

How I Started My Own Green Themed Business

By Tracey Porpora

If you've ever pondered how you can blend your desire to create a more eco-friendly planet and your paycheck, then you may aspire to launch a "green" business. CW spoke to two women who did just that. In fact, they create environmental awareness each day while fulfilling their dream of running their own business.

Jessa Brinkmeyer, 24, owner of Pivot, an environmentally-friendly boutique in Chicago, IL.

CW: How did you get started in the business?

Jessa: "I was always someone who thought about the little things I should do to lessen my impact on the environment. I was excited about this because it blended two things I'm interested in: fashion, and living a more conscience/aware lifestyle. I wanted to wear some of these fabrics and support the designers, but they were difficult to find in Chicago. That's what spurred me to think about the concept for an eco-boutique."

CW: How long have you been at it?

Jessa: "I opened Pivot the first week of September 2007."

CW: What was your background before becoming involved in the business?

Jessa: "I graduated Northwestern University with a journalism degree, and was working at a small publication covering fashion. There, I learned more about fabrics, like bamboo,

cotton and soy, and the designers who were using them to create very fashion-forward collections. These are items you'd want to wear, not ones that scream they're eco-friendly."

CW: How is your business "green-friendly?"

Jessa: "I have more than 30 designers from across the United States, Europe and Canada. It's primarily women's apparel. A lot of the designers use fabrics that are bamboo, and organic cotton cashmere that has been combed off the animals. Everything in the boutique is eco-friendly. I used low VOC paint, [which doesn't release significant pollutants], energy-saving light bulbs, and all of my fixtures, including the racks and counters, were designed by a local artist who uses recycled steel and wood."

CW: Why do you feel the "green theme" is important?

Jessa: "This is the only boutique in the area that is dedicated to ecofashion. The clothing is attractive, and it appeals to people. The main point I want to get across is you don't have to sacrifice anything in terms of fashion, personal style or comfort to have a more conscience wardrobe."

CW: Did you ever have a "oh no" moment?

Jessa: "There are some days that are so overwhelming, and you think that you're 'to do' list is so long. But at the same time, when people walk in the door and tell me they're so grateful there is a place like this in Chicago, it makes me realize why I'm working so

hard.”

CW: Have you had an "aha" moment... when everything started making sense?

Jessa: “When I first opened I was able to look around and see all these designers I only read about before right here in my store where I could feel their collections; that made it all worth it for me.”

CW: Where do you see yourself in the future?

Jessa: “In the near future, my web site will be redesigned to add online commerce. I also have thought about opening stores in other cities down the road.”

CW: What advice would you give others starting their own business?

Jessa: “If you’re opening a green business you need to make sure you care about it, and you’re doing it for the right reasons because people will be able to tell if you’re not devoted.”

Lisa Richardson Elkins, 33, owner and principal of the Chicago, IL-based 2 Point Perspective, which specializes in eco-friendly architecture and furniture design.

CW: How did you get started in the business?

Lisa: “I always wanted to own my own business. I actually got a very scary call from the doctor who told me I had a tumor inside my heart, so I told myself if everything went

smoothly with the surgery, I would go after my dream and start my own firm.”

CW: How long have you been at it?

Lisa: “Just over a year.”

CW: What was your background before becoming involved in the business?

Lisa: “I always knew I wanted to start my own design firm, and always knew I wanted it to be a sustainable business. I made sure my career path prepared me for starting my own firm one day. My undergrad degree is in architecture, and I also got a master’s degree in architecture in London. I worked as an architect for several years in San Francisco. I chose to work in both small and medium-sized firms. The small firms helped me learn how to run a business, while the larger firm taught me how to efficiently run an architectural project. I also found a job as a furniture designer where I was involved in sales. This let me improve my design skills while also learning what people really want from their future selections.”

CW: How is your business "green-friendly?"

Lisa: “My husband and I are both LEED-accredited architects. [The U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED™) has a green building rating system]. This is a measuring system for designing a green a building, and we’re trying to get as many LEED-certified projects under our belts as we can. Of course, we recycle, and we also buy wind energy instead of energy from coal burning

power plants. We've joined the Sustainable Furniture Council, which makes sure what you design is sustainable.”

CW: Why do you feel the "green theme" is important?

Lisa: “My two passions are modern design and the environment, so I wanted to focus on something that combined those two ideas. Not damaging the earth is one of my core values. Everyday I try to do something to lesson my carbon footprint. We're at a critical point right now, and if we don't make some changes, the planet won't be able to recover from what we've inflicted.”

CW: Did you have a "oh no" moment?"

Lisa: “Some weeks are harder than others, but I haven't had a critical moment that I can think of.”

CW: Have you had an "aha" moment?

Lisa: “We're getting to that point now. We have several furniture pieces that we've gotten back recently that look really nice. It's a confidence boost, and makes you think, ‘I can do this.’”

CW: How do you deal with conflict in the workplace?

Lisa: “We try really hard to avoid conflict, because dealing with it is something I'm not very good at. My husband recently joined as a partner, so we make a ton of the decisions

upfront together. As far as other employees, we don't move forward with something unless the whole team is happy with it."

CW: What's the secret to your success?

Lisa: "I think if we continue to design spaces that people really love, and furniture pieces that make people stop and say, 'wow,' then we're on the right path."

CW: Where do you see yourself in the future?

Lisa: "I want to move toward even more LEED-certified projects, and possibly design eco-furniture for larger companies."

CW: What advice would you give others starting their own business?

Lisa: "Whenever you're starting a business, it has to be something you're passionate about. You also have to draft a solid business plan, and get good business advice. But don't 'green wash,' which means don't say your business is green if it's not. That's the biggest way to turn off your client base. Make a plan early, and find jobs that will help you learn everything you need to know along the way."