

Young Company Focus

Essential Bodywear: Changing the Way WOMEN Shop

An Idea Takes Shape

Sometimes ideas that are knocked around between friends are just talk. Sometimes however, ideas are put into motion and really take off. That is what happened for Carrie Charlick and Marcia Negro; an idea that came from people-watching grew into a direct selling company called Essential Bodywear.

In February 2003, Carrie and Marcia were working a booth together at a hobby industry association trade show. Slow foot traffic led to boredom and the two friends became involved in a favorite pastime, people-watching. They noticed the great hairstyles and cute outfits of the passersby. They also could not help but notice how many women needed the pick-me-up that the proper foundation garments provide.

That experience quickly spawned an idea for a business designed to help women look better and feel better about themselves by offering them the best foundation pieces, bras, panties and other undergarments,

and to help them find the right size and style for their body type. One of their first names considered for the business was, "Just Trust Me, You Need This!" says Carrie. And the statement is true—so true in fact that last spring Oprah

dedicated a show to the topic, *Oprah's Bra and Swimsuit Intervention*. However, "just trust me" wasn't quite the message Carrie and Marcia wanted to send so they settled on a name that imparts the message that the right "foundations" really are essential.

Since statistics show that 85 percent of American women are wearing the wrong bra size, Essential Bodywear hit on a product that is in high demand. The business partners also chose



Carrie Charlick and Marcia Negro,
Co-Founders/Managers of Essential Bodywear



essential bodywear, llc™

an in-demand mode of distribution for their products. "We knew the only way to market was at home parties," says Carrie. The team says that the direct selling model has worked well for their business for three main reasons: Women today are extremely busy, women know they can trust their friends to not let them make a fool of themselves by buying something that doesn't fit right, and because a lot of women simply hate

dressing rooms. From the idea that women could get together with a group of girlfriends, have a bite to eat, a glass of wine and be measured and fitted for the perfect bra, the Essential Makeover party was born.

In May 2003, Carrie and Marcia began their journey of success by holding their first in-home party, but not until the pair had gone on what they call a "crusade to find the best of the best." "We went to 100 different stores to find the right pieces," says Marcia. They found garments they liked, met with manufacturers and developed a product line to fit a variety of body shapes and sizes.

Looking Good

Just three months later, in August 2003, the company signed its first consultant. By mid-October 2005 the company had grown to 144 consultants in 22 states, and just before their interview with *Direct Selling News*, the company hit its first calendar year million in sales—with the holiday selling season yet to come.

While there are a couple other direct selling companies that sell lingerie, there are few, if any, with the sharpened focus of helping women look good *in* their clothes. Essential Bodywear also offers women an educational alternative to the hassle and embarrassment of the retail shopping experience. The company is changing the way women shop, with a home party experience coupled with a personal consultation. While retail store associates are often more concerned with moving inventory, Essential Bodywear consultants are "taking customer service to the next level," says Marcia, by taking the time to explain which piece works best for the individual and why.

"Our focus and mission are to revolutionize the way women shop," says Carrie. "When a customer goes to a home party and buys things as intimate as bras and panties and leaves smiling, you've rocked her world." She says that consultants will often get to know their clients on an entirely different level by finding out things that are not divulged in everyday conversation. "People will talk to you just like they would their hairdresser," says Carrie, and consultants honor their customers'

"Some women actually cry because of how great they look."

confidences by telling them, "It's just between you and your bra lady." Marcia says she gets goose bumps just thinking about the difference that they and their consultants have made, helping thousands of women look great and feel better about themselves. "Some women actually cry because of how great they look," she says.

The respect and kindness that Essential Bodywear customers are given make the experience one that they're not only willing to repeat, but one they want to offer by becoming consultants themselves. "We are empowering women to start their own business," says Carrie, "and they are so confident and proud about what they're doing." Marcia adds, "Our consultants love knowing that they're helping women feel good about themselves."

If we had known then what we know now...

With just \$200 to get Essential Bodywear started, the pair delayed submitting an application for DSA membership. In hindsight they say that was a mistake. "We would have saved thousands and thousands of dollars if we had gone there first," says Marcia. Now Carrie and Marcia agree that the education they have received and the people they have met through the Direct Selling Association have been extremely helpful. In fact, the business



owners recommend that new direct selling companies make becoming part of the DSA one of their very first business decisions.

Among the most valuable benefits the DSA offers are the contacts. Carrie and Marcia have made many since submitting their application at the end of 2004. "It's easy to feel like a little fish in a big pond," says Carrie. Marcia agrees, "You can feel like you're on your own," says Marcia, "and it's helpful knowing that they're out there for you." Many fears and uncertainties were banished—or at least lessened—when the pair attended their first DSA Annual Meeting this year. The welcome they received and education offered through the general sessions, breakout classes and one-on-one time with other executives and supplier members renewed their spirits, and the two business partners went home from the conference refreshed and ready to run.

Finding supplier companies that specialize in tools, systems and information designed for the direct selling industry has been another plus that the DSA has offered. One of the areas in which the team says they could have saved thousands of dollars is through their Web site. Originally working with a company that did not have direct selling experience put them in a bind. "Our Web site system was obsolete as soon as it launched," says Marcia. The partners are thrilled with the new Web site and software system that are being put together by Party Plan Solutions and will launch in the

coming weeks. The new system offers consultants their own personal Web site and virtual office, and provides an effective system for corporate employees as well.

The Road Ahead

While their consultants take products and the business into women's homes, Marcia and Carrie are getting the word out by traveling to expos with their "magic box." Prepared for business with bras, measuring tapes and dressing rooms, they have fit and measured women across the country for better-fitting bras, and always have the busiest booth on the floor. The team says it is like a magic show where women go into the box and emerge to cheers, oohs and ahhs at the difference when they come out. Once the customers fall in love with their new look, the entrepreneurs take the time to explain how they can host a party and share the business opportunity.

With Carrie's former career both in sales and as a product buyer, and Marcia's experience in the lingerie department of an upscale retail store, the women say they knew that their experience and the products were a good fit. But the business has surprised them by taking off with a snowball effect. By taking the leap and acting on an idea, the friends-turned-business-partners say they are amazed at the response.

Working now on the designs for a future private label and traveling to Paris to select fabrics for next fall's line, Carrie and Marcia are excited about the successes they've achieved and about their company's future. With their "bra-fit revolution" Marcia and Carrie say that their goal is to take the guesswork out of shopping and to change the statistic from 85 percent of American women wearing the wrong bra to 85 percent wearing the right bra and, just maybe, to one day be as big as Avon. While these goals may seem lofty, they are the perfect fit for this growing company. 🍷



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