

The Shubert, Staged Right: Recasting Downtown Minneapolis's Biggest Eyesore

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TASTE MAKER JILL BLASHACK

She used people's taste for luxury and convenience to create a high-recognition brand in direct-sale gourmet foods.



Jill Blashack believes her title, CEO, “sounds a bit too conventional,” considering the close-knit company she runs and the almost accidental way it came to be. And even though she started Tastefully Simple, a retailer of easy-to-prepare gourmet foods sold at home tasting parties, Blashack hesitates to describe herself as an entrepreneur. “I don’t consider myself to be a risk taker,” she says.

Still, she’s grown Alexandria-based Tastefully Simple into a 320-employee company since its inception in 1995. Its 20,000 consultants—many of whom are stay-at-home mothers and women looking for supplementary income—helped the company garner \$110 million in sales last year. These representatives are recruited by other consultants, purchase a starter kit for \$170, and, as independent business owners, receive up to 36 percent commission on the sales they generate at each home party. This year, the company projects that sales of its more than 30 gourmet products, which include seasonings, soups, bread mixes, desserts, and beverages, will reach \$116 million.

A 1979 graduate of two associate-degree programs in sales and marketing at Alexandria Technical College, Blashack spent three years afterwards running a café owned by her father in her nearby hometown of Villard, then worked other jobs at a tanning salon and a bank. But in 1989, Blashack started a business of her own, Care With Flair, selling gift baskets filled with gourmet foods and items such as candles and frames from a storefront in Alexandria. Her small business employed a handful of people and netted about \$100,000 a year—not enough, she soon determined, relative to the effort she was putting into it.

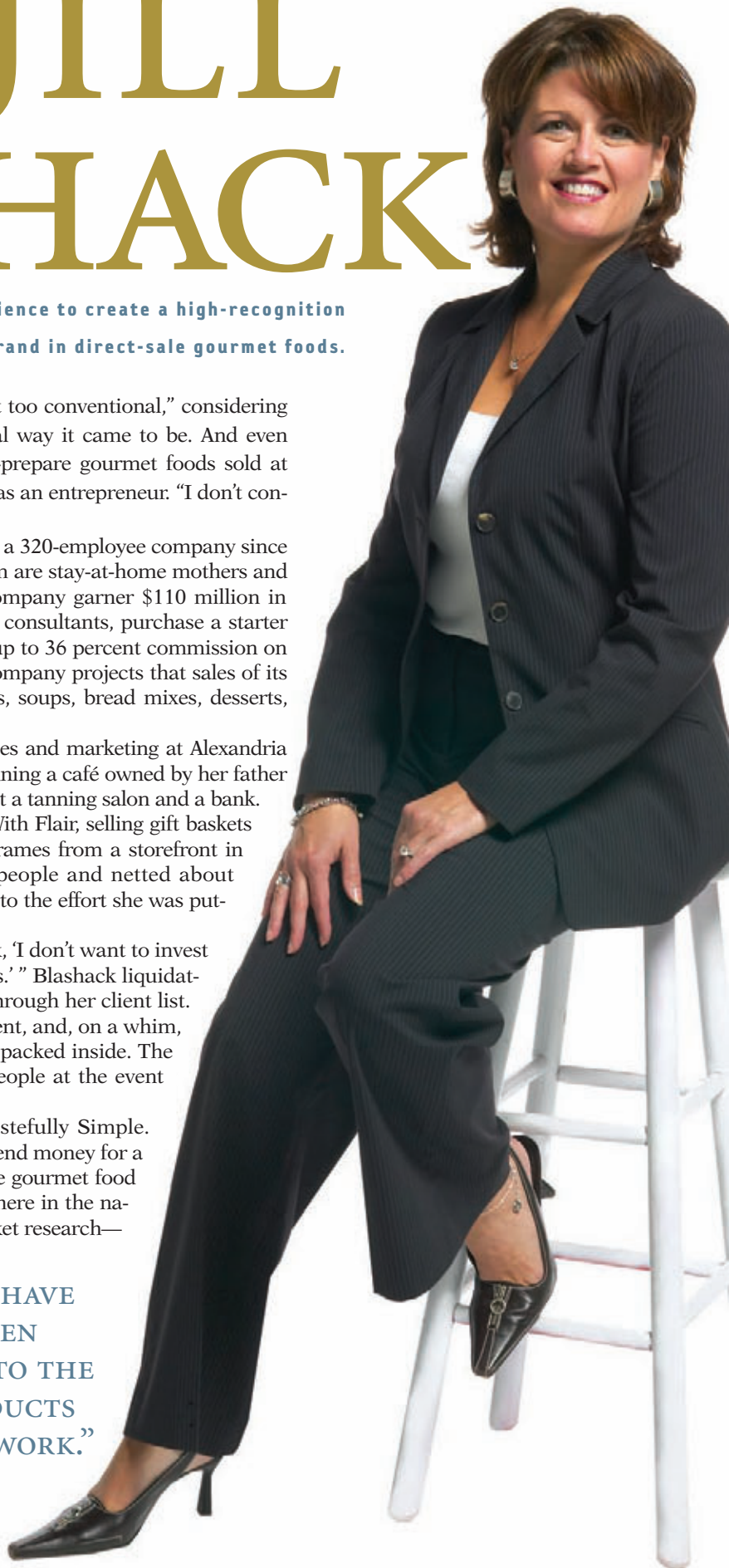
“My son was born in 1992, and in 1994, I started to think, ‘I don’t want to invest that much time if I’m not going to see the financial rewards.’” Blashack liquidated her retail shop and sold directly to corporate accounts through her client list. She also displayed her baskets as part of a local crafters’ event, and, on a whim, decided to offer participants samples of the gourmet foods packed inside. The foods were received better than the baskets themselves; people at the event purchased \$2,500 in food and only \$200 in gift baskets.

That was enough to give Blashack the concept for Tastefully Simple. “People are looking for great foods, and they’re willing to spend money for a quality product that’s convenient,” she says. “If products like gourmet food sold in outstate Minnesota, these products would sell anywhere in the nation. My joke is that this was the beginning and end of market research—it was intuitive market research.”

MINNESOTA BUSINESS

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“WE HAVE
BEEN
TRUE TO THE
PRODUCTS
THAT WORK.”



Blashack's first few days after she launched her new business in June 1995 were discouraging. One evening, as she made calls to try to schedule tasting parties, "Steve, my late husband, and my son, Zach, were playing out back. I'm looking out longingly thinking, 'I want to be out there,'" Blashack recalls. She made about 20 calls, and "I think I got one booking that night."

Feeling defeated, she went to work the next day at her facility—a 1,200-square-foot shed where she packaged orders on a pool table. Then she got a call from the print shop that was publishing the Tastefully Simple catalogs. Blashack's first thought was that they wouldn't be printed in time for her first scheduled tasting party. Instead, the print shop owner said the idea of a home tasting party had intrigued her, and she wanted to book one.

"After I hung up, I looked up to the heavens and said, 'Thank you, God,'" Blashack recalls. "I just needed that so badly. It's so easy to get discouraged, get fearful, and retract ourselves whenever we start something new."

By year's end, seven consultants had joined Tastefully Simple. The next year, Blashack had 33 consultants. By 1998, revenues reached the \$1 million mark.

That same year, both Blashack's brother and husband died. In those dark times, she devoted her energies to raising her son and to the growth of her company, and was rewarded with a 7,600 percent increase in

**"IN ORDER
TO GROW, YOU
HAVE TO BE ABLE
TO DELEGATE AND
EMPOWER
PEOPLE."**



revenues between 1999 and 2003, inclusion on the *Inc.* 500 list of fastest-growing private companies three years in a row, and winning the Ernst & Young Emerging Entrepreneur of the Year award for the Minnesota and Dakotas region in 2000.

Blashack credits her father, a farmer, for her drive, and her mother for her ability to successfully execute plans. "Dad was typically before his time," she says. "He was an ideas man. He was involved with ethanol 20 years ago. My mom strove for excellence in everything she did. She also gave me my philosophical perspective."

Her father died last November. Weakened by cancer, he made a special trip to the national conference of the company's consultants in the Twin Cities last year to watch his daughter speak. "I introduced him, but he couldn't come up on stage because he was in a wheelchair," Blashack says. "Everybody gave him a standing ovation."

For Blashack, the standing ovation illustrated something about the character of her company: the way her own story and success inspire others and connect them to the business. Consultants love the story of how she started Tastefully Simple in a small shed, Blashack says; now the company operates out of a new 178,000-square-foot facility that overlooks woods and wetlands.

"It's having a dream and going for it. People relate to it. It's hope," she adds. "This business is so much about relationships." —*Holly O'Dell*



➤ From top: Tastefully Simple's original headquarters—a 1,200-square-foot shed. Blashack with two of her brothers. With founding partner and COO Joani Nielson. With her husband, Gary Strahan, and son, Zach.

➤ Left: Blashack motivates consultants at the 2005 national conference.

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◀◀ 1996 HEADQUARTERS TEAM 2005 ▶▶

What a difference a decade makes. Blashack's first employees included Dolly Frost and Joey Peterson (left). Right: Tastefully Simple's 320 employees celebrate the company's tenth anniversary.

