

TOTALLY HIP

Sister Team Launches Clip-On Purse

By Marie Bonelli

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Sandy Christiano's idea for a hands-free, clip-on purse was conceived by accident. About four years ago, while unloading her young daughter from a car seat, the heavy, shoulder-strapped pocketbook that she was wearing swung around and struck her daughter in the head.

Her vision for a fashionable, yet utilitarian, clip-on purse blossomed into a family business when Christiano and her three sisters, Kenya D'Augustino, Ladene Paulino, and Raylene D'Augustino, launched HipPurse as an online business out of a home office in Rocky Hill in October 2007.

While holding onto their day jobs, the four sisters sank nearly \$150,000 of their own money into the operation. They designed the seven styles of purses and had them manufactured in China.



HipPurse co-founders and sisters (left to right) Kenya D'Augustino, Raylene D'Augustino, Sandy Christiano and Ladene Paulino.

For the past 18 months, they have sold 25 percent of their inventory directly to retailers and consumers online at their Web site, www.HipPurse.com.

Today, the purses, ranging in cost between \$15 and \$29, are sold in 14 boutiques throughout Connecticut and nine states nationwide.

The travel-inspired purses — such as Day Tripper, Escape, Venture and Get Away — feature a concealed clip located on the purse's back side. A detachable, 45-inch strap can also be wrapped around hips, or tossed over a shoulder.

"We're still pounding the pavement," D'Augustino said.

As head of marketing, D'Augustino has a daily routine that keeps her churning out new sales tactics on www.HipPurse.com, Amazon.com and Twitter.

She's also on the phone making cold calls or sending e-mails to industry press, prospective boutiques, amusement parks, casinos, and cruise lines. Locally, she

showcases the purses at corporate vendor shows, including State House Square, Bristol Myers, and The Hartford and at craft fairs.

She said the purse line became available at the Hartford-based Aetna store in June.

To help the sisters sell the HipPurse, they added four commission-based sales representatives in the Connecticut, Massachusetts, Michigan and Florida markets.

“In a couple more years,” D’Augustino said, “our goal is to net a quarter million by 2011.”

Their tenacity could pay off if they close a dream deal with the home shopping network, QVC. Western Creative of Redford, Missouri, a full-service advertising agency, is in discussions with the network’s accessory buyer on behalf of HipPurse.

Marilyn Montross, vendor relations for QVC, said it’s easy to get a product reviewed by the network, but difficult to be accepted. “In order for us to decide to put a new product on air,” Montross said, “we essentially have to say good-bye to an old one.”

Initially, the sisters unsuccessfully attempted to get onto the network’s shopping program on their own, bringing their line of purses to a QVC vendor open house.

“We think we would do amazing on QVC,” D’Augustino said.

QVC receives about 10,000 unsolicited vendor applications every year, and accepts about 600.

Timothy Phelan, president of Connecticut Retail Merchants Association said, “If they can get on QVC, more power to them. In today’s market, there’s not a roadmap to follow.”

Locally, at Tapestry Rose in Rocky Hill, the HipPurse line is nestled in a corner of the artisan gift shop. It’s one of the first items out the door, said store owner Sally Farrell.

The sisters developed their business plan with help from Score — a nonprofit that assists small businesses — and by talking to other entrepreneurs.

They plan to send their purse designed for young girls to President Obama’s daughters. The purse, which accounts for 9 percent of sales, comes with messages that encourage girls to protect their mind and body.

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