



Columbia Falls Pottery

Columbia Falls, Maine
Adams Adams, Owner and Artist

Columbia Falls Pottery's experience with e-commerce shows the potential that exists for rural artisans to extend their markets beyond regional borders and to become less dependent on seasonal tourism for success. The artist is choosing to move the business from one that generated some seasonal employment opportunities to a successful self-employment enterprise that will rely on e-commerce as essential to her long-term goals for the business. She plans to grow the online component while reducing her dependence on retail sales. Her effective use of e-commerce will keep Columbia Falls Pottery in rural coastal Maine well into the future and allow this lifestyle entrepreneur to pursue both her business and her artistic dreams.

Profile

Columbia Falls Pottery located in Columbia Falls, Maine is owned by potter April Adams. Adams produces and sells pottery in several distinctive patterns, along with tiles and tile murals, and clocks. Currently, she produces all of her products; in the past, she has sold at volumes that required sub-contracting with other potters in the region who would produce "blanks" that she finished with her unique decorations and glazes. In addition to her standard patterns and designs, Adams does custom design work.

Columbia Falls Pottery has a retail presence in Columbia Falls, located in an historic building on the main street. The store is open during the tourist season and by appointment during the spring. Production occurs in the back of the retail space. In the past, the retail operation required full-time sales help in July and August, and part-time production assistance during the same period. At the height of her business volume, 2000, the business had a full-time sales person, production assistance and two sub-contractors. Current plans are to relocate the retail operation after this season to a shared retail space on the main street, reducing the time and operating costs associated with operating a retail storefront, while expanding the e-commerce side of the business.

History

Adams Adams, a Maine native, has been a full-time potter since graduating from the Portland School of Art, practicing her craft for 37 years. She began doing craft shows and wholesaling her work but recognized that potters who had done well with their business in Maine had access to the retail and tourism markets. In 1990, she moved to Columbia Falls and opened her retail business on the main street in town. As a result, 95 percent of her business became generated by the retail market while 5 percent was received from the wholesale market.

A turning point for the business came following 9/11. Most of her business had been walk-in retail sales but that activity declined after 9/11. The tourist trade that made up the majority of her sales – 60 percent of her sales occurred between May and October – declined significantly. From 9/11 until last year, sales continued to decline, associated with the decline in tourism that Adams does not see returning to earlier levels. At the same time, operating the retail space was becoming an increasing burden on Adams. At the height of her business in 2000, she was spending more time managing the business than she was spending on the artistic aspects of production. And, the historic retail storefront, renovated when she started the business in 1990, was in need of additional renovation and maintenance – an unwelcome prospect for Adams at this point in her life.

These factors came together to suggest the need for a refocusing of the business in a new

Year online: 1998
Area Population: 599
Web site:
www.columbiafallspottery.com



direction. What the business needed was a way to have more off-season sales and to bring in out-of-region sales. While Columbia Falls Pottery has had a Web site since 1998, it served primarily as an online informational brochure about the artist and her pottery. Any sales generated by the Web site came the old fashioned way – through a follow-up visit or call to the store to place an order. In 2000, Adams began the process of expanding her e-commerce capability as a way of changing the direction of the business and helping her refocus her energies on her role as the creative talent behind the business.

Business Location

Columbia Falls, Maine was established in the late 1700s as a shipbuilding and lumber town. Like many small Maine coastal communities, these industries are now part of community history, replaced by tourism and, to a lesser extent, agriculture, specifically blueberries and seafood. While many of the town's businesses rely on the seasonal tourist trade, most residents commute out of the town to work. In 2000, the town's population was 599. Located in nonmetropolitan Washington County (2000 population 33,941), Columbia Falls is 143 miles north of Maine's largest metropolitan area, Portland.

Role of e-Commerce

The e-commerce capability of the Columbia Falls Pottery Web site developed over time. Online ordering began in 2000 using a system where customers submitted an order and payment information online, which went to the webmaster. The webmaster, in turn, would fax this information to the retail store where it was processed just like any phone order that was received. Over time, the sales associated with online ordering increased but there was no active management of the e-commerce component of the site. In fact, Adams did not get a computer until 2003.

A turning point occurred in 2003 when the webmaster abruptly left, taking the technical knowledge of the Web site with him. Fortunately, Adams owned the domain name, but she still had to start over with Web development. This misfortune, however, had a silver lining in terms of her engagement in the Web development and e-commerce side of the business. Adams identified a local webmaster and began to build her skill set regarding e-commerce. She took part in workshops on e-commerce sponsored by the Maine Women's Business Center at Coastal Enterprises, Inc. and made a commitment to building the e-commerce side of her business. As Adams stated, she is committed to the success of e-commerce because it is the only way to market to a wider audience and to allow her to get back to being an artist again.

The process of building the e-commerce site took planning and time. Between 2003 and 2005, the new Web site was developed. In 2005, her tiles and her custom commissions increased and the Web site was revamped in 2006 to feature the tiles. The final step in the e-commerce process was implementing a shopping cart to handle the online ordering and payment processing. The decision about which shopping cart to use required more research and decision making. Adams did not want to use Pay Pal and she wanted to have some control over the design of the shopping cart. As a result, Columbia Falls Pottery purchased a shopping cart that provides calculation of real time shipping and does instant ordering and payment processing. The shopping cart was installed in early 2007, completing the transition to a full e-commerce site.

Actual out-of-pocket costs to start up the e-commerce site were about \$6,400 for Web development and the purchase and installation of the shopping cart. That figure does not include the time spent by Adams to create the photos for the site, write the text, and develop policies and procedures for online sales, such as shipping and returns. However, monthly operating costs for e-commerce are very low since the shopping cart is owned by the credit card processing company that charges a low \$15 per month. Web hosting is \$95 a year. These costs are projected to be covered by additional sales within the next year.

Challenges and Lessons for Rural Entrepreneurs

The experience of Adams Adams and Columbia Falls Pottery highlights some challenges and provides a number of lessons for other rural businesses considering e-commerce.

- One of the biggest challenges to the successful implementation of e-commerce involves managing the Web site to increase the business's visibility on search engines, e.g., getting on the "first page" of a Google search. Enhancing visibility to search engines requires constant management of keywords, links and consideration of services that promise to increase exposure to search engines. For an artisan, it also means that quality pictures alone are not enough to optimize Web presence – it is the text and keywords that are picked up by search engines. Site optimization is a challenge that Adams continues to face.
- The adoption of e-commerce capability requires time and planning. It took Adams more than two years to

fully implement e-commerce as she struggled to fit its development into her already full schedule of running the business. The actual launch of the shopping cart occurred during the winter months – the business’s slow season – when Adams could devote her full attention to the details of the Web site transition to e-commerce. An alternative for other rural businesses is to hire professional services to do the work or to hire additional staff to manage the e-commerce function. In the case of Columbia Falls Pottery, assuming these additional costs was not feasible so existing capacity had to be used to build e-commerce capability.

- Businesses should do their homework about e-commerce before they start. The workshops offered by the Maine Women’s Business Center were very valuable in terms of providing information and raising issues that Adams had not considered. In addition, she did her own research – viewing other pottery Web sites to see what features she liked, looking at the features of different shopping carts, etc.
- There was nothing about the rural location of the business in Columbia Falls that made her e-commerce endeavor more difficult. Up until early 2007, Internet service was provided through dial-up, but there is now broadband access. She was able to find a Web developer locally and support resources were also available in the state.
- Undertaking e-commerce requires a real commitment to the process and perseverance when roadblocks are encountered. But, for this business, the transition to e-commerce represented a way to move more completely from retail to online sales and, as Adams states, it does not matter how long it takes, “it has to work.”

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

See related case studies and learn more about e-commerce at <http://srdc.msstate.edu/ecommerce>.