

# Novel Businesses Find Niche

By Melanie Threlkeld McConnell

**D**og food delivered to your door. Gourmet lasagna available for takeout. A 7-foot plastic stork staked in your yard to announce the arrival of your newborn.

These Boise businesses aren't quite in the same league as the pet rock or Chia Pet, but they're offbeat enough to claim a niche in an ever-diversifying community.

These and many other unusual businesses like them find success by selling comfort and convenience for families who are strapped for time.

"Convenience is the No. 1 motivating factor for a purchase," says Bob Shepard, regional director for BSU's Idaho Small Business Development Center. "Price is No. 5."

Research indicates that 65 percent of homes in Ada County have two working adults, he adds, "and that's because of the low salaries in Boise." So it's no wonder businesses that make life easier for working families have gained a foothold in the marketplace.

Entrepreneurs Jamie Brewer and Paul and Mary Jean Wegner started businesses that cater to the working crowd and are finding that the demand is definitely there.

Brewer delivers pet food — dog, cat, horse and even pig food — to clients too tired to make an extra trip to a specialty store. Nearly all of her clients are working mothers. "A lot of people now are feeding a premium dog food not sold through grocery stores, so it's an extra trip, and they don't want to have to do it," the 33-year-old mother of two says.

And it's human food — high quality gourmet Italian and French cuisine from Cucina di Paola on Ustick Road — the Wegners are serving for tired parents to pick up, take home and heat. Their instant success landed them a contract to supply two Albertson's stores with the couple's flagship product — lasagna.

The trend in the food business, says Paul Wegner (BS, sociology, '88), is home meal replacement. He used his experience as a cook in

Italy and as a chef at The Flicks to make the jump to self-employment and fill a demand.

And who would have thought a giant stork would supplant the telephone when it came time to announce the birth of a new baby? Boisean Marty Fulford first came across the idea when she lived in northern Virginia and had one of the big birds placed in her own yard to announce the birth of her child.

"It was nice because people we didn't know very well came over and brought bread," she says. "So it helped start some friendships. It also let a lot of friends and neighbors know the baby was born without having to call."

When she moved to Boise, Fulford enrolled in the "New Venture Creation" class at BSU to help her write a business plan, and she then started her own part-time stork business.

The key to starting a business, even if it may seem quirky, is to learn what consumers want and to give it to them, Shepard says, citing the recent comeback of home-delivered milk by Darigold.

"Make sure there's a market for it," he advises. "It doesn't make any difference that it's quirky. Maybe that's what they want."

That's exactly what painter Lou Ann Hales discovered, albeit accidentally, with her all-female painting crew. Many of her clients are single women and older people. "They are more comfortable with women coming into their homes," she says. "So we sit and visit and have a cup of coffee with them."

For most of these entrepreneurs, they pursued a dream despite the naysayers. And they are succeeding because they meet a need in their community.

"Go with your dream, go with your instinct. That's what it's about," says Wegner. "Say to yourself, 'I see it. I want it, and I'm going to go for it.'" □



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*The only thing this stork delivers is the announcement of a new birth.*