



# Case Study

## MainelyMetals

Gardiner, Maine  
Carol and Tim Gay, Owner

This case study of MainelyMetals demonstrates how e-commerce can help to expand the sales and reach of a small rural manufacturer. The Gays have taken a homegrown product, a swing arm mailbox, and expanded what had been primarily in-state sales to include other states, particularly those in the Midwest.

### Profile

MainelyMetals, owned and operated by Carol and Tim Gay, is located along the banks of the scenic Kennebec River in Gardiner, Maine. The company does metal fabrication and produces MailSwing, a swing arm mailbox designed to rotate when hit by a snow plow and then reset after impact. The MainelyMetal Web site features a demonstration video about MailSwing along with information about other products the company offers, including metal flagpoles and clotheslines. The site is fully e-commerce capable, including a shopping cart to order products.

### History

The MailSwing was invented and patented by Tim Gay's father and grandfather about 30 years ago. This innovative mailbox design was the product of snowy Maine winters and mailboxes that were frequent snowplow casualties. A traditional mailbox is fixed to the MailSwing, a galvanized steel arm that can swing 360°, returning to its upright position. The MailSwing reduces the need to shovel under a mailbox by allowing snowplows to plow under the rotating arm. For more than 25 years, the MailSwing was produced by the metal fabrication company owned by Gay's father and sold primarily within the state of Maine.

In 2003, the business was handed down to Gay, an experienced machinist and metal fabricator (who continues to be employed in addition to running MainelyMetals), and Carol Gay, who runs her own office service business in addition to her work with MainelyMetals. The MailSwing is produced in the metal fabrication shop beside the Gay's home. Gay can manufacture 200 units at a time, and makes most of the parts for the product. Currently, they do not employ anyone

else to help with production of the MailSwing. While Tim concentrates on manufacturing the product, Carol's skills have been used to develop the Web site and its e-commerce capabilities.

### Business Location

Located along the Kennebec River, the economy of the town of Gardiner, Maine (2000 population 6,198) was dominated by the ship building industry in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Paper mills and shoe and leather companies contributed to the economy beginning in the late 1800s. Today, as the mills have closed, Gardiner serves as a service and retail center in the region. This small community's central location between the mountains and the coast is a major attraction for residents. Gardiner shares nonmetropolitan Kennebec County, (2000 population 117,114) with Augusta, the capital of the state.

### Role of e-Commerce

From the beginning, the Gays employed e-commerce tools to expand sales of the MailSwing. Currently, 40-50 percent of their sales occur through the Internet. Sales tend to be seasonal and have gradually increased over time. The Web site provides information to potential customers, including a video demonstration of how the swing away arm actually works. Customers can e-mail to get more information about the product. And, for customers who want to order without contacting anyone at the business, the online shopping cart allows them to easily place an order. The Gays credit e-commerce with helping them to extend their sales to other parts of the country

Carol Gay worked with the Coastal Enterprises Women's Business Center to develop the

Year online: 2003

Area Population: 6,198

Web site:

[www.mainlymetals.com](http://www.mainlymetals.com)



MainlyMetals Web site, taking classes and working one-on-one with a business counselor. She had worked with them before when she started her office services business and returned for help moving MainlyMetals into e-commerce. In addition, she used her Web hosting company, classes at the university, and friends to help her develop this new part of the business. While the Gays have talked about hiring someone to handle the Web site and e-commerce, they are uncertain about their ability to find a person with the right skill set in the local area.

She asserts that learning Web site development was not difficult, but it was harder to acquire the skills and information needed to engage in e-commerce, i.e., adding the shopping cart. She estimates that it took two to three months, working part-time, to build the e-commerce capacity of the site. The ongoing cost for the site averages about \$60 each month, which is being covered by additional sales. The Gays are experimenting with the addition of other products to the site, such as garden ornaments, decorative plaques, and weathervanes, as a way of spreading the cost of the shopping cart over a wider range of products.

The Gays are actively seeking to expand sales of the MailSwing. They have distributed over 200 press releases in five states, used direct mailings, and aired television commercials in Maine and upstate New York. They send both mail and e-mail to public works departments and rely on word of mouth. One of the biggest challenges they face is optimizing their e-commerce capability by appearing higher on the search page.

### **Challenges and Lessons for Rural Entrepreneurs**

Like all rural entrepreneurs, the Gays have faced a few challenges in using e-commerce that offer lessons for others:

- As with many entrepreneurs, developing the online ordering capacity of the MainlyMetals Web site was a big challenge. Getting the shopping cart up and running was difficult; optimizing the site to increase its visibility on search engines remains a challenge. The Gays are working to link their site to other sites as a way of drawing more potential customers to MainlyMetals. Carol recommends taking advantage of any assistance available to develop e-commerce capacity, including classes and one-on-one assistance from service providers like Coastal Enterprises.
- It is important to explore the Web site development tools available and choose one that is right for the business. If they were starting their Web site over again, Carol would use a Web site template

program offered by their Web hosting company. For MainlyMetals, with a relatively small number of products, such a “canned” program would have been easy to use and would have been more than adequate for their Web site needs. She has also learned about other shopping cart options that would have made the development of their e-commerce capability much easier. For other entrepreneurs, the experience of MainlyMetals suggests the need to research both template and customized Web site development options to determine what might work best for their unique business needs.

- Web site development must be consistent with plans for growing the business. Right now, if the Gays want to tap into larger markets, it will require a major investment of time and money, both in terms of developing their Web site and their production capability. Currently, these entrepreneurs are not prepared to make that commitment to growth and will continue to focus on the niche market they have developed. If their goals for the business change, the Web site can be further developed to meet the emerging needs of their growth business.

**From e-Commerce as a Strategy for Improving Business Vitality: Lessons Learned from Small Businesses by Deborah M. Markley, David L. Barkley, and R. David Lamie**

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