

Social media puts Lake Tahoe woman's yarn shop on the map

By Melinda F. Emerson, New York Times

Pretty much out in the middle of nowhere in Nevada, there is a little yarn store with a funny name, Jimmy Beans Wool. Actually, it's in Reno, but it's a small shop that sells a big assortment of knitting and crochet supplies and every kind of yarn you can imagine.

The store has become a fixture in Reno, but what is really amazing is that the store has annual revenue of more than \$7 million, the vast majority from online sales. Some of those online buyers are so loyal to the store that they make pilgrimages to it from around the world. In fact, the store has become such a destination that its owner, Laura Zander, 38, installed a hot tub full of yarn in the warehouse to offer her customers a shared experience – and, more importantly, to create a photo opportunity. You can now find versions of these photos on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Flickr.



Laura Zander of Jimmy Beans Wool.

Here's how Zander turned Jimmy Beans Wool into a social media phenomenon.

Zander and her husband, Doug, are former software engineers

who decided to reinvent themselves after the dot-com bust of 2000. They left high-paying coding jobs in San Francisco and moved to Reno, where they thought they would start a software consulting business.

Along the way, Zander took a knitting class to relax and got hooked. "I became obsessed with knitting," she said. "I had no idea there was so much fashion in it. When the Internet bust looked eminent we decided to turn our vacation home in Lake Tahoe into our permanent one."

But when they tried to build their Web consulting business, they struggled to find clients. One client they did find, the owner of a hand-dyed yarn company, Lorna's Laces, convinced Zander that she could make money opening her own yarn store and offered to be the company's first adviser. "She lined up other yarn store owners for me to speak with to convince me it was a viable business model," Zander said.

She decided to open a shop, and she decided to call it Jimmy Beans Wool. Zander says Jimmy refers to a much-loved character in a favorite Todd Snider song and Beans refers to coffee beans. In the beginning, along with everything you might need for knitting projects, the shop also sold gourmet coffee.

Within a year, the yarn and knitting supply sales were doing so well that Zander decided to ditch the espresso cart and focus on the yarn. But the name continues to help – unusual and memorable enough to stand out among the more than 2,000 other yarn vendors online.

It took five years for Jimmy Beans Wool to reach \$1 million in sales. "The first five years in business we just focused on selling wool yarn," Zander said. "In 2007, we started focusing on building a brand." In particular, they studied how Tony Hsieh, chief executive of Zappos, used customer service to build sales online.

The first big step was to start posting instructional videos

and product reviews on YouTube. “We wanted to position our business to answer any question our customers had about yarn and knitting, so we started doing video reviews of new products,” said Zander. “We noticed you got more space in Google search with pictures and video links.” The first Jimmy Beans Wool video went up on YouTube in June, 2008. Three months later, sales had increased 67 percent.

Today, the Jimmy Beans Wool YouTube channel has more than 1,500 videos and almost 1.5 million views. The store adds an average of two new videos every month. “Yarn is very tactile, and it’s tougher to sell it online because our customers like to have a relationship with people who they buy from,” Zander said. “We explain our products in videos as if we were talking to you in the store. We are purposefully unpolished. Our employees appear in the videos. They don’t wear makeup or have a script. They are all knitters, and they talk honestly about the products.”

Like Zappos, Jimmy Beans believes in giving its customers instant gratification. “We have a rule in our business,” Zander said. “All orders must go out in 24 hours.” The company ships 500 to 1,000 packages every day, seven days a week, and it includes free patterns on its custom shipping envelopes.

Early on, the business developed slow and steady, but its growth has been between 25 and 55 percent since 2007. It has been ranked on the Inc. 5,000 list of fastest growing private companies four years in a row.

Over the last few years, the company has introduced numerous marketing initiatives, including “Knit-A-Longs” tied to Downton Abbey and serving as the first official yarn supplier to the United States Snowboarding and Free Skiing Team. It has also created a Stitch Red campaign to raise awareness of heart disease in women and published a book called Knit Red (Sixth and Spring, June 2012) featuring designs of celebrities who knit. It even created Beans for Brains college scholarships

for students who knit or crochet.

All of which may explain why its loyal customers are so eager to visit the little store in Reno, including the hot tub. Jimmy Beans Wool turns photos of its visiting customers into souvenir postcards to memorialize the trip.