

At-home business perfect for working mother

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By Ken Picking

For the Gettysburg Times

Women often struggle with the choice between earning a steady paycheck outside the home or finding a way to stay with their children and make money where they live.

Jill Crawford stood at that bridge of life. She took a long look at the where she could fall and decided to take the proverbial leap of faith.

It was scary and uncertain, Crawford said, to go from being a corporate graphic designer to launching Crawford Designs, LLC, in 2006.

"It's definitely not easy, a huge commitment to go out on your own and start a business from scratch," said Crawford. "I can say I have no regrets. I love it."

A natural artist from the time she finger painted as a child, Crawford now operates a thriving website design business from her dining room table. Instead of a view of York from the Caskey Group office building, Jill gazes out on the vast farmland between Gettysburg and New Oxford that was originally her grandparents'.

Crawford's website portfolio, available by logging on to www.crawforddesignsllc.com, is considerable - Conewago Valley School District, H.A.R.T Center, Codori Memorials, Immaculate Conception School, McIlhenny Banners, Irishtown Fire Company and many more.

Jill creates marketing materials for Eichelberger Performing Arts, Hanover, and Cross Keys Village, The Brethren Home. She also sets up social media sites like Facebook, Linked In and YouTube for her clients and advises them on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategies and other Internet marketing to grow their business.

"I really liked working for Graphcom and then Caskey, but the commute from York became too much. It was always in the back of my mind to go out on my own," she said. "I finally reached the point in my life, with two kids at home, I felt it was time to give it a try."

"I remember being in art school (Bradley Academy), and we were asked to write a time capsule of where we saw ourselves in 15 years. I wanted to be married, have two kids and my own business. It can happen if you want it badly enough."

Brian and Jill Crawford built a home on the family farmland of William and Annie Orendorff where Jill grew up, the daughter of Patrick and Janet Staub. A graduate of Delone Catholic, Jill not only conducts daily business from home, she manages typical, traditional household

responsibilities and raises Brock, 13, and Hannah, 11, with Brian, who works at Krosaki Magnesita Refractories in York.

"It makes me laugh when someone says to me, 'Oh, I could never work out of my house. There's too many distractions,' " said Crawford. "Yes, you can plop down and watch TV if you want to, or find other things to do. You have to set commitments, boundaries and schedules. When the kids were younger, I still had baby-sitters on busy days.

"This industry is very feast or famine. There are times when it is very stressful. I'm a deadline-oriented person, which really helps. I get twice as much done here on my own than I ever did at any company. I know how to manage what needs to be done. If you set a daily plan and follow it, you will be OK."

Before Brock and Hannah came home from school in New Oxford, Brian from work in York, and starting dinner, Jill interrupted editing copy on her laptop computer to talk about the life and business she has created.

Q: How was your first year in business?

CRAWFORD: It was not consistent, that's for sure. I took a huge pay cut. I found out I am not a sales person. I like being behind the scenes, creating, but I found out quickly I had to start networking, attending events, to get known and start making money.

Q: What was your husband's reaction to leaving your job and starting on your own at home?

CRAWFORD: Brian never doubted me. Back in 2006, when I started out, the economy was not as crazy as it is now. We were in a good place with his job, so it was the right time for us to give it a try. Everything just clicked. Brian said just do what I needed to do and we see where it goes.

Q: Did you start right away creating websites?

CRAWFORD: In the beginning it was more brochures, newsletters and marketing materials. Then I gradually started doing more websites because I saw the opportunity. I had to learn all the behind-the-scenes, like HTML coding. Back then, there was not many Content Management Systems as there are today. Now people can go into the site and edit and manage it themselves after the site has been created. I do all the up-front work and then teach my clients how to manage the sites themselves.

Q: What was your first website?

CRAWFORD: Sleighter's Furniture & Sleep Shop in New Oxford. I appreciated them being my first. I've learned a lot since then.

Q: What has been your biggest challenge in growing your business?

CRAWFORD: Definitely the sales end, networking. I am into marketing other companies, not promoting myself. I'm not a public speaker. That's been the hardest part for me. I would go to network events and it was mostly people trying to sell themselves. They really didn't care to hear from me. So I actually started my own networking group, York-Adams Speed Networking. They were little luncheons once a month, kind of a speed-dating thing where people would sit down with another business owner and just talk for 3-4 minutes, then go on to another. That really helped me. I had more control, not just thrown into the masses. I might fire that back up in 2014. Right now referrals and word-of-mouth give me all the business I can handle.

Q: All of your pricing appears on your website, very transparent. How did you come up with it?

CRAWFORD: In the beginning, I basically had an hourly rate. I knew how much time I needed to build a website from scratch. That's how my pricing developed, nothing more complicated than that.

Q: Lately the big website companies are advertising free websites with a monthly hosting fee. What is your reaction to that?

CRAWFORD: I was nervous when that first came out. Honestly, I thought that might end up shutting me down. But my biggest benefit to my clients is their ability to work one-on-one with me, not over the phone all the time, or through emails. I can show up at their door, take photographs. I'm as hands-on as they want me to be. I have found, especially locally, that's what my clients want from their web designer. I'm not worried anymore. I know there are businesses out there who would rather work with someone like me.

Q: Are clients who want their first website ever unrealistic?

CRAWFORD: Mostly with deadlines. My slogan always has been: Poor planning on your part does not make it an emergency on my part. I have had people call me and say they have a grand opening on Friday - and its Wednesday at 5 p.m. - and they want a website up and running. That's my biggest issue. They want a magic button to make things happen. That's not always doable.

Q: What advice would you give a woman who would like to start a business from home?

CRAWFORD: When I started, I was kind of in the blind on what I needed to do. You definitely need a good business plan. Make sure you have a sales tax number, your quarterly estimated taxes set up, before launching into what you actually are going to be doing. You have to anticipate that everything falls on you - sales, marketing and advertising, accounts receivable and billing, customer service.

Q: What's the future for Crawford Designs?

CRAWFORD: I ask myself that all the time. This business is always changing. Every day I am learning so I can be the expert in my field for my clients. I don't aspire to grow much bigger, to

have my own office building. I don't see any benefit to branching out. I have all the equipment I need. I manage my business and still have family time with Brian and the kids. It's the lifestyle I always wanted. I may have to stay up to 1 a.m. to finish my work. The hours can be crazy, but I love it and it works for us.

Ken Picking, www.aaymerchants.com, writes "Taking Care of Business Adams County," which is published in the Times on the second and fourth Saturdays.