
Got Kids? These Two Women Can Help

by Valerie Poulin

WHEN GRAPHIC ARTIST Kim Strange met potential business partners Shari Wert and Elisa Morton Palter for the first time, she held Shari's newborn baby as the three women discussed strategies for the third annual edition of *Help . . . We've Got Kids*.

Between carpooling and swimming lessons, parenting and volunteering Shari and Elisa run a company out of their Don Mills home-based office, self-publishing a unique children's resource directory that lists products and services for parents in the Greater Toronto Area.

Although at least two publishing houses were interested, the partners self-published *Help . . .* as a means to keep control of their project. "We set out to fill a need and start a flexible business, not to be published authors," says Shari of their foray into the publishing biz.

Like other Canadian self-publishing success stories (David Chilton's *The Wealthy Barber*, Janet and Greta Podeleski's *LooneySpoons*, and Dania Lebovics' *Kiddy Chronicles*), this resource book fills a niche market.

"It helps we are our target market," affirms Shari. "These are two moms telling you what they found."

These are also two moms with sharp business skills. They have achieved a steady 25% increase in sales for the past five years and almost tripled the first press run to 20,000. This year's sales yielded an impressive 41% increase over last year's figures.

Elisa, a former marketing consultant credits their success in part to creative problem-solving ability, stamina, and determination; her partner is quick to praise the work of the designers, printer, and a distributor. The idea may have been theirs, but the product resulted from teamwork.

Kim Strange, who designs the content, agrees. They have the right mix of people and suppliers, she says, adding, "They love what they do and they're great to work with."

During telephone interviews, enthusiasm and pride are clear in both

partners' voices. Elisa speaks excitedly about the happiness both felt when holding the first edition, it was exactly what they had envisioned, or in Shari's easily detected sales ability (her background includes market research and direct marketing). Elisa says that at first they fell into familiar roles where work experience and their natural abilities took them. Now, she says, they switch off.

"We finish each other's sentences," she adds. They say that at times they feel like one person. Kim Strange laughingly agrees.

"It's really a collaborative effort," she says of the dynamic duo. They are very organized and "Elisa has this amazing memory" adding that both women are very detail-oriented. Details are important for a venture that includes annual collection of more than 1600 listings, ad sales, coupon sales (\$1600 in savings to readers), and book sales.

"We worked really hard to ensure that if we were going to do it, we were going to do it right," says Elisa.

Doing it right meant six months of consumer research studies, telephone surveys, scouring child-oriented publications and the yellow pages for clients, and tapping everyone they knew for leads.

They mass mailed flyers to potential listees and ended up spending more money than they had to present *Help . . . We've Got Kids* as a professional venture with longevity.

They advertised in community newspapers, drove the streets in search of possible advertisers, and kept notebooks handy as they chauffeured car pools. And they did all of this while raising three children each with their banker husbands. These are two very resourceful women.

The book's graphic designer says her employers are amazing. They never seem to run out of ideas even bombarding her with "tons of ideas" for entertaining her son on a recent vacation. They spend time talking to readers, too.

"We get calls every day from readers and advertisers alike," says Shari. People ask for ideas and offering suggestions for the book.

The women are also willing to help others who want to self-publish because they found booksellers and publishers, as Shari puts it, "encouraging, helpful, and supportive."

The enthusiasm of their work rubs off, too. Strange found herself



promoting the book she helps create and recently told a potential advertiser about the book when she had trouble locating

their store.

"You're not in *Help . . . We've Got Kids*, I had to look you up in the Yellow Pages," she said.

The two mothers enjoy the flexibility that the business venture, now in its seventh year, allows. Although it is their sixth, they do not consider it old hat.

"It's a well-oiled system, but we still delight in it," asserts Shari.

Help . . . 2000 is now available at all major book stores and in about 250 stores and 150 child-related stores across Toronto.

For the entrepreneurs who met more than six years ago while working at a non-profit organization expansion looms in the future.

With school and extracurricular activities soon starting up again, so does more car pooling.