

Leap of Faith

We talk with Marie Zeffer, owner of Ann Arbor, MI-based Sew Much Thread, about how she took her embroidery hobby commercial. See what she learned, and still is learning, along the way.

THE SPOTLIGHT'S ON

Marie Zeffer is owner of Ann Arbor, MI-based Sew Much Thread. Contact: marie@sewmuchthread.com.



Stitches: How long have you been embroidering?

Marie Zeffer: I've been embroidering for just over four years. I started by being hired by my local Husqvarna Viking dealer to teach embroidery software classes. I was hired for my background in teaching and training. They taught me how to embroider. My love of sewing began in seventh grade home economics class.

Stitches: What types of products were you creating? Were they just for family and friends? Were you charging for your work?

MZ: My friends and family members received a lot of embroidered T-shirts, sweatshirts, placemats and hats as gifts for birthdays and holidays. I'd be super busy embroidering for a week or two at a time, and then I'd take a little bit of time off before beginning the next batch. At that point, I wasn't charging for my work.

Stitches: What prompted you to take your embroidery skills commercial?

MZ: Long before I started my embroidery business, my husband and I would have the same conversation periodically in the morning when he was wearing his Land's End shirt embroidered with his company's logo. I'd say, "Nice shirt," and he'd respond with, "You could be doing this." I'd reply, "No, I'm just doing this for fun."

At that time, I had my home embroidery machine and software, and would make embroidered gifts for family and friends. One morning, when my husband and I were having our usual exchange about his logoed embroidered shirt, he added, "Do you realize how much my company paid for this shirt?"

When he told me, I was in shock. That morning I decided to go beyond "just doing this for fun." After a successful first order in September 2005, Sew Much Thread has been growing.

Stitches: What services do you offer?

MZ: Sew Much Thread specializes in embroidering for business, club, team and special event apparel. I also offer monogramming, digitizing for my customers, heat pressing and screenprinting. I don't have any minimums, and I make a special effort to offer women's compatible styles whenever possible.

Stitches: It takes a certain type of person, with discipline and drive, to launch a business. How did you know you had the qualities necessary to start and run a business?



Zeffer digitized this design for a customer's request for a 40th birthday gift.

MZ: It just sort of happened as my hobby evolved into a profitable business. I've had to have a lot of patience with myself, as starting a business and getting it going takes a lot of time. Also, I've had to be willing to make sacrifices. I've also learned some humility because no matter how expert I think I've become, there's still a lot more to learn.

Stitches: When you decided to go commercial, what were the steps you took to launch the business? How did you pick the name Sew Much Thread?

MZ: My first order came from my husband's place of business; before all of its embroidery wear had been coming from Land's End. I approached this as a trial order with the understanding that if it didn't work out for either of us, then we could simply let the other know that it wasn't going to work. What happened instead was that I completed the order on my Husqvarna Viking Designer SE home embroidery machine, and once I finished it, I felt confident that I could do more embroidery as a commercial business.

The company was very pleased with the quality of my work and liked dealing with a local business so it shifted from Land's End to me. As my business grew, so did the size and complication of my embroidery. Some stitchouts were taking hours. I quickly realized that there was no way I could grow my embroidery business without a commercial machine and software. I purchased a new machine and software from Tajima, along with some basic supplies.

The name of my business, Sew Much Thread, came about because embroidery uses "so much thread."

Stitches: How did you know if launching a business would work? Were you afraid of failure?

MZ: Once that first order was completed successfully, I knew it would work. I didn't really have anything to risk since I already had a home embroidery machine and software. I was more afraid that the business would take off too fast and I wouldn't be able to keep up with the orders.

I envisioned a snowball at the top of a hill starting to roll faster and faster. I'm currently running in front of the avalanche and managing to stay in front. Although I did have orders waiting for the entire first year of business, it was at a pace that I felt comfortable with.

Stitches: Do you work with anyone? Do you use outside vendors or suppliers for any of your needs or services that you offer to clients?

MZ: Purely by coincidence, I met a woman who lives literally right down the street from me who's been operating a commercial embroidery business out of her home for more than 10 years. I contacted her to see if she'd be willing to answer a few questions, and she was kind and receptive.

So instead of operating as competitors, we work together and help each other. For example, I digitize for her, and she heat presses for me. But it goes a lot further than that. We also help each other with little things on a regular basis. There's plenty of work so people can find ways to work together not against each other.

I work mainly with about four to five clothing and accessory vendors. I also just recently found a screenprinter to work with.

Stitches: How did you start advertising your business and services?

MZ: My strategy so far has been to network and talk to people I already know and who know me. I carry a few business cards in my purse, and when I see that

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someone might be able to use my services, I pass along my card and have a friendly conversation.

Stitches: Is your business growing?

MZ: Yes, my business continues to grow. Since I upgraded to the new M-series single-head Tajima machine and Pulse software, I'm able to handle a much larger volume of work.

Stitches: How did you decide it was time to invest in a company Web site? How do you expect it will help your business?

MZ: I knew that I wanted to have a Web site as soon as possible because in people's minds these days, it's a sign of legitimacy. I also want it to be a tool for my customers. My site will have links to product catalogs, details of the services that I offer, a gallery of my work and customer testimonials. There will also be places where interested parties can e-mail me directly. We plan to launch the Web site at the end of December 2006.

Stitches: What does it take to keep your business going strong? What else are you thinking of doing to add to your success?

MZ: There always needs to be a certain amount of beating the bushes for sales, so I plan to visit more local businesses.

Stitches: How do you keep your name out there and keep yourself competitive?

MZ: The majority of my work has come from word of mouth. I keep in touch with my customers, network online and try to go to a conference once a year. Most of all, I'm constantly trying to improve my skills, as there's so much to learn in this business.

Stitches: What advice would you give to embroiderers thinking of starting their own business?

MZ: After motherhood I re-entered the working world by teaching at a local sewing machine dealer for next to nothing. This increased my skills and confidence. Then, I started with family and friends and slowly expanded my circle and continued to build my portfolio.

So, start with small jobs, take it slowly and learn as much as you can. Don't think you're going to make it big right off the bat. Be patient. Allow yourself at least six months before you expect to really make money.

If you're a one-person show, you need to do it all. That means you need to sell, do the accounting, shipping and receiving, and get the work done. Be willing to accept that not everyone will take you up on your offer to embroider something for them, and move on.

Stitches: Is there anything you would have done differently?

MZ: My workspace has been a big challenge. I thought I would just need a small area of the dining room in my home. Since then, I've taken over the dining room and expanded into the living room. I have quite a few containers in the basement as well. My husband is finishing out part of our basement for me, but it can't happen soon enough. I underestimated how fast I would expand. ●

If you have an interesting story about how you built your business, send an e-mail to nrollender@asicentral.com, with the subject line: *Stitches, How'd They Do That?*