

Q&A with Judi from Silver Creek Soap Company

Can you describe your business in a few sentences?

It is a small two home-based company. It is made in one home and wrapped in another. We produce about 9,000 bars of soap a year and sell it wholesale as well as on our own to individuals.

How did you get started in this business?

Sitting by the fireplace in October of 1995, my friend and I were conversing about our early memories. Alice asked if I had ever tried to make soap as she was remembering making it with her grandmother. We decided to try it and give some for Christmas gifts. We decided it would have to be plant-based because we didn't want to render fat from animals. We had to research places to get our raw materials and read several books with instructions. I have to give a lot of credit to Alice, who later became my daughter-in-law, because she did the research and together we muddled through. It was not pretty soap and we had pretty bad packaging, but we gave it away, used it ourselves and even put it in a few craft shows. At this time, we really were experimenting with different recipes, did not own our own gram scale, pretty much ruined my kitchen with caustic materials, and read a lot of blogs trying to correct our costly mistakes and make a beautiful bar of soap. After 25 years, we have it down but still have to be really aware of what we are doing because it can go wrong very easily.

How many different soaps do you make?

Counting seasonal Christmas soap, twenty in both large and small bars.

Where do you typically sell your soaps?

We like to sell it in stores that sell produce, plants, art and natural products. We sell it in the valley at EZ Orchards, Bauman Farms, Red Bench in Silverton, Wooden Shoe, Jones Produce, Blue Raeven Farm Stand, Farmer John's in McMinnville, Willamette Valley Pie, Silver Falls and others.

Are there any other products you sell?

Not to sell everywhere. We do make a lotion to sell at the Wooden Shoe and Schriener's Iris Gardens. It is made for festivals and gift baskets

What's your typical clientele? Who typically buys your soap?

People who like natural products and do not want to use soap with preservatives. People who like the way they smell. Tourists who want to take back a small remembrance from a trip to Oregon. We have scents that appeal to everyone from floral, spicy, fruity to comfort scents such as vanilla oatmeal.

Do you use any social media to market your business.

We have a Facebook page with some pictures. People will message me on this page.

Have you had a website before? If so, what did you like about it? What didn't you like about it?

We have. It was not user friendly and was not successful for us. We actually tried several times with different helpers. We tried because we had some people ask us if we had one.

Yes, several times. We could never get it user friendly for either us or our customers. In fact, we only sent a few orders from them.

Would you like to sell products through your site, or do you want it to just be informational (showcasing your business)?

Mostly informative, I think. I really like the personal touch of taking orders on the phone and being able to answer questions. For those people who are not used to a personal touch, I think a web page is more comfortable. We could sell some through a web site if it was easy to access and work with.

If you were able to do anything with your website, what would you like it to do?

Inform people about the advantages of using a natural soap. It does feel different than commercial soaps when used. It makes you squeaky clean, but moisturizes the skin at the same time. It feels different compared to regular soap like Dial, for example. It has not preservatives in it which some people are allergic to. We use plant oils rather than animal oils. If we were to use animal oils we would have to use preservatives

Are there any websites you've come across that you really like the design of? If so, what are they and why do you like the design?

Are there any websites you've come across that you really dislike the design of? If so, what are they and why don't you like the design?

I have not looked at many websites about soap.

Are there any particular colors or fonts that you'd like the students to use?

Our favorite is green.

Is there any specific feelings or imagery you'd like your business or products to invoke in your customers?

Our soap is a simple one, natural, stream friendly and portable in its cloth wrapper. We have used trees a lot, outdoor themes and stressed how good it is for your skin. It smells great but doesn't make you too fragrant after your shower.

Do you have any testimonials from customers about your products that you can share?

Some on our Facebook page. I think the best testimonials are the people who reorder on a regular basis.

Do you have any previous photos of your business or products you'd like to share with the students?

Some on Facebook. I can email some to you as well. *(Ed. Note – see provided images)*

Any other comments that would be helpful for the students?

Many people do not realize how soap is actually made. It is not a product that a person can make in the evening and sell the next day.

First, all oils are measured to the gram and since some of them are solid, we melt them in a big pot.

Next we measure the lye. Yes, all soaps are made with lye. We buy ours from a chemical company and are very careful with it. One tiny dry caustic soda bead on your skin will burn. It must be measured by the gram (so do the other ingredients). All the ingredients are expensive so you do not want to mis-measure. (there is a learning curve)

Water is added to the lye and it immediately heats up with no heat source.

When both the oils and the lye water cool down to anywhere between 110 and 125 degrees, we pour them together into the big pot.

We then begin stirring and wait for it to saponify (a molecular change making soap and glycerin). When it changes from watery oil to vanilla pudding texture, we add the essential or fragrance oils.

We then pour it into wooden molds, insulate it and let it heat up again on its own. When it cools (days) we then remove it, cut it and age it for weeks until it is ready to wrap. Meanwhile we are making labels and cutting fabric preparing for wrapping.