

Online venture brings sparkly success for jewelry designer

Camilee Tout's Internet home-based business started in 2002 with a \$200 gift and has grown steadily since then

BY KARI HASTINGS ✉

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Camilee Tout remembers the moment inspiration struck her. Her husband, Steve, bought her a necklace from Nordstrom. It cost him \$125, and Camilee thought to herself, I could make that.

She shopped at a few bead stores, found some Swarovski crystals, and sure enough, made an almost exact duplicate, for far cheaper than Nordstrom's price tag.

That was 1999. Today, Camilee is the owner of a successful Internet home-based jewelry business called Camilee Designs. She doesn't make as much as she did as a telecom analyst for US Bank, but the trade-off has been worth it, she says.

"I've never been in the red — from the very beginning," she says. "I started out with a \$200 gift, and every piece I sold, I invested back into my business."

The Internet has been an ideal place to grow, she says, and test her designs.

She started out on eBay, selling her first pair of blue chalcedony earrings for \$24.99.



SHANDA TICE / THE GRESHAM OUTLOOK
Camilee Tout creates one of her gemstone and wire-wrap necklaces, which she will sell on her Web site, where she does nearly 50 percent of her business. The rest of her business is done on eBay.

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“I remember watching the computer, and when I saw that they sold, I ran down the stairs to tell Steve and I tripped and fell, I was so excited,” she says. “I got up and ran over and told him it sold and then I accused him of paying one of our friends to buy it. He swore he didn’t know the buyer.”

Now lots of Web consumers know about Camilee. She’s sold about 2,000 items on eBay, and that’s just 50 percent of her business.

Camilee tries to convert every eBay customer into a camilee.com customer. She also sells her gemstone and wire wrap jewelry on etsy.com, an artist co-op Web site.

Camilee, who has never gone to business school and relies on her instincts, says she has never overextended herself, doesn’t buy anything on credit and prides herself on superior customer service. At this point, Camilee says 75 percent of her buyers are repeat customers.

She will take calculated risks, and says a recent decision to branch out into making solid 14-karat gold jewelry alongside her 14-karat gold-filled and sterling silver pieces was one such risk.

“My customers were asking me about it,” she says. “They were wondering when I was going to make that move.”

Camilee describes her jewelry as elegant, delicate, classic, colorful, quality, timeless and, at times, trendy.

She uses wire-wrapping techniques to blend colorful gemstones into lariat, pendant, charm and fringe necklaces, dangly earrings and bracelets. Her prices range from \$30 to \$166 for earrings and from \$66 to \$245 for necklaces.

The pay off, she says, is far more than monetary.

“I get to sit here and make beautiful things all day long,” she says. “I feel so humbled that I get to live my dream. Sometimes I just pinch myself.”

The lowdown on camilee designs

Name: Camilee Tout.

Age: 30.

Hometown: Gresham.

Occupation: Jewelry designer. Owns home-based Internet jewelry business called Camilee Designs.

Former occupation: Telecom analyst for US Bank’s corporate office.

What she was making before she left: \$40,000. “Everyone told me I was crazy to leave.”

When she made the leap: February 2002 after two months of running her business 20 hours a week and working 40 hours a week.

Keys to her success: “Exceeding my clients expectations. If I tell a customer I’ll get a necklace to them within five days, I’ll have it to them in two or three.” Camilee also credits the high-quality photographs of her jewelry with much of her success. “It’s hard because with an online business, people can’t literally see or touch my product, so the photos are essential.”

Customer demographics: 60 percent of her customers live in California. The remaining 40 percent are largely from New York, Great Britain and Japan. "They love me in Japan; I don't know why."

Book on her bathroom counter: "The Starbucks Experience: 5 Principles for Turning Ordinary Into Extraordinary" by Joseph Michelli.

Her challenge: "Jewelry designing is such a saturated market. You really have to set yourself apart, and I think I do that with attention to detail and excellent customer service."

Her secret weapon: Her husband, Steve Tout, who does Web site security for a living. He designs and helps her maintain her Web site: www.camilee.com.

Business breakdown: 50 percent eBay and 50 percent her Web site and an artist co-op Web site: www.etsy.com.

Hours: Anywhere from 20 to 60 hours a week, depending on her sales.

Point of pride: Camilee says she's never been "in the red" in her business. She invests 75 to 90 percent of her profits back into her business. "Every item I sell, I use most of that money to buy new materials."

Quirk: Camilee doesn't wear her own jewelry most of the time. "It's kind of like wearing the T-shirt of the band to their concert. Plus I'm just a shy person and when people notice my jewelry, I just get really embarrassed." Camilee says an Internet-based business works for her because of her shy personality.

The best part: Doing what she loves for a living. "I feel so humbled that I get to live my dream. Sometimes I just pinch myself."

What's next: Camilee has hired a part-time designer, Ellen Milich of Troutdale, to work with her. Ellen, who is more of an extrovert, is planning to try and get Camilee Designs into local boutiques and stores sometime in the next year.