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## SMALL BUSINESS RECIPE FOR SUCCESS Salsa maker turns red hot Controlling costs, attracting repeat customers are keys to Katy family's business

By SANDRA BRETTEG FOR THE CHRONICLE  
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Running a family business requires the closest attention to the bottom line, as Rick and Peggy Wright well know. After spending roughly 30 years considering the idea, the Katy couple launched Wrights of Texas salsa business in 2007. Today, their products are sold in 14 Whole Foods Markets, eight Central Markets, six H-E-B stores and some specialty stores, as well as on the company website, wrightsoftexas.com.

But it was managing the little things - like sourcing the most cost-efficient lids and managing labor costs - that allowed the business to succeed, Rick Wright said.

"Cost control is so critical," Wright said. "I know to the penny our labor costs for each jar. I can tell you how much a lid costs. Those are the things that will eat you up alive if you're not careful."

Rick Wright ditched the corporate life in 2001, accepting early retirement from AT&T at age 47. Too young to be idle, yet too old to find a comparable corporate job, he thought, Wright and wife Peggy spent the next six years debating possible ventures.

Peggy Wright had a restaurant background with a degree in hotel and restaurant management but had spent 12 years as a fashion merchandiser. A native of San Antonio, she'd been making salsa for friends and family since the age of 15, she said.

"My mother always told me we should sell it, but it took us a long time to get there," Peggy Wright said.

Emphasis is on 'fresh'

Today, Wrights of Texas sells five types of red and green salsa. Because all of the ingredients are fresh and raw, stores place the product in the refrigerated section.

The company's products sell for more than mass-produced versions - at just under \$7 a jar - because of its fresh ingredients, Peggy Wright said.

"We thought about freeze-drying it back in the '80s and even talked to some people from NASA," she said. "But trends change because today the emphasis is on fresh, not frozen."

The company was really born at the Round Top Annual Spring Antiques Fair in April 2007, the couple said. By making salsa at night and selling it during the day, the Wrights became convinced they could market their product and make a profit.

"It's one thing when your family and friends praise your salsa, but it's another when complete strangers praise it," said Audrey Skelton, the couple's daughter and vice president of marketing.

The company needed an industrial kitchen space, but Rick Wright was leery of racking up expenses early on. The answer lay with Katy restaurant Hasta la Pasta, which leased the company its catering kitchen during off days so the couple could make their salsa.

"We looked at other options, like using a co-packager to make the food from our recipe," Rick Wright said. "But they wanted too high a quantity for it to be feasible, since raw products have a very specific shelf life. Plus, I was still trying to figure out our marketing plan at that point."

"I had a different view," Peggy Wright said. "This was my child, and I wasn't ready to let it go to someone else."

The challenge, both Wrights said, was making and distributing a product with a shelf life of between three and four weeks. With its natural ingredients and lack of preservatives, they couldn't mass-produce the product and let it sit in a warehouse, Rick Wright said.

"We're actually in a good location here in Houston because we can get our product to either coast within three days," he said.

'Snowball marketing'

Further validation came when the salsas did well at the 2007 Houston Hot Sauce Festival. Then, Rick Wright said, he felt confident he could approach grocery stores.

The first grocery store sale, however, owed more to serendipity than salesmanship. When the banker for a new Whole Foods Market in Sugar Land gave a jar to one of the store's buyers, the store ordered 20 cases for its grand opening. That led four more Whole Foods Markets to sign on with the company in 2008.

"It's not a given that once you're in a store you'll stay in," Rick Wright said. "We continually have to prove ourselves, and do things like tastings on the weekends to build our customer base. I call it snowball marketing, because it builds on itself."

"Small startups usually don't have the marketing budget of a big company - like a Frito-Lay - so they do things like free trials to get people to try it," said Jackie Kacen, a marketing professor at the University of Houston. "The repeat purchase is key, because there's a tremendous amount of choice out there for consumers."

Love those tastings

While Rick Wright declined to provide annual revenue, he said the company ships more than 100 cases of salsa each week and has doubled its revenue for several years running.

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Today, the company leases a 2,600-square-foot industrial kitchen and storage facility in Katy. It employs six part-time workers each Monday and Tuesday to make the salsa, with distribution taking place Wednesday through Friday. Saturday and Sunday are reserved for tastings at grocery stores.

"Peggy and I do the tastings together, but a lot of people tell me we should split up and do twice as many," Rick Wright said. "But that's not why we got into this business to begin with. We got into this business to spend time together as a family, and heck, it's just more fun."

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