

Building a business

Mary Tatum and Janet Rickstrew started a company that brings tools—and home improvement skills—to women who want to do it themselves. Learn how they did it.



Mary (left) and Janet donate a portion of sales to charities.

**Mary Tatum, 47,
Janet Rickstrew, 49**
Denver

THEIR BUSINESS

Tomboy Tools

THE CONCEPT

Empowering women to handle home repairs and projects on their own

INITIAL INVESTMENT

\$2,000 each

IMPRESSIVE STAT

The company is on track to end 2012 with a 25% increase in gross sales.

▶ **Tap into a trend**

In 2000, Janet and Mary noticed many of their female friends were becoming interested in DIY projects. “With the booming housing market at that time, more women were living on their own, and they wanted to maintain their homes without hiring a handyman,” explains Mary. The longtime friends came up with the concept of “tool parties,” where sales consultants sell tools, then show how to use them.

▶ **Combine your expertise**

Janet, a self-described tomboy, had always been interested in hands-on

projects, while Mary’s background is in computer programming. When the two joined forces, it turned out to be an ideal combination. “Janet’s tool know-how was the perfect fit with my technical experience to bring our idea to life,” says Mary, who created the company’s original e-commerce site.

▶ **Make a commitment**

When a national TV program mentioned Tomboy Tools on-air, their website received more than 60,000 hits in 20 minutes. “That’s when we realized we were on to something, so we quit our day jobs to focus on the company completely,” says Janet. It wasn’t easy to start from scratch: They had both sold their homes and dipped into retirement funds. “It required total commitment—and some sacrifices—to build the company from the ground up,” Mary says.

▶ **Listen to the customer**

“The first tools we manufactured were blue—we were afraid people

wouldn’t take pink seriously!” recalls Janet. But when they introduced a pink hammer for fundraising in 2005, women went crazy for it. “That taught us to listen to what our customers really wanted, not what we thought would sell,” says Mary.

▶ **Don’t be intimidated**

When Janet and Mary first went to the National Hardware Show in Chicago, there were hardly any other women in attendance. “We certainly got some stares and chuckles,” says Janet, “but now, many booths at the show are run by women.” Tomboy Tools’ unique features (such as a magnetic hammer head that lets you start a nail with one hand) and lightweight ergonomic designs have gained recognition in the industry. “We’ve overcome our fears and proved that women can make it in this male-dominated field,” says Mary.

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