

Dick Youngblood: Dressing for success

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Donna Freeberg has done all the things an entrepreneur can be expected to do in the pursuit of success: She identified a critical need, came up with an inventive solution and made significant headway toward gaining the attention of her potential market.

There's only one thing missing: the cash necessary to bring that solution to market -- a common, if not universal, deficiency for those struggling with a start-up business. Nonetheless, her efforts deserve attention because of the market she seeks to serve.

Freeberg, 48, is founder and chief executive cheerleader for a Spring Lake Park company called Dignity By Design Enterprise, a would-be manufacturer of easily accessible apparel for the physically challenged, including those with limited dexterity or mobility and those in wheelchairs.

Armed with a \$150,000 Small Business Administration loan that was depleted by December, Freeberg has created 32 designs for men's and women's business and professional casual clothing that share one key characteristic: They are fashionable without looking as if they've been modified.

The designs, which use Velcro fasteners that are inconspicuous, were just the beginning. She also has produced the patterns, located the requisite textile suppliers and nailed down a manufacturer willing to handle initially small production runs at an affordable price.

Freeberg, a single mother who has not drawn a paycheck in six months, has been less successful with the pinstriped barons of bankdom. Five times in recent months she has tried and failed to borrow up to \$150,000 to promote and manufacture the product.

A Catch-22

One of the last contacts seemed the most promising: A loan officer sounded impressed with the company's potential and agreed to take the funding request to his board. But the proposal was rejected 10 days ago, for exceedingly logical reasons: Freeberg has very little equity and virtually no sales.

"It's a Catch-22," she lamented. Despite the 54 million disabled Americans who could benefit from her product, "I can't market it because I can't afford to manufacture it. And I can't get the money to manufacture it unless I have the sales."

But Freeberg hasn't given up: After spending a day "in shock," as she put it, after the recent turndown, she was back at her desk with the promise that "I will not be beaten." Lurking behind that pledge, however, is the fact that she's nearly broke and could be a couple of months away from a shutdown.

But she's still hoping. With the help of Ruth Kahn, a veteran small-business consultant, Freeberg was looking to have meetings at other banks last week, and Kahn was pursuing several leads with potential investors. There was no word of success late last week, however.

Kahn, the former co-owner of the 11-store Imported Auto Parts chain, signed on to help Freeberg for a very personal reason: Her husband and business partner, Norman Kahn, was incapacitated by illness for 20 years before his death.

"I know what a wonderful help these products would have been," she said.

Freeberg's experience with apparel began more than 20 years ago, when she started a theatrical costume design business that operated mainly as a sideline to her principal job in network sales and consulting. Because of that, a friend who was a wheelchair user asked her in the 1980s to design some business attire for him that was both comfortable and stylish.

That notion stuck with her for 15 years. Then, weary of the corporate grind, she decided in 2001 to remortgage her Shoreview home, empty her savings account and put her heretofore excellent credit rating to the test to start Dignity By Design.

Aim: Convenience, comfort

The ensuing product line is designed for both convenience and style. Men's dress shirts, for example, are fastened down the front with Velcro but display a row of buttons. And women's suit jackets are closed using Velcro, but the fasteners can be folded back into a hidden pocket if the coat is worn open.

Men's slacks, shorts and jeans fasten on the sides and can be folded down in the front, while an elastic inner waistband holds the pants up as the wearer tends to basic needs. Loops on each side help those with dexterity problems to refasten the flap.

For wheelchair users, Freeberg offers pants that open all the way down the right leg for ease of personal hygiene. For comfort, the rise in the back of the trousers is lengthened to eliminate embarrassing droop and the legs are longer in front to reduce the flare and cover the shoetops more naturally.

All of which inspired Kathy Karkula, development director for Special Olympics Minnesota, to nominate Freeberg for a Women to Watch award given in July by the Business Journal.

"I am amazed at the beauty and ease of this apparel," she said in her nominating letter, which also lauded Dignity by Design as a "dedicated company to the physically challenged."

Agreement came in a missive received from Lisa Arnold, who operates a Home Instead franchise that supplies home caregivers for the elderly: "There is no other company out there providing fashionable options of this quality or ingenuity," she wrote.

These are among a blizzard of similar letters and e-mails that have resulted from the only marketing ploy that Freeberg can afford -- appearances at senior-care product exhibitions from here to Chicago, including 3M Company's annual Eldercare Show. It's enough to convince her that there's a viable market for her ideas.

Now all she -- and Kahn -- have to do is convince some bankers and/or investors.

Dick Youngblood can be reached at 612-673-4439 or at yblood@startribune.com. DignityBy Design Enterprise

Business: Fashionable and convenient clothing for the disabled

Founded: 2001

Headquarters: Spring Lake Park

Executive: Founder Donna Freeberg

Revenue: Inconsequential

Web site: <http://www.dignitybydesign.com> rail/ITEM:

Donna Freeberg has an ingenious business concept and a passel of market interest. What she doesn't have is the cash to market or manufacture her products -- stylish, yet easily accessible apparel for the physically challenged.

Dick Youngblood/Star Tribune

Donna Freeberg, founder of Dignity By Design Enterprise, has won plaudits but little financial backing for her ideas for easily accessible clothing for the physically challenged. **D**Dick Youngblood

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