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ENQUIRER BUSINESS COVERAGE

Sunday, February 28, 1999

Making a success of stationery

Today, one store chain; tomorrow, the retail world

BY JOHN ECKBERG
The Cincinnati Enquirer

For any paper company with only one employee, getting shelf space to sell stationery and notebook paper in 117 Meijer stores scattered across five states would be a big, big deal.

For William D. Shoecraft and his 8-year-old firm, Did You Know Publishing Inc., showing up on Meijer shelves is just another footprint on the path of success. While he is happy to be in Meijer and glad that a store mailer of 500,000 items pegged to Black History Month includes his products, Mr. Shoecraft has bigger plans.

He wants a Meijer's presence for his stationery and paper throughout the year — not just in February during Black History Month — and he wants to reach out to the rest of America through other mass merchandisers.

"Walgreens, CVS drugs, Target, Kmart, Wal-Mart," he said, rattling off retailers expected to attend an October conference in Louisiana sponsored by the School/Home Office Product Association. He wants to be in all those stores and thinks that his line of papers and stationery will be bought in a large enough volume to justify it.

"Without a doubt, consumers accept our products," Mr. Shoecraft said. "Before we brought any product to market, we contracted with a market research firm to do focus groups and found that 85 percent of consumers would purchase materials sight unseen. Once they saw the products, the numbers went even higher."

It started with a book

Company roots are modest and evolving. When his 13-year-old daughter, Amber, was 3 back in 1988, he went looking for African-American history books to buy or borrow from libraries to read to her. He could not find any written about African-American history at a level that could be understood by preschoolers.

Mr. Shoecraft, a Wyoming resident, decided to publish a

book himself, and his first effort was a hardbound book that chronicles Rosa Parks' refusal in 1955 to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Ala., bus to a white passenger and the massive bus boycott by blacks that followed. Colorful illustrations were by Mr. Shoecraft's uncle, David Gullatte, a retired illustrator.

Two more biographies written for preschoolers, a teacher's guide and a line of posters followed. It was while trying to market those products that Mr. Shoecraft stumbled upon the idea of printing faint portraits of great African-Americans on stationery, and "Lasting 'M' Impressions Notebook Paper" was born.

"We were at a conference in Louisiana and wanted to thank people who had stopped by our booth for information," he said. "We thought we would send a note with a portrait from one of our books. Soon, people began to call us back and wanted to know where they could get the paper."

Right here, Mr. Shoecraft thought.

Within days, he was printing and packing paper — the shrink-wrapper machine from those days is still in a corner of his office — and shipping it off from the company's Corryville offices to a steady stream of customers, mostly schools.

Lines came later

At first, portraits appeared on unlined stationery. Some of the paper went to Jefferson Elementary School in Hamilton. When Mr. Shoecraft visited and saw the writing of students displayed in halls and classrooms, he noticed that some sentences sloped up or cascaded down across the page.

"One student had even taken his ruler and put lines on the paper," he said. Mr. Shoecraft realized that there was an untapped market for lined paper with historical portraits on it.

It has not been a one-man show. He relies on a 15-member volunteer panel of publishing, education, accounting and marketing research advisers for guidance. A grant from Crest toothpaste and the Procter & Gamble Co.'s Educational Service Department helped print the first books.

Schools remain the primary market — even with inroads at Meijer. He estimated annual revenues at \$50,000 in 1998. That should change. "With the notebook paper and the retail outlets, we hope to double or triple that number in 1999," he said.

A model for others

The company should be a model for other firms, said

business development expert Annette Tarver, president and chief executive officer of the Cincinnati Business Incubator.

"His is a good example of a start-up company that identified a market niche, created a product for the niche and then superbly merchandized the product," Ms. Tarver said. "The paper is beautifully designed and can be used by any age group. He has succeeded against the odds."

Mr. Shoecraft went on a marathon trip last week. He climbed in his car and headed north to count sales.

"I was running I-75 from Cincinnati to points around the Detroit area," he said. "I wanted to see how the product looked on the shelves — to see how it was displayed and what kind of (sales) movement was taking place."

The sales volume was solid.

"We saw about 75 percent movement," he said. "It was an excellent trip — very tiring, but an excellent trip."

ENTERPRISE INSIGHT

"Slow and steady growth — I think with any organization, as you grow, you've got to put systems in place to handle that growth. Otherwise, you can't deliver on time and you can't deliver a quality product. Slow and steady growth is what we focus on."

**— William D. Shoecraft, developer of stationery
featuring Dr. Charles Drew, George Washington
Carver, Rosa Parks and others**

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