



## Case Study

# Stained Glass Express

Waterville, Maine  
Janet Parkhurst, Owner

Stained Glass Express demonstrates the use of e-commerce to grow one niche product line of an existing business enterprise and to more effectively utilize the time and capacity of employees in a retail location. The Web site serves as a complement to the current retail store and, since it is still in a developmental stage, the long term impact on sales is yet to be determined. The Web site provides information, and may eventually replace the paper catalog, as well as full e-commerce services.

### Profile

Oakes and Parkhurst Glass is a full-service glass company, providing auto, residential, commercial and stained glass for the past 30 years. Beginning as a single store, Oakes and Parkhurst has grown to three locations, including Stained Glass Express located in Waterville, Maine. Stained Glass Express has three primary business activities – selling glass and supplies to hobbyists, selling finished stained glass gift items, and fabricating and repairing stained glass, particularly church windows. The retail store in Waterville is engaged in all three business activities while the Web site focuses primarily on selling glass and supplies. An online gift line will be added in the near future.

The business has identified a niche market online by featuring “Pattern of the Month” – a unique stained glass pattern that is highlighted for a month, including a list of all the materials needed to replicate the pattern. It is then archived on the site for future access. In addition, the business features kits that can be purchased online. Staff is working to develop a marketing connection in China so that they can offer lower price, quality glass to gain a competitive edge for their online business relative to competitors.

The owner, Janet Parkhurst, considers the e-commerce portion of their site to be still under development. However, they are experiencing online sales and began to market the Web site more heavily at the end of 2006.

### History

Oaks and Parkhurst Glass has been a fixture in the Waterville, Maine region for 30 years. The business provided glass services, e.g., residential, auto, replacement and repair, etc., throughout the region and operated several stores. During that time, they did have a Web presence but did not engage in e-commerce activities. Janet Parkhurst began to offer a small supply of stained glass products in each store but made a decision to consolidate the offerings into the Waterville store and create a retail space focused on the three business activities described above. The retail store has display space for gift items and space to offer classes, in addition to storing glass and supplies for both retail and online customers.

The store’s popularity in Maine has led to a loyal customer base of hobbyists who will travel some distance to visit the store. In addition, the business has found a new customer base of designers and cabinet makers who are looking for stained glass insets for cabinets. The volume of business made it important to have two employees at the store at all times to serve the walk-in retail trade and to meet other orders and demands. Expanding the online component of the business offered a way to more effectively utilize the time and talent of employees in the retail location, and to expand the size of the market for the business.

### Business Location

Waterville, Maine was built on the mills and shipping industry that dominated so much of Maine in the 1800s until the mid-1900s. The town (2000 population 15,605) is also home to Colby College, a small liberal arts college consistently ranked as one of the best private colleges in the

Year online: **2005**

Area Population: **15,605**

Web site:

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



country. Located in nonmetropolitan Kennebec County (2000 population 117,114) Waterville is 23 miles from Augusta, the capitol of Maine, and 75 miles from the city of Portland.

### **Role of e-Commerce**

In 2005, Janet bought the domain name, stainedglassexpress.com, developed a new logo, and began to build the online component of the business. The approach has been to move slowly so that they could work out any issues before going live with the Web site. And, they relied on existing staff capacity to build e-commerce capability. For support, Janet turned to Maine Hosting, an in-state Web hosting and development service, and they worked on the business's initial Web site. This first site was very "image heavy." They used pictures rather than words to describe products. However, they discovered that images are not picked up by search engines, and so they had to revamp the site to include keywords and other text that they observed on their competitors' sites.

Once the Web site was developed, the next step was to add a shopping cart to become a full e-commerce site. Again, Janet turned to her existing staff to investigate, identify and install this new feature. However, after several false starts, this job was turned over to Janet's son who has the Web development skills to enhance the e-commerce features of the site. One year after initiating the Web site development, Janet bought a license for a shopping cart and she had been actively marketing the site for about four to five months at the time of the case study interview.

Orders placed online are sent directly to the retail store in Waterville. One of the two employees who are at the store at all times checks and then fills the online orders. One of the unique challenges presented by online as compared to retail sales relates to out-of-stock items. If a particular color glass is not in stock when an online order is placed, and the Web site does not reflect the lack of inventory, then it becomes necessary to contact the customer to determine whether a substitution can be made. These substitutions are made easily in the store, face to face with the customer, but can be more difficult online or on the phone. It has been something of a challenge in the retail store to add the new responsibility of online order processing. As a relatively new activity, they are still in the process of developing a system for effectively handling online orders in a timely manner.

One of the important resources Janet used in building e-commerce capability was the Women's Business Center and particularly the e-commerce courses offered by that organization. Both Janet and her son participated in workshops. For Janet, the classes were useful in helping her

understand the language of e-commerce so that she was better able to communicate with her son once he took over this aspect of the business. Her son was able to get ideas for further developing the site, including critique and feedback on improvements he had made to the site from other business owners and the counselors at the center.

In spite of the startup challenges faced by Stained Glass Express, they are seeing orders online and expect to have the Web site paying for itself in another year. Until that time, the existing glass business is helping to subsidize the operation and development of the online component of the stained glass business.

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

Janet's experience expanding the stained glass niche market of Oakes and Parkhurst Glass through the Internet offers some important lessons for other rural entrepreneurs:

- Entrepreneurs need to make a plan for expanding the online component of the business just as though they were creating a new business enterprise. Janet suggests developing a marketing budget and implementation plan, and making sure that the company has acquired the capacity to build this new online business. If existing staff do not have the expertise to do this important work, then Janet suggests hiring a Web development person to help avoid some of the false starts they faced. In spite of taking classes, Janet wishes she had known more about e-commerce at the beginning of the process. A lesson for other entrepreneurs is to conduct the due diligence and gather as much information about this new "enterprise" before getting started on the path to e-commerce.
- Having a Web site does not eliminate the need for marketing. Janet hoped that the Web site would allow them to discontinue their paper catalog and to reduce the time and expense of home and other trade shows. However, until they are successful in optimizing the Web site – getting higher on search engine pages – these traditional marketing activities will still be needed to keep up with their competition.
- The business of managing the Web site, in terms of updating it and working to improve their position on search sites, should not be underestimated. The biggest challenges Stained Glass Express faces are (1) keeping stock, pricing and products current on the Web site and (2) expanding their links, improving keywords and investing in "pay for click" needed for search engine optimization. The Web updating is at

least a monthly investment, while the optimization issue is a constant challenge involving a break even analysis to decide how much they can afford to pay to try to get the business on the “first page” of a search.

- While it has been easier to expand Stained Glass Express online because it is part of a successful existing business, it also creates a challenge. E-commerce sales must continue to grow and become a more important component of the overall business in order to justify continued investment. Oakes and Parkhurst Glass is a company with an interest in growth since there are three children with an interest in being involved in the family business.

**From e-Commerce as a Strategy for Improving Business**

***Validity: Lessons Learned from Small Businesses*** by Deborah M. Markley, David L. Barkley, and R. David Lamie

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