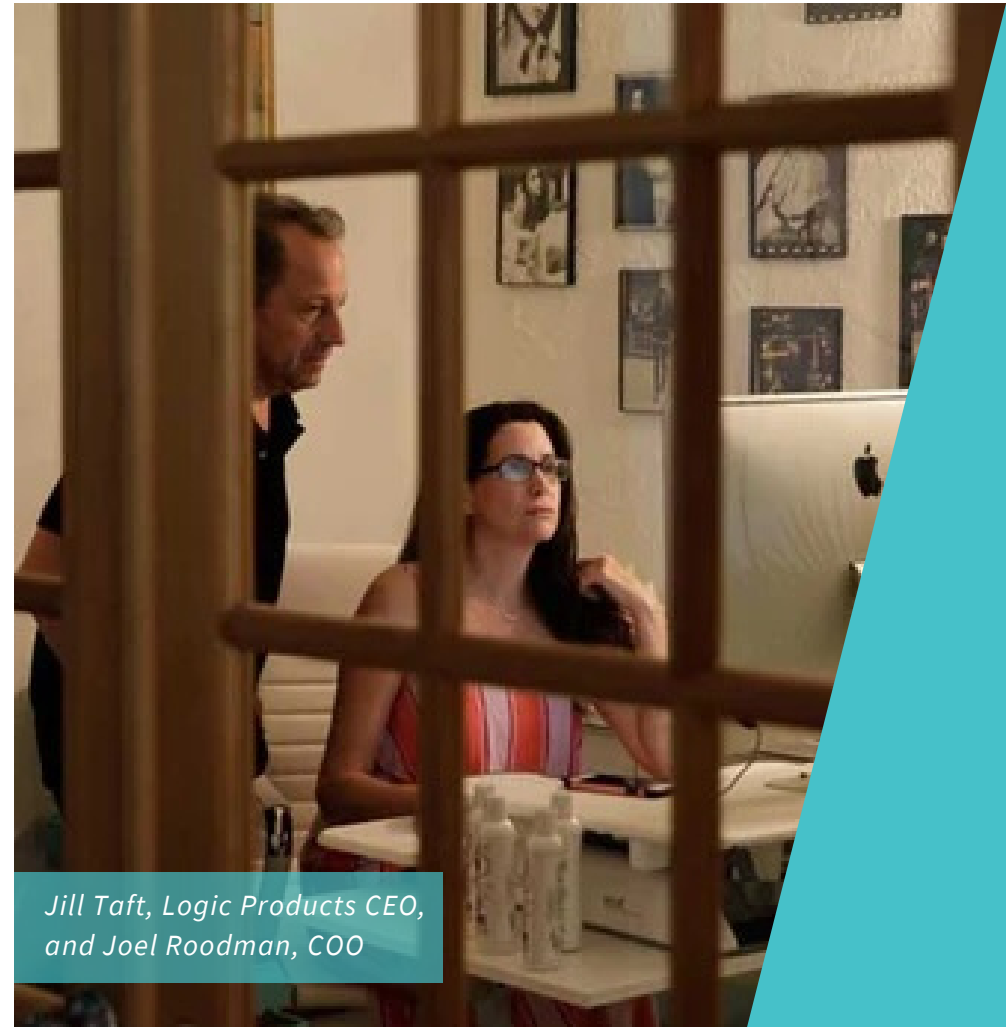


LOGIC PRODUCTS | IOWA CITY, IA

// JILL TAFT, CEO AND FOUNDER

Lice infestations plague an estimated 6-12 million Americans every year. When Jill Taft and Joel Roodman's daughter came home from school with head lice, over-the-counter, pesticide-based products gave her negative reactions. Jill's desire to find and create a safe, natural solution for her child resulted in the birth of Logic Products. "We started handing out the product to moms at school who loved it—the business grew through word of mouth."

They then started bottling the product in their apartment and selling it on Amazon, and the business took off. Logic Products now manufactures its products in FDA-approved facilities and offers solutions for head lice, pets, children, and salons. Scaling the business hasn't been without growing pains. Jill says, "We've had to scramble, negotiate, and we even rented a Penske truck and loaded up product to deliver orders ourselves. Now, we've finally reached a position where we can comfortably meet that larger wholesale volume."



*Jill Taft, Logic Products CEO,
and Joel Roodman, COO*



We've seen it all since starting Logic Products. Challenges with access to capital, growing too fast to scale, and warehouse management. **As a small business, every day is an opportunity to negotiate, make decisions, and grow.**

JILL TAFT | LOGIC PRODUCTS

Dogs with BarkLogic, courtesy of Heather Hunt/TheDapple

SMALL BUSINESSES THAT INSPIRED SUPER SELLING!

// THANK YOU TO ALL THE SMB LEADERS WHO PARTICIPATED IN OUR RESEARCH

Alma del Jaguar - Memphis, TN: 5th-generation tequileros use traditional methods to sustainably produce Alma del Jaguar tequila, with a social mission to protect wild jaguars in the U.S. and Mexico. McCauley Williams, CEO and Founder.

Bowlcut - Los Angeles, CA: Bowlcut creates sauces featuring a new generation of Asian American flavors influenced by the founder's childhood. Crystal Ung, CEO and Founder.

Candor All Natural - Washington, DC: Candor All Natural makes all-natural self-care products such as candles, skincare balms, and spa treatments. LaQuansia Bennett, CEO and Founder.

Crazy Aaron's - Norristown, PA: Crazy Aaron's creates colorful thinking putty and creative, innovative toys that inspire curiosity and wonder. Aaron Muderick, CEO and Founder.

Destiny African Market - Randolph, MA: Destiny African Market is a family-run grocery store bringing consumers African foods and goods. Sola Ajao, Owner.

Fresh Pickle - Charlotte, NC: Fresh Pickle brings style and fashion to an expanding selection of women's pickleball bags, apparel, and gifts. Lee Oesterling, CEO and Founder.

Grill Sergeant - Omaha, NE: Grill Sergeant offers high-end grill and smoker tools and accessories. Scott Moller, Co-founder.

Health And Wisdom - Arcola, MO: Health And Wisdom is a health and wellness company specializing in topical magnesium products for stress, tension, and insomnia relief. Leroy and Laura Collinwood, Co-Owners.

Logic Products - Iowa City, IA: Logic Products produces unique eco-friendly, non-toxic bath and body products for kids, pets, and salons. Jill Taft, CEO and Founder.

London Wick - Washington, DC: London Wick crafts natural, hand-poured coconut wax candles in unique and heavenly scents. London Cooper, CEO and Founder.

Love Dot - Chicago, IL: Love Dot sells apparel and accessories from emerging African brands and designers to make a positive economic impact across the continent. Nneka Ude, Founder.

Marco Delli - Los Angeles, CA: Marco Delli designs women's boots that showcase a fusion of vintage charm, western edge, and rock 'n' roll attitude. Marco Delli, Founder and Creative Director.



Jim Eddins, Founder of Perdido Vineyards

SMALL BUSINESSES THAT INSPIRED SUPER SELLING!

// THANK YOU TO ALL THE SMB LEADERS WHO PARTICIPATED IN OUR RESEARCH

Miche Beauty - Washington, DC: Miche Beauty produces premium hair care products for all textures of naturally curly hair. Jonathan (COO) and Michelle (CEO) Ballard, Co-Founders.

oogiebear - Rockville, MD: oogiebear sells innovative baby care tools and high-quality, USDA-certified organic baby balms. Nina Farzin, CEO and Founder.

Perdido Vineyards - Perdido, AL: Perdido Vineyards is Alabama's first farm winery since Prohibition and makes and sells award-winning vinegars, wines, and spirits. William Sangster, General Manager.

Primitiva Jewelry - MN: Primitiva Jewelry pieces are handmade and ethically created by Colombian master artisans, preserving the traditional filigree technique. Laura Merino-Franco, Founder.

QRxLabs - Miami, FL: QRxLabs brings consumers cruelty-free and paraben-free skincare products with scientifically proven ingredients and sustainable packaging. Alexander Federowicz, CEO and Founder.

Red Moose - Toms River, NJ: Red Moose sells luxurious cream polishes, high-shine waxes, and quality brushes and shoehorns that keep shoes and leather goods looking as good as new. Mordechai Hoffman, Founder.

Taara Projects - Baltimore, MD: Taara Projects is a fashion social enterprise selling sustainable apparel and accessories sourced with methods and materials that minimize waste. Shanthi Ramakrishna, CEO and Co-founder.

True Places - Philadelphia, PA: True Places creates modern outdoor chairs and accessories with quality and meaningful outdoor moments in mind. Ben Knepler, Co-founder.

T|W Tote - Washington, DC: T|W Tote designs stylish, sustainable, and personalized weekend bags, lunch bags, toiletry kits, backpacks, and more. Sherika Wynter, CEO and Co-founder.

YumEarth - Stamford, CT: YumEarth creates organic, allergy-free candies that are widely available in stores across the country including Target, Walgreens, Whole Foods, and Walmart. Rick Pickering, SVP of Sales.



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Crystal Ung, CEO and Founder of BowlCut