

small business

DICK YOUNGBLOOD
Robyn Lingen and Tom Bullington have found an uncommon market focus for their new communications business: city governments with marketing and public relations needs. **Coming Wednesday.**

Bringing up baby, and a business

• A St. Paul couple rent out cribs, strollers and other baby essentials as they start their own family.

By TODD NELSON
Special to the Star Tribune

Jay and Chantelle Ebben wanted a home business, one Chantelle could run as their family grew.

Their plans are working on both fronts: The St. Paul couple launched their home-based company a year ago. And the Ebbens are expecting their first child next spring.

Setting up their business turned out to be something like preparing for parenthood.

"She said from the start we wouldn't get anything for the business that we wouldn't use for our own kids," Jay Ebben said.

That's because their company — Rockabye Rentals — rents cribs, high chairs and other infant and toddler gear. The items are available through the company's website, www.rockabyerentals.com. Chantelle Ebben said she did extensive research to find brand-name, safety-certified products for the company to offer. Rockabye Rentals follows state regulations for cleaning returned items and uses a sanitizing agent that contains no chlorine.

The Ebbens — one or the other and sometimes both — deliver the items, most often to grandparents with visiting grandchildren in the Twin Cities metro area. They have made deliveries to hotels, to the airport and to corporate relocations services. The Ebbens set up the items and pick them up after the visitors leave.

They got their first orders a year ago, just before Thanksgiving. Business started a bit slowly, as they made their website more visible to search engines and began using pay-per-click advertising to attract visitors. Rockabye Rental offered free deliveries at first but added a delivery charge, starting at \$10, when gasoline prices soared, Jay Ebben said.

Their first year has surpassed their expectations, with 90 customers, a number of repeat clients, accounting for \$12,000 in revenue, Jay Ebben said. The couple have used savings to buy the equipment.

Revenue, however, isn't the only goal, the Ebbens said. They want the business to grow but don't want it to grow too quickly or too big.

"We've had a lot of people suggesting different ways to go about growing the business," Jay Ebben said. "We always have to come back to what our original reason for starting the business was. And that was to have Chantelle be more or less able to stay at home and spend time with our kids. So the decisions we make really have to be within the confines of that."

That perspective reinforces a message Jay Ebben, an assistant professor in the entrepreneurship department at the University of St. Thomas College of Business, said he tried to convey to his students.

"It fits within a framework we teach at St. Thomas," Ebben said, "which is what the three elements of an opportunity are: fit with you personally, demand for the opportunity and a financial opportunity. If any of those three are missing, you're going to have to evaluate those."

One thing Chantelle Ebben has ended up not missing is her old job at Thomson West. With a law degree from the University of Minnesota, she held two positions at the company, one teaching lawyers how to do online research, another in corporate marketing. She said she had some anxiety about leaving behind her salary and benefits but has discovered an entrepreneurial side.

"I love working for myself," she said. "It's just so much more satisfying. My level of happiness is 100 times greater than it was. When you do well, there's just such a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment that you don't get working for someone else."

The Ebbens said they hoped customer referrals would help business grow next year. If anything, having more baby-equipment rental companies open up in the Twin Cities might help business by making people more aware of the option. Similar companies are more common in such tourist destinations as California and Florida.

Jay Ebben said he would like Rockabye Rentals to grow by five or six times in revenue. At that size, he and his wife could maintain control of the com-



Jay and Chantelle Ebben own and run Rockabye Rentals from their St. Paul home. Chantelle said she did extensive research to find brand-name, safety-certified products for the company to offer. Rockabye Rentals follows state regulations for cleaning returned items and uses a sanitizing agent that contains no chlorine.

TOM SWEENEY •
Star Tribune

pany, still operate largely from home and maintain a high level of customer service.

"Another thing we like about the business is the customer interaction," Jay Ebben said.

"That makes it fun," Chantelle Ebben said. "They share a little bit about themselves, especially if they have grandchildren or great-grandchildren coming."

Susan Greenberg of Hopkins, a repeat customer, said she has twice rented a portable crib and an Exersaucer for her visiting grandson. "I needed some items that at the time I didn't want to purchase," Greenberg said. "I wasn't sure how many visits we were going to be having, and this fit my needs perfectly."

Jim and Judith Peterson of Bloomington are repeat Rockabye Rental customers. They found the company through an Internet search last spring,

ROCKABYE RENTALS

Business: Rents cribs, high chairs, strollers and other baby and toddler gear, provides delivery, setup and pickup.

Founded: 2005

Headquarters: St. Paul

Web: www.rockabyerentals.com

Executives: Jay and Chantelle Ebben, owners

2005 revenue: Opened a year ago. Estimated 2006 revenue is \$12,000.

Strategy: Growing at a measured pace through referrals and repeat business.

before their infant grandson's first visit from out of state.

Their rental items have included car seats, a portable crib/playpen combo and a swing, among other items. "Let me tell you what a lifesaver that was," Judith Peterson said of the swing, which comforted the toddler while his parents made an overnight trip to Iowa. "Holy Toledo, if we hadn't had that I don't know what we would have done."

The equipment made a favorable impression, as did the Ebbens, she said.

"They're clever, they're smart and you look at their Sunday school faces and know you're getting a good deal," Judith Peterson said.

Todd Nelson is a freelance writer in Woodbury who also has written for the St. Paul Pioneer Press and the Raleigh News & Observer. His e-mail address is todd_nelson@mac.com.

outside consultant

Q Marketing is a "contact sport." However, as a smaller business law firm, I don't have large marketing campaigns to contact potential clients. How can a smaller, focused business law firm position itself against larger firms that have departments handling similar work?

ANTHONY BARTHEL
SKJOLD BARTHEL

A Typically, attorneys in smaller firms commit more time to marketing because they are responsible for implementing the marketing plan. Having a large marketing campaign is not the issue. Instead, focus on developing an effective marketing program that targets specific industries and clients and includes training for your lawyers on key techniques. The key is developing a strategy — determining which marketing tactics will put you in touch with potential clients. Tactics might include a well-designed Web page highlighting the firm's specializations and attorney expertise, a blog written by firm attorneys or submitting articles written for trade publications.

Most of all, meeting and developing relationships with the people who make decisions is important in distinguishing your firm. Understand that clients rarely choose their attorney, or any other professional, solely on the basis of their technical expertise. Technical expertise is the starting point, but potential clients choose qualified lawyers and firms on the basis of whether they believe they can work with that person and that firm. That decision is personal and intuitive and is based on relationships.

For that reason, training for your lawyers in the techniques necessary to build trust and client relationships could be what sets your firm apart. Some lawyers use continuing legal education and professional development seminars to learn how to develop their client services and marketing skills.

SUSAN J. MARSNIK, CHAIR
ETHICS AND BUSINESS LAW
DEPARTMENT
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
OPUS COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

Answers are provided by the John M. Morrison Center for Entrepreneurship at the University of St. Thomas. E-mail questions to consultant startribune.com.

small business calendar

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21

Small-business counseling. 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Southdale Library, 7001 York Av. S., Edina. Free. Call 952-938-4570. Sponsor: Minneapolis SCORE.

Top 10 tips for building a business. 12:15 to 1:15 p.m., 2324 W. University Av., St. Paul. Free. Call 651-646-3808. Sponsor: WomenVenture. Advice from successful local entrepreneurs on best

practices for small businesses.

Beyond outside of the box — quantum capacities. 7 to 9 p.m., Van Dusen Center, 1900 LaSalle Av., Minneapolis. Free for members, \$15 nonmembers. Call 651-602-3175. Sponsor: Inventors' Network. Jane Barrash, executive director of Continuum Center, will speak.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 22

Write your own business plan using the Minneapolis Public Library Micro Entrepreneur Resource Center. 4:30 to 6 p.m., 300 Nicollet Mall, room S-275. Free. Call 612-630-6000.

How to get a Small Business Administration loan to buy a small business/online workshop. 8 to 9 p.m. at www.USABizMart.com/education. Free.

Sponsor: Business For Sale Online Academy. Topics: How to correctly structure your deal for SBA financing, the differences between conventional and SBA financing for your business purchases, why picking the right lender is important for the timing of your deal and more.

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