

WICKS N' MORE

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What began as a hobby 14 years ago has turned into a multimillion-dollar business whose products are sold in more than 3,000 stores across the country.

And thanks to radio personality Rush Limbaugh, Wicks n' More is getting even more name recognition.

Recently, the conservative talk-show host thanked the Mantachie-based candle company for sending him gardenia-scented candles.

On his show, Limbaugh had bemoaned the fact that he couldn't find large enough candles for his home. Limbaugh received thousands of candles from across the country but gave special mention to Wicks n' More.

Afterward, the company was swamped with orders.

"We had sent the candles, but didn't think anything else about it," said Terri Ellis, the company's vice president of operations. "Then we were getting calls like crazy. He simply acknowledged us by name and thanked us, and the next day, we had our Web site linked to his and that generated 10 times more Internet traffic than usual. We also got five times more customer orders."

And to think - Wicks n' More didn't have gardenia-scented candles available until now.

"We've used the scent in combination with others, but we never had just a gardenia-scented candle by itself," Ellis said. "But we're able to custom-make orders, as we did in this case for Mr. Limbaugh."

And now, gardenia is among the pillar candles, votive candles, gift sets and other products available in more than 100 different color and fragrance options.

Starting at home

To say Wicks n' More has been a success story is an understatement.

Becky Neal started pouring candles at home in 1994 as a hobby. Five years later, she and daughter Kim Godsey opened a candle retail store in Tupelo, selling their hand-poured candles. Two years later, sales hit more than \$1 million.

The 1,200-square-foot operation was too small, and the company moved to a 24,000-square-foot facility in Plantersville.

"We thought we would never fill that out, but we did," Ellis said

In 2002, the company bought the former Murray Bicycle factory, which had 67,000 square feet of space in Mantachie.

And the company outgrew those digs. However, instead of moving, Wicks n' More added on, and its facility is now 83,000 square feet.

"We have enough land here that we can keep building and expanding here," Ellis said.

That's likely to happen, considering that company CEO Cynthia Albanese sees an even bigger future.

Albanese joined the company as chief operating officer and chief technology officer in June 2005. She was named CEO in September 2007. As co-founder and partner of FCS Investments LLC, an equity investment partnership, as well as CEO of CMA Technology, a consulting company specializing in e-business, Albanese has 25 years of experience in growing and developing other companies.

She has the same ideas for Wicks n' More.

In fact, Ellis said Albanese is chiefly responsible for the "More" in the company's name.

"She's really taken us to a different level by expanding our product categories," she said.

Said Albanese, "I was interested in the company but I also thought it was underutilized. But what makes this company is its people and their dedication to Mississippi and to growing in Mississippi. But I thought they could become a national player. And today, we are the largest hand-poured pillar candle manufacturer in the U.S."

More than candles

And as the name suggests, the company goes beyond candles. While pillar candles are its bread-and-butter business - it shipped more than 750,000 of them last year to retailers in 42 states last year - it has branched out to offer container candles, votive candles, gift sets and other fragranced products including greeting cards, diffusers and room refreshers.

"Our candles are all handmade and handpoured every day," Ellis said. Some 40 to 60 employees work at the Mantachie plant, depending on the season.

"Right now, we're preparing for the Christmas season ... we know what we'll be doing for 2009, and we're now preparing for 2010."

As for the competition, which includes some large nationally known companies, Ellis said Wicks n' More doesn't pay much attention to them.

"We try to be the trendsetter," she said. "We were the first to have the three-layer, poured, angled candle, and others followed. We're always looking ahead and trying to be out in front of everybody else."

The company also has a special green emphasis. It has developed two new candle lines using renewable and sustainable wax, and a portion of sales of those candles is donated to Sustainable Harvest International.

"It's a very important part of what we do," Albanese said.

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