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Tips on How to Start Your Own Candle Business

Our disclaimer: There are many paths to the goal you choose to reach. The following are observations that may help you on your path, but you will probably have many of your own. Our intent is to aid you in some way, if we can. Thanks for reading!

Gary, Laurie & Kelly

Send Comments and Questions to [Lumina](#).

Tips for Selling Beeswax Candles

1. **Determine who your market is. (Who will be buying your beeswax candles?)**

You start off with limited resources, so try to figure out what kind of person will want what you are selling and then seek out that type of person. (I tend to think my clients will be people who are somewhat like me.) I started my beeswax candle-making business in 1991. I have determined that my market is predominantly made up of people who enjoy (and are willing to pay for) natural products. These people often already know [about beeswax](#) and why it is the preferred wax for candles. I don't really have to sell to them or "educate" them on my product (which saves me a lot of time). Beeswax candles are not comparable to paraffin candles so when I am at a show and I hear the comment "You can buy tapers at Wal-Mart for 3 for a dollar," I can guess that the speaker is comparing apples to oranges. That means 1) the comment may be coming from someone who may not know about or appreciate the qualities of what I am offering and/or 2) I may have to spend more time explaining the benefits of my product to this potential customer.

I do not have the resources of a large company. So I believe that my time will be better spent going to where my market *already exists*. In other words, I will have better success wholesaling my product to stores that sell natural products or high-quality handmade goods (such as pottery) and selling to the public via herb shows and high-quality/funky art/craft shows and trying to locate folks who want unusual and/or natural candles.

2. **Be prepared to work long hours.**

Like any business you start, it takes work. Therefore you must decide what your goals are and if you really want to do this. I assume you have already received advice on contacting your local Small Business Association office and drawing up a business plan. Good advice I should have taken. When I started making candles, I was working a 60-hour-a-week job that I loved, doing image preservation, but I wanted more (don't ask me why!). My goal was more about getting to make my own choices than about making money. I started out slow. And I am still too cautious. A business plan helps you clarify your goals. You also need a tax ID number, so contact your state's comptroller. This not only allows you to purchase materials free of sales tax, but also is required by shows before you will be able to sell your goods. Your state comptroller will help you with many tax questions that you will inevitably have.

3. **Discover your strengths and weaknesses.**

I am an artist. I enjoy talking to people; however, I am not a salesman. I am not much of a marketer. My observation about people is this: we each have different skills and interests (thank goodness!) and we accomplish so much more by allowing ourselves to join with people we trust who have skills different from our own and who share the vision. Be honest with yourself about why you want to start your own business

and what skills you bring to the table. Consider looking for a partner or employee (or a spouse?) who has some necessary skills that you either lack or are not interested in using, depending on the goals for your business and your budget. For instance, I find real/snail/paper mail correspondence overwhelming sometimes and I rarely have time to follow up (call the customer, pursue the sale). Self-employed people tend to be responsible for ALL areas of the business: manufacturing, selling, marketing (different from selling!), accounting, inventory, and shipping. It's rare that an individual has the time, much less the skills, to wear all of these hats.

4. **Create your product. Understand what it is.**

What is it you are really selling? A thing or a lifestyle? WHY would someone want what you have to offer? I am constantly thinking about which candles I want to make -- and which I don't. I consider whether or not the candle fits my "theme" or "philosophy". Is the product consistent with why customers do business with me now? Also, I did a serious amount of research on [packaging options](#) before making a decision. I chose packaging that I found attractive and consistent with the "personality" of my product. Later, when I chose fragrances, I decided to use essential oils (from plants) instead of synthetic scents--since I had already determined that my market preferred natural goods.

5. **Create a plan.**

Wholesale? Retail? "Tupperware" parties? Church bazaars? Weddings? Shows? A Web site? Candles are a seasonal item--with most sales occurring around the Christmas holidays. How will I sell my candles? I have chosen to do several of the above. Naturally, wholesaling does not generate as much profit as retail; however, it allows me to sell candles THROUGHOUT the year--helping me with cash flow. I generally only do candle shows (retail) October through December. And in 1996, I started [my Web site](#). On the other hand, do not let my methods limit YOU! I want to be able to pay my bills by selling my [sculpture](#), so my goals are probably different from yours. As enjoyable as it is, I do not want to be making candles all day, year-round. I like to focus on the candles for part of my day and then focus on the sculpture the rest of the time. You might prefer to go after the bridal market. Brides love to give beeswax candles as wedding favors -- especially if you can make them in the wedding colors. Maybe you can team up with a wedding consultant or two. Also, I sell candles to certain florists.

Although I took a basic marketing class at a local college, I have learned more about marketing by keeping my eyes open -- especially when I am shopping. I assume that my customers are somewhat like me -- and that they might like some of the same things that I do. So I collect business cards for small shops I like and then contact the owners to see if they might try carrying my products. I go to [arts and crafts shows](#) in my area and if I think they would be good shows for me to sell my work, I find out how to get on the mailing list for future shows. I talk to vendors who do similar work (but avoid offending/"threatening" someone whose work is VERY close to what I do) to find out what they like and dislike about the show. Start off with the small town shows or -- if you can find any -- shows in the big cities that have small booth fees (\$100 or less). Small town shows have low booth fees (\$50 or less) and even though turnout may be low, the people are there to support the vendors! Big city shows tend to have high booth fees (\$250 and up), which means you have to sell a LOT of candles just to recover your booth fee, travel expenses, cost of materials, and -- oh yeah -- what we all tend to discount as unimportant -- our TIME! And that's not even mentioning the word profit!

More about shows and booth setup

6. **Customer Service:** Another thing I pay attention to is my experiences as a customer. If I feel good about a place, I start thinking about WHY. If I have a negative experience, I usually know why, so I think about how--from the business's end--the situation could have been corrected.

Very few people who interact with customers actually get training in customer service (or manners). It appears to me that individuals seem more concerned about not taking the blame (personally) for a problem or have no idea how to fix a problem *or* don't have the authority to really help the customer. ("Oh, we botched your order, let me give you a free _____. Please give us another chance to make it up to you.") **Any** employee who interacts with one of your customers, whether it's the salesperson or a production manager or a shipping clerk, needs to know that he is representing the business, as well as himself. One of my biggest pet peeves as a customer is to hear, "Oh, I didn't take your order . . . I didn't work that day . . . etc." without a positive, problem-solving answer following. Think about the complaint from the customer's point of view and remember **YOU NEED THE CUSTOMER MORE THAN THE CUSTOMER NEEDS YOU**. Don't bother with excuses unless you feel this somehow helps the customer know how to interact with you in the future ("we need this sort of information on the order form because . . ."). Acknowledge the complaint--it is usually legitimate--and then figure out what it takes to correct the situation, even if you have to go a little out of your way to do it. [There are **rare** instances in which you will better serve your company and even the client to cut your losses and NOT serve a particular client. Some people insist you go too far out of your way or bend your policies too much to really be worth your energy. If you make the decision to let this sale go, do it with as much grace and politeness as you can muster. One way to do this is to supply the customer with a name or two of other businesses that might be more to his liking -- and you still exhibit good customer service! Learning to say "No" is sometimes difficult, but healthier for all concerned.]

7. **Always carry your business cards with you.**

And pass them out to anyone who shows the least bit of curiosity about what you do. Include your business name, your name, your address, phone, URL and e-mail address (if applicable), and WHAT YOU DO on the card. A simple, but descriptive graphic is often helpful. [Mystery is not always attractive. I hate business cards that only have a name and phone number on them. I want information at a glance. I won't generally keep a card that doesn't give me that.] Include your card with any business correspondence you do. Don't be shy -- let everyone you meet know what business you are in and how much you enjoy it. It takes a long time to market your business, so the sooner you get started, the sooner you will discover the rewards.

8. **Create a mailing list.**

Even if you don't think you will use one yet, start building it. Just make a form and leave it with some pens on a clipboard or have a guest book in the area of your booth or store where people purchase your goods. Leave blanks for mailing address, phone, and e-mail. I have generally avoided bombarding my friends with my product advertisements unless they ask, but use your own judgment on this one.

9. **Think like a business person and try to keep an open mind.**

I have a bad habit of buying a bunch of supplies for a new product (like the stained glass candle holders I designed and know I could sell!) and then never finding the time to make the product. When it comes tax time, I discover that I lost money! Gee. **Focus!** It's better to do one thing well than do 10 things so-so. Determine what you can pull off successfully with the resources you have. On the other hand, don't be afraid to try new things. If you see something is popular or you just want to experiment, go with the flow **if it doesn't require too many new resources**. Think of unusual uses for your product (find a niche). Beeswax candles make great gifts. Candles enhance all kinds of ceremonies (example: weddings), meditation, holidays (religious or cultural, such as Kwanzaa), romantic evenings, and even Y2K/end-of-the-world preparation (what if there's no electricity?).

10. **Like what you do.**

Life's too short, after all.

I believe it was Henry Ford who said, "**Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you're right.**" If you don't believe it or enjoy it, you can't sell it to others.

Still need suggestions about **Where to Start?**

Visit <http://www.luminacandles.com/startup.htm>

8-16-99 In response to several questions about where to start:

In my local market, the candles that sell the best for me are:

- 4" taper pairs (stocking stuffers, office gifts, etc.)
- 8" taper pairs
- 8" taper gift-boxed sets of 4
- 4" pillars
- 6" pillars
- votives
- 2" spirals ("they look like little trees!"--for Christmas displays)

The best selling colors (also strongest at Christmas):

- natural
- forest green
- cranberry
- red
- ivory

Other colors also sell well, but it depends on the time of year (pastels more in the spring) and other factors which I have not determined. You might keep up with the fashion trends (especially in home decorating) and bridal magazines to see what colors are popular.

More business tips

(including booth setup for shows, pricing, and packaging)

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Most recent revision: 22 December 2003

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