

Gift Basket Network

INSIDER

April 2018



Shawn Parola
Queen Bee and owner of
All The Buzz Gifts



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Gift Business Owners **INSIDER** April 2018

Volume 9, Number 4

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Gift [Business Owners INSIDER](#)
[Volume 9 Number 4 — April 2018](#)
[Published online 12 times per year by](#)
[Creative Gifts To Go LLC, 1911 E Ranier](#)
[Loop, Flagstaff, AZ 86004.](#)

Photos, articles, comments and ideas should be sent to the editor at the above email.

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Growing Your Gift Business



Begins Today!

From The Inside

By Joyce Reid



These tips aren't gift basket specific or even gift related but they can make all the difference in your business and your life:

1. No matter how many mistakes you make or how slow you progress, you are still way ahead of everyone who isn't trying.
2. Sometimes good things fall apart so better things can fall together.
3. Making one person smile can change the world – maybe not the whole world, but their world.
4. Life is 10% of what happens to you and 90% of how you react to it.
5. Giving up doesn't always mean you're weak, sometimes it means you are strong enough and smart enough to let go and move on.
6. Don't say you don't have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Pasteur, Michaelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson, Albert Einstein, etc...
7. If you really want to do something, you'll find a way. If you don't, you'll find an excuse.
8. You can learn great things from your mistakes when you aren't busy denying them.
9. In life, if you don't risk anything, you risk everything.
10. Trying to be someone else is a waste of the person you are.
11. Don't listen to what people say, watch what they do.
12. Live each day of your life as if it were your last.

What are some of your favorite quotes? Share them with us in our Facebook community after you finish reading this month's magazine.

The Monthly Gift Business

Roundup

By Mary Babiez

This is a continuing series of roundup discussions with members of our Gift Basket Network, designed to share knowledge, get to know each other, and together improve our businesses.

***The question for April is:
How did you find your first clients/customers?***

No matter how long you're in business, finding new customers and retaining existing ones is at the top of everyone's goal list. We are always seeking new ways to spread the word about our business.

When starting a new business that you're super excited about and truly believe, there is a feeling of "if you build it, they will come." After the first year or two, you begin to realize that is not the case. You must consistently seek out new business through a variety of avenues.

Mary Babiez—[Thoughtful Presence](#)

I started my business after years of working for major corporations. It was this corporate network that was my first outreach for selling corporate gift baskets. Additionally, my initial customers were friends and friends of friends through word of mouth. From that initial customer base, I worked on building my website to gain more traffic through Google and other search engines. I am now a member of my local chamber of commerce, have joined various networking groups, and am still always looking out for new avenues to acquire customers.



Giselle A. Morch, [Essence of Presents, LLC](#)

I work full time at another job that is in an office building located in Washington, D.C.

My first customer, Diane was and still is a precious customer to Essence of Presents.

The first customer is the security guard at the office building. I told her about my business, brought in a gift basket and Diane has been gracious and supportive ever since.



Joyce Reid, Creative Gifts to Go

When I first started my gift basket business, I was a Realtor and very involved in the real estate industry, the Chamber of Commerce, and the community. I had been making gift baskets for my own customers and clients and found that I enjoyed it much more than all the hassles of following a sale from inception to closure. My baskets were pretty pathetic, looking back at them, as I knew nothing about the techniques of producing a professional looking gift basket. But my customers liked them. I initially began by marketing my gift basket services to other Realtors as well as to the service industries for the real estate industry (title companies, bug companies, home inspectors, etc). I finally made the decision to leave the dog-eat-dog world, even though I was a multi-million-dollar producing Realtor at the time, and begin this new business. Building on my previous connections and networking skills, I built the business to be profitable the first year and it mushroomed into a national gift service from there.

Martha Smith, [Baskets full of Joy!](#)

I've been in business 17 years, way before the Internet and all that has evolved in the way of communication. Word of mouth and direct mailings were the most effective ways to communicate with potential customers. I was also a member of the local

Chamber and a business networking group.

If you'd like to participate in next month's question, please sign up to receive the monthly email. Contact mbabiez@thoughtfulpresence.com to join the list!



Get Well Soon Gifts

Get Well Soon is one of the most popular themes for gift basket orders. We asked our readers to share pictures of some of their most popular get well designs. Our sincere thanks and appreciation to those of you who did.



Shared by

Cindy Schoonover
Distinct Impressions
Las Vegas, Nevada



Doctor Feelgood
is Mary O'Rourke's
Best Seller in the
Get Well category.

**All gifts on this page were shared by
Mary O'Rourke—Baskets on Occasion, Inc — Burnsville, MN**



Heart Healthy
#2 Seller in the Get Well category



Children's Activity Box is a popular gift for kids



Ultimate Get Well
Created by Cindy
Schoonover
Distinct Impressions
Las Vegas, Nevada



A Sunny Day and Bear Hug Gift Box
Joyce Reid—Creative Gifts to Go—Flagstaff, AZ

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Your Customer's Journey. How Does Your Company Rate?



There is a very rough drawing of a typical customer's journey on the next page. It begins with how they found your company and continues through how they are treated and how loyal they may be after the sale.

You may choose to add to or change the stops on the journey, but my hope is that this project will make you think about all of the processes needed to complete a sale and gain a lifelong customer.

Look at it from your customer's perspective and not from the your company's perspective. The views from each perspective are entirely different. What may be comfortable for us as owners may frustrate our customers.

You could take this a step further by polling some of your trusted customers about different aspects of their journey with your company. Ask for honest feedback, and be prepared for some feedback that may not be positive and may need work. Don't take that feedback personally, but use it to build a better customer experience.

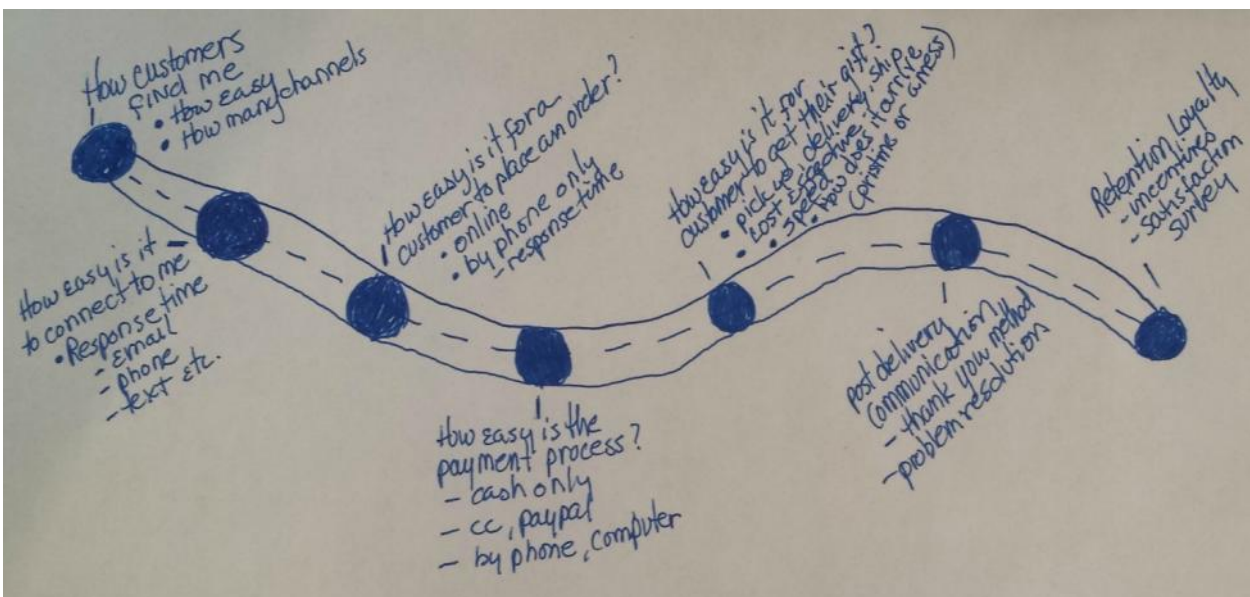
You could mark the following drawing with:

Green for “I am good at this and my customers love it.”

Yellow for “I may need some work in this area.”

Red for “I don’t do this well, or I don’t do it at all.”

Grade yourself honestly on how you feel your company is set up in these areas as if you are the customer. Strip away all the vanity and how easy going through this process is for you. It isn’t entirely about you, the owner. The customers must have a seamless positive experience or they will not return. They will find a better experience somewhere else.



So, how did that go? Did you identify some areas to work on? Find any areas that you need to implement?

We are now eighteen years into the 21st century and the world around us is constantly changing. I sometimes feel that it is hard to keep up. In light of that, exercises such as the one above, will certainly help to keep us current with the needs of our customer base and potential customers going forward.

The competition for our customers’ attention and money is more diverse than ever. We must embrace new concepts for how we capture and keep a customer. If you have been kicking and screaming in response to change all the way to 2018, here is some

comforting and uncomfortable things to keep in mind:

1. Social media does not replace live interactions with your customers but can complement those live relationships.
2. Live video engages better than recorded video. Real people in real time gives your business a face and a soul that your customers can speak to right now.
3. Social media can lead to forming relationships much faster, because your potential customers feel they already “know” you. Use of social media can also deepen relationships with existing customers. It can help you build a profile of their likes and dislikes that can be used to design appropriate gifts for that customer.
4. Live streaming may be uncomfortable for you but it is a skill that can be learned. Imagine how great it would be for your customers and your business if you could live stream a product launch, host a Q&A session for customers, or host a “How To” webinar to give your business more visibility and to position you as an expert.
5. Consider hosting a meet-up type of event for your social media followers in your local area. First, you must form a community that is invested in your company so that they will follow and engage with your social media channels.
6. It will cost you money to offer convenience to your customers. To make their experience better, which will gain you loyalty and more orders in the end, find a way to make every transaction easy. For example, if you don't take credit/debit cards, because they cost you money, then investigate VENMO or PAYPAL and suck up the fees for the sake of growing your business.



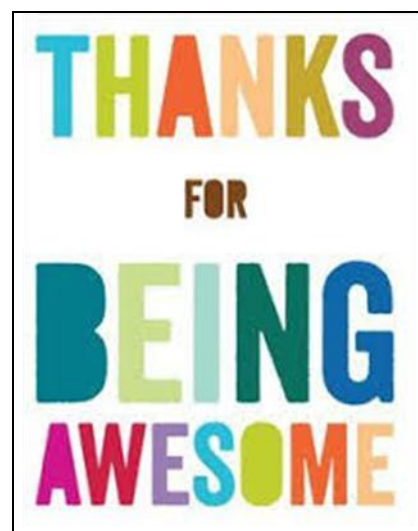
7. If the cost of convenience is something that you feel needs to be passed on to your customers, look at your pricing and compare it with that of your online and offline competitors. Also compare and contrast the services you provide that your competitors don't offer, like customization, imprinted ribbon, hand delivery, personal shopping etc. Adjust your pricing to reflect all of the extra services you offer. The increased pricing will help offset the cost of providing convenience to your customers.

We all must find a way to make customers want to choose our business over the competition. Unless you have very deep pockets, it is frustrating to try and obtain and retain customers, not to mention turning them into rabid, loyal fans that proactively spread your wonderfulness to others.

The way to do that is two-fold. Get to know your customers and their needs. Over-deliver on every aspect of the customer journey. Trust me, if you provide excellent customer service, you are already a step ahead of the big online basket companies. If you provide superior, fresh products and beautiful current designs, you are on your way to building a loyal customer base.

Make sure that you do the work necessary to always know where you are with the products and services you provide and how they line up with your customers' expectations. Also make sure you are providing a seamless, easy and enjoyable experience for your customers. Award their loyalty and appreciate and acknowledge them publicly using your social media channels.

People love recognition and will do almost anything to be recognized. One thing giant online competitors will never do is to make a customer feel really special. Since our businesses are smaller, we have the advantage of being able to take the time and the initiative to make every



single customer feel as if they are our only customer.

- Have you implemented a rewards program?
- Do you send Thank You cards?
- Do you sent little thank you gifts when a customer's refers you?

If not, you are missing a great opportunity to make your customers know how special they are to you. They LOVE that special attention.

If you did the exercise above, go back and make it more complete as it relates to your business, as there may be missing steps, or steps that don't apply to your business. Begin a conversation with yourself about the customer experience and try to map it out in detail.

I recommend polling some customers and even possibly asking a non-customer to place an order in exchange for a basket or a percentage off to get feedback from someone who has never ordered before. Ask them to provide feedback on each step of the ordering process.



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Shawn Parola All The Buzz Gifts

By: Nicole Moore Expressions Gift Basket Boutique, LLC

Affectionately known as Queen Bee, Shawn Parola is the owner of All the Buzz Gifts, a thriving gift basket business in San Jose, California. Her company was launched in 2004, but Shawn's flair for creative details began much earlier.

"I've always had a creative side and especially loved throwing parties, kicking up the theme five notches and creating decorations," she explains. After giving birth to her son, she found that her creative side was shoved into overdrive.

"My sister and I did some event planning for a short time. I was always in charge of centerpieces and out-of-town gifts, thank you gifts, etc."

After her sister decided to follow a different path, Shawn noticed people continued to request raffle gifts for schools as well as decorative elements for events. Her position on a committee at her son's school gave her an opportunity to make gift baskets, and it was then that her eye for details became clear.

Shawn's foray into entrepreneurship unfolded gradually. She worked at various full-time or part-time jobs over the course of several years including the one as an occupational therapist/rehabilitation department manager at a skilled nursing and rehab center. While employed, Shawn operated her gift business out of her home. Because she didn't require much funding, she personally financed the supplies she needed for a particular project.

Eventually, she filed for her business license and became a sole proprietor, but that meant coming up with a company name that would have staying power. Shawn recounts, "My husband and I went through a million names, we wanted something fun that could grow to include other areas if we expanded into them." When they finally landed on 'All the Buzz Gifts' – it just stuck!

All The Buzz Gifts is a professional gifting service catering to large businesses who have consistent gifting needs. They primarily supply commercial property managers, hotels, real estate agents, and home developers with gifts intended to foster professional relationships, such as referrals gifts, thank you gifts, and closing or signing gifts. They handle all aspects of gifting from concept to design to delivery and everything in between, particularly customization and corporate branding.

Operating from a house converted to a commercial space, All The Buzz headquarters (a.k.a. The Hive) consists of a workshop reimagined from an oversized garage, as well as an office space that holds Shawn's desk, ribbon printer, and dye sublimation equipment. During the regular season, Shawn employs only one worker bee but will utilize on-call help for larger projects or occasional deliveries. However, when gearing up for the winter holidays, she brings in an additional 3-4 worker bees to cover the frenzied months of October through December.

Shawn's most popular gift baskets are Thank You and Holiday Gifts. She found that her branded closed slide-lid wooden boxes did well during the past holiday season. She

also discloses that wooden crates have been a hot commodity lately, as well as metal tins and beverage tubs.



Bay Area Gourmet Crate is a rustic wood crate filled with Bay Area snack favorites.



Cheers Tub is a large beverage tin filled with a variety of gourmet treats sure to make a “giant” impression!



Snack Attack is a beautiful wood crate tray filled with California gourmet



A wooden slide-lid box and plaid bow creates a simple, yet festive presentation.

In addition to gift baskets or boxes, Shawn offers personalized products, favors, giveaways and small marketing gifts. She can order most of the products, like baked goods or floral, direct from her affiliates and can even have them drop-shipped to her client. These simple gifting alternatives are a great way to add revenue without

increased labor costs. With the simple addition of a label or bow, they are ready for delivery.

While smaller gift items may be a more manageable feat, Shawn has handled her share of large volume and high-value gifts. Her largest order by volume to date was designing 650 gift bags for a vendor attending the Sundance Film Festival.

She has also designed several gift baskets over the years in the \$1000 price range and says, “they are monsters.” The basket shown below was for a client who wanted an oversized gift that was *huge and crazy*.



No Fuss, Big Impact Gifts



The Jelly Belly Jar finished with a bow and custom label that says, “You’re a Wonderful Human Bean!” Sells for \$12.



Personalized chocolate dipped Oreos made by Lady Fortunes. Perfectly packaged and ready to go. Choose to add a finishing touch with a bow or a label on the back.



A small gable box filled with chocolate dipped pretzels. Sells for \$3.50/ea. in quantities of 10 plus.

As you can see from the above example, Shawn has a genuine willingness to go the extra mile for a client. *90 miles roundtrip to be exact.* But in all seriousness, customer service and customization are at the forefront of Shawn's business.

"We bend over backwards to make people happy," she tells us. "Customizing is just something that [makes us] more unique... I [will meet customers] in person for consultations and [will] send detailed proposals after the meeting. We're always available to them and we have lots of ways to brand their gifts." It is Shawn's accommodating nature that keeps her clients coming back time and again.

Although her customer service is a key differentiator against the competition, it is not the only thing that attracts her client base. Certainly, her impressive design skill and knack for coordinating products, colors and theme has a huge impact. Keeping up with trends provides her with a competitive advantage. As Shawn reveals, "I'm keenly tuned in to what I see out in the world. I am really interested in colors, textures, style. So, it is pretty natural to me to see something different and automatically think about how I can use that in a gift design."



Shawn has seen a variety of gift trends come and go during the 14 years that she has been in business. Lately, she has seen an increased interest in gifts that are streamlined, rustic or encased in wood, reflecting a more modest aesthetic. There is less focus on giant bows or cello fans, florals or enhancements. There has also been more of an emphasis on local items, as well as special dietary options, like gluten-free and vegan, all of which are visibly reflected in her current creations. Shawn's

Gourmet Treat Box, for example, is a clean design in a lidded wooden box filled with locally sourced treats.

Having a designer's eye has certainly contributed to Shawn's accomplishments. Designing and "making a vision come to life" is one of her favorite aspects of the business. She also loves sourcing awesome products, primarily those from the California region. Her preferred vendors include: Thatcher's Popcorn, R&J Toffee, JDW, Sutter Buttes, Marich, LeGrande Confectionary, Torn Ranch, Holly Baking, and Jelly Belly.

Of course, every gift business owner knows that it's not all designing, shopping and fun all the time. For Shawn, handling the administrative aspects of the business is sometimes an unpleasant necessity. Her least favorite tasks involve accounting, creating proposals, and clerical work.

Another important business responsibility involves marketing which she has steadily mastered over the years. Her most successful marketing strategy has been in-person networking. As people get to know her and discover what her business is about, a trust is built that organically promotes her business. The fact that she diligently follows up with contacts from her networking events helps as well. Shawn has also found that social media coupled with email newsletters are a surefire way to keep top of mind with her followers.

"We always get a few orders within 24 hours of a newsletter going out," she reveals. Although she plans to improve her online marketing strategies to increase sales, she indicates that about 20% of her business comes directly from her website. The other 80% is typically from calls or messages she receives via her social media platforms.

Her most valuable marketing tactic is the development of a cohesive and unforgettable brand. Initially, Shawn had no idea her chosen business name would become so iconic and memorable, but it didn't take long for this newly crowned Queen Bee of San Jose to realize she had landed on the sweet nectar of branding gold. A testament to her branding genius is found within her networking circle where she is known as the "bee lady" and people frequently gift her "bee things."

“I’m known as the Queen Bee in many circles,” explains Shawn. “There is bee stuff all over the hive. Our Facebook Live videos are called ‘Live from the Hive.’ We have several bee-based gifts and my giveaways always relate to our name, i.e. honey or bees.”

Her **Bee Happy** faux leather gift trunk filled with savory and sweet gourmet goodies is the perfect representation of all her branding elements blended together.

Over the years, Shawn has learned to capitalize on her distinctive honeybee trademark. “We put our name or information wherever we can as long as it is in good taste. And, we use our logo and signature black and yellow colors on everything we disseminate, including newsletters, car wrap, marketing materials, website, and social media.”



And when Shawn says she puts her information everywhere, she means it. Her fully wrapped company van is certainly an attention-grabber.



The branded wrap, fully transforms her company van into a mobile marketing unit.

With her branding on point and marketing techniques honed, Shawn is primed to “take over the world, or at the least the greater Bay Area,” she teases. Her goal for the future is geared towards “amping up [her] niche!” Her plan is to grow the regional and

customized areas of her business as a competitive edge against the Big Box companies. “We are looking to become the San Jose area source for regional and customized gifts... eventually [serving] most all California gourmet products... [while also] catering to local sports teams.”

The Big Game Welcome Pack is a bevy of Bay Area made treats, plus local maps and attraction information, and can be completely personalized.



Her recent expansion of personalized products will also help her remain reigning Queen Bee of San Jose. With the introduction of dye sublimation equipment, she can now personalize an array of items with any photo, text, or logo directly on-site.

While it may seem that the path to success has been paved in golden honey, Shawn’s journey hasn’t come without challenges. Several years ago, when the economy took a downturn, she wasn’t sure her company was going to survive. Fortunately, she managed to keep buzzing along. One factor that may have worked in her favor was her aversion to risk. Because she normally prefers to take things slowly, she admits, “I fight myself to take risks.” And while she feels she must regularly overcome the personal habit of playing it safe, it has kept her from encountering too many devastating business obstacles.

Another challenge is balancing her personal life with business. She says that it has taken her a long time to get to this point, but there’s still room for improvement. While she does work Saturdays, it is by appointment only. Additionally, she’s made it a goal to avoid working on Sundays, reserving it for personal time only.

One of the biggest changes she has made is to avoid being at the mercy of her business phone line. Shawn admits that she used to answer her phone anytime, however, she is

now committed to answering it only during business hours. She surmises that, “We may lose a couple customers, but it’s worth it to keep my sanity!”

Her other new approach is to keep consistent help on board and that includes those times when it is not very busy. By employing staff year-round, she has an opportunity to teach them the operations side of the business, such as photography, social media and inventory control. Empowering her team to take over these vital tasks offers Shawn a reprieve from working 12-hour days and allows more flexibility in her schedule. She says the true test will come in May when she will be traveling to Europe for vacation. By implementing a set deadline for her staff to be fully trained, she feels it will give them the motivation they need to become more independent and self-sufficient.

On her journey through entrepreneurship, Shawn hasn’t faced it alone. In the past, she consulted a business coach through the Small Business Administration. She also hired a coach specializing in online marketing. While she has discontinued both for now, she may revisit the opportunity once she figures out a way to manage the workload assigned to her by the coaches along with her normal business responsibilities. She also attends a small women’s mastermind group once a month where the members help each other brainstorm ideas. She recently hired a photographer to give her an overview on photography equipment and instruct her on proper techniques to improve her photography.

In addition to the business coaches and peer groups, Shawn often leans on her husband and parents for guidance, emotional and physical support. She regularly works with her husband, her personal marketing genius, to devise business strategies.

Her son used to help her in the workshop, but now that he lives four hours away, he checks in during the holidays and acting as her personal cheerleader. Close friends have been another great resource for support and hands-on help in the workshop. Friends from her networking groups act as a sounding board and have been very generous with their time and knowledge. Shawn acknowledges that she is really blessed

with a strong support system, which is pretty important to this business. She says that “It does get tough at times, no doubt about it.”

When asked whether she would do anything differently if she started over, her answer was, “I would take more risks, get on the marketing right away, join a networking group so that I was out there and learning from other professionals right away.”

The biggest lesson Shawn has learned is that it’s not an easy business and it takes a whole lot of time and effort to keep it going. She says, “I find that I am always thinking about it and what I should be doing. You will have to learn a LOT of different skills or be prepared to delegate and pay for them to be successful.” And finally, “You will change your holidays forever, no more relaxing, parties, entertaining!”

Well, she certainly doesn’t mean to discourage a newcomer from entering the gifting world, does she? When asked what advice she would give to someone that is new to this business, she exclaimed, “DON’T! Just kidding, well, kinda...”

Recognizing that it is a challenging business creatively, emotionally and mentally, her sincere advice is to thoroughly research the industry. “There is plenty of information available online, in books, and on message boards which will give you an idea of what you are getting into.”

Fun Facts About Shawn:

She has been married to her husband, Robert, for almost 15 years. His support makes the business more manageable.

She has one son, age 22, who is her pride and joy. He is a recent college graduate living and working in Nevada.

Her favorites pastimes are::
Entertaining
Volunteering in the ICU at the local hospital holding babies.
Day trips to the beach or San Francisco.
Working as an occupational therapist one Saturday a month to retain her skills and for the sheer enjoyment of the profession.



Shawn’s local pride shows in this San Jose gift box.

Additionally, she advises saving money before launching a gift basket business because the overhead can be steep. She emphasizes that many expenses are no longer optional. “Yes, you’ll need inventory, but you also need a website, phone line, pictures (at a minimum), dues for a networking group, occasional IT help, etc. Save more than you think you’ll need. Start small and build from there.”

She also recommends not offering too much too soon. Because gourmet products will expire, she suggests using the same products in multiple designs allowing for versatility. “You can change up the look of the same basket for different occasions with different color or style of bow and enhancement.”

**“WHETHER YOU THINK
THAT YOU CAN, OR
THAT YOU CAN’T, YOU
ARE USUALLY RIGHT.”
—HENRY FORD**

This quote is one of Shawn’s favorites because she believes “life in general, and especially this business, is all about attitude and drive. You gotta stay positive and work toward your goal every day to be successful; and most of all, you must truly believe in yourself and your success!”

Sage advice from a veteran entrepreneur who has consistently proven that hard work and a positive spirit are the primary cornerstones for business success.



All the Buzz Gifts is located at:

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San Jose, CA 95135

408•504•3703

www.allthebuzzgifts.com

<https://www.giftbusinessowners.com>



Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

Mark Twain