

Concept Development

Sweet Success

The Story of the Village PieMaker

Taking on life's challenges and overcoming obstacles has been part of our national heritage and the stuff of legends. But, some say that we have lost that edge; that we are no longer willing to make sacrifices; not willing to work as hard as people in developing nations.

Nebraska and our citizens are often cited for their strong work ethic, perhaps because we are a state that was founded on the entrepreneurial spirit of homesteading farmers and ranchers, the strong backs and arms of railroaders, and the willingness to risk it all for a better life exhibited by the Oregon Trail pioneers.

With the steady decline in the number of family farms over several decades, rural communities have lost population and empty storefronts have blossomed in once vibrant villages and small towns from east to west. But you can never sell the spirit of Nebraskans short. Communities and citizens are getting creative and working together to use entrepreneurship and existing resources to breathe new life into these communities.

A perfect example of rural entrepreneurship in action is Judith Ogden Larsen, founder and owner of The Village PieMaker in Eustis, Nebraska. You can't help but admire the strength of character exhibited by Ms. Ogden Larsen, the work ethic and innovation shown by her employees, and the community spirit that Eustis has shown in welcoming and supporting her business.

The Village PieMaker

Eustis, Nebraska

If thoughts of The Village PieMaker evoke images of community, vitality and diligence, hold them because they aptly portray Judith Ogden Larsen, President of The Village PieMaker Corporation. Add curly auburn hair, freckles across her nose and a smile like sunshine. Ogden Larsen makes, packages, freezes and delivers 15 different frozen/ready to bake pies to markets across the globe. The Village PieMaker's tender and tasty piecrust enfolds fresh fruit, pecan or key lime fillings that recall summer sun and 4th of July picnics in the park.



Judith Ogden Larsen is the President and Founder of The Village PieMaker.

The pie making business started in the owner's home, eventually moved to a restored slate green tile and brick dairy building on main street in the Village of Eustis, and just recently moved to bigger quarters because demand for her pies outgrew that facility.

Business Inception

In 2002 Ogden Larsen started to make pies from her home in Sumner and sell them at farmer's markets in the region. "In November of 2002 an image flashed in my mind, and I couldn't make it go away," said Ogden Larsen "I kept seeing myself selling pies from my pick-up along I-80 interstate, and even though my logical mind told me that it was senseless to do it, my intuitive mind said to go ahead." Ogden Larsen parked her pickup on the Elm Creek exit on I-80 and sold fresh baked pies. She said, "In between selling pies, I played tunes on my fiddle."

When a hunter who had purchased a pie called her from Washington, D.C. to place an order, Ogden Larsen knew her pies were memorable. She remodeled her son's bedroom into a commercial bakery and quit her secure job leaving benefits and retirement behind her. "I went into business with blind faith and a vague notion of a business plan," said Ogden Larsen. "I thought I could run a business because being a single mom, I knew how to stretch dollars to the moon and back." Ogden Larsen acknowledged that she knew nothing about marketing when she started The Village PieMaker.

Marketing

Ogden Larsen started business with 11 steady accounts. Her route was small. She delivered 70 pies in a 1988 hatchback.

Radio helped her market the pies. Placing clever 60 second ads on radio that ran 7 days/week, 8 times a day was affordable. "People often tell me that they hear me on the radio all the time, and they remember the pies," said Ogden Larsen. "I want the product in people's eyes all the time, and I want The Village PieMaker name in their minds."

She hired a marketing specialist, Simon, The Pieman to expand the marketing of the pies and to deliver to the restaurants, grocery stores and specialty markets that carry the product.

Ogden Larsen believes in "no stone unturned theory." She seldom misses an invitation to speak before a group because invariably someone will suggest a person for her to meet who furthers her goals. "I never miss an opportunity to share, said Ogden Larsen. "I speak at meetings because everything leads to something else."

Small, 8" pies became Ogden Larsen's calling cards. She sold the pies at Farmers Markets, festivals, and slice by slice. Annually, she bakes 40 pies for a bull sale on a ranch in the region. "My first customer was Sherry Lytel at Country Whimsey in McCook, 416 Norris Ave., phone 308.345.8665. She has never missed a week in ordering pies."

Business Planning

Ogden Larsen contacted the Nebraska Business Development Center for assistance with developing her 3rd business plan. Nebraska Business Development Center offers consulting, training and materials for starting a new enterprise. Offices conveniently are located in communities across the state as well as at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, College of Business (www.nbdc.unomaha.edu).

"I don't have any money although I do have super cash flow," said Ogden Larsen. "Nebraska has lots of methods to help a small business acquire money, and the programs help immensely."

Business Expansion

The Village PieMaker's initial 11 accounts exploded to 350 accounts. "Freezers, bags of flour and sugar took over my house," said Ogden Larsen. "I needed to expand." Ogden Larsen fielded calls from community leaders across the region to entice The Village PieMaker, Inc. to locate in their community. "The economic development people in Eustis were most creative, and they came up with a plan," said Ogden Larsen. "Eustis felt like a good fit, and I have learned to trust my gut."



This converted dairy building attracted The Village PieMaker to Eustis, Nebraska.

Over 28,000 pies have been made and marketed out of the Eustis bakery. Ogden Larsen said, “By March, 2005, we will be making 600 pies per month to satisfy our market. The Village PieMaker is expanding the shipping operation to a second location in Eustis.

Employees

The Village PieMaker currently employs thirteen, including one sales representative. The importance of obtaining good paying jobs in rural Nebraska underscores Ogden Larsen’s personnel policy. Ogden Larsen finds that people who grow up in small communities or farms have learned to work hard and work well, and they have common sense. “Minimum wage is a slap in the face,” says Ogden Larsen. “I take pride in my work, and I pay people well to care about the job.” Ogden Larsen gives the employees lots of credit for the company’s success. “All the little celebrations, I take back to the women because we wouldn’t be successful without us working together for the company, and no one has quit.”

Advice to Entrepreneurs

Ogden Larsen’s ingredients for a successful small business include:

Positive attitude - stay calm and remain open. You will learn from every encounter. Something will come to you. We spend life thinking anyway, so think big and think positive.

Sales representative – Marketing required more of my time, and I knew marketing was a weakness so I hired a marketing specialist.

Superior product – Our customers buy again and again.

“I learned early on while rolling out pie dough in the heat of the summer that it is so easy to get overwhelmed about the really big picture,” she said. “I used to think I need to have answers to every detail, and I have learned to step back and say I don’t know exactly how, but I know this problem will work itself out.”

I wake up every day expecting to be amazed. I go to bed at night saying, “That was so cool.” Stay open because the most amazing things happen.

Expect to work long hours. I put in 90 hour weeks.

Vision for the Future



I advise entrepreneurs to feel proud because America needs us. The success of America in large part depends on entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurs are special people. I provide 13 jobs in Eustis, and I like to imagine 400 other entrepreneurs in the region providing 6 jobs per business. The economic drain of The South Platte region would be stopped.

Simon the Pieman, marketing specialist and I developed a 3-year plan that involves the following new products and marketing contracts:

We are returning to the smaller, 8” pies and adding hand-held, empanada type pies to the product line. As the population ages, the interest in smaller pies increases because older people prefer small portions.

We will be working with University of Nebraska Food Processing Center www.fpc.unl.edu to set up a UPC code on the labels and change packaging so we can contract with Affiliated Grocery Stores.

We will seek assistance from the University of Nebraska Food Processing Center on developing a non-gluten crust that is up to my standards of flavor and texture.

We intend to expand the fundraising section of our business. When youth groups or non-profits sell pies, a high percentage of the profits return to them. We want to support what kids are doing. Youth sold 580 pies at a fundraiser for St. Anne's Catholic Church in Lexington.

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Special thanks to *Nebraska Rural Living*, source of this story about The Village PieMaker. To read more success stories from Nebraska Rural Living, go to <http://www.nebraskaruralliving.com>. Nebraska Rural Living is the brainchild of two sisters who returned to their small town roots after a life pursuing their dreams in big cities. Nebraska Rural Living's mission is to market the very real benefits of a rural lifestyle, especially to people who grew up in the South Platte region and moved away after graduation.