

Friday, June 4, 2010

Hard work paves the way to well-heeled American dream for SBA alum

What's tiny, pink and runs all over? A Volkswagen Beetle with a "Pink Pump" logo on the side.

Part of the shoe store's "Heels on Wheels" low-cost gift delivery service for customers, Beetle Bugs regularly crawl out into Detroit Metro traffic to deliver beautifully wrapped packages. Treating customers to cushy perks is one reason why Pink Pump owner Tawny Thieu, SBA '02, was named among the "Top Ten Business Women of 2009" by the National Association of Women Business Owners.

Her business philosophy is refreshing. "Everyone who walks through our doors is important to us," Thieu says. "My sales team doesn't work on commission or gab on cell phones. We give customers our undivided attention — without any pressure to buy."

The word is out.

With **Pink Pump** stores in Bloomfield Hills, Royal Oak and Birmingham, Mich., orders are also pouring in from out of state. With Pink Pump now being the first women's shoe boutique to franchise, stores will soon be opening in Ann Arbor, Mich., and Atlanta, Ga.

"I don't care for cookie cutter stores," Thieu says. "It's important that our larger franchises keep the charm and feel of a small boutique."

While delighted with the success of Pink Pump, Thieu fully understands what it's like to have the shoe on the other foot.

Shoestring budget

Born to a widowed Vietnamese mother while the family was in route to America in 1979, Thieu was three months old when they arrived at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. "We didn't speak English, and my Mom had just \$20 in her pocket," Thieu says. "After landing, my two older sisters were so hungry that my Mom spent \$5 on airport food."

Times were tough but Thieu's memories are by no means negative. "I had a fun childhood," she reflects. "I didn't even realize how poor we were until I later went to school and got picked on for my clothes and shoes."

Perhaps because of that, Thieu took an early interest in fashionable clothes and high heel shoes.

"I got a little tired of my sisters' hand-me-downs," she laughs. "So I'd save up my babysitting money and treat myself to a new pair of shoes."

At 15, Thieu began working as a receptionist at a local hair salon, working her way up to salon manager. Continuing work there while later attending OU, Thieu earned a bachelor's degree in business/marketing in 2002. After graduation, she took an office job as a marketing assistant. Her heart wasn't in it, so she returned to her passion for the beauty industry.

In 2005, Thieu and her brother-in-law, hair stylist Tim Upchurch, opened the stylish Liquid Salon in Bloomfield Hills. "My mom raised her daughters to be strong and self-reliant," Thieu says. Thieu learned the lesson well.

Pumping it up

With the salon clipping along, Thieu stepped into a new adventure: the fun-filled world of shoes. In 2006, she opened her first shoe store, Shoe Envy, in Keego Harbor, Mich. The small storefront soon expanded to a 1,700-square-foot store in the heart of Bloomfield Hills. She changed the name to Pink Pump in 2009.

The trendy stores offer a unique variety of designer shoes, such as Charles David, Michael Kors, Betsey Johnson, Velvet Angels, Ugg and Hunter. The stores also offer a select line of designer clothes, handbags and other accessories.

Thieu is hands-on in every aspect of the business: answering phone calls and emails, attending to interior design of the stores, and focusing down to the feet. "I hand-pick all the merchandise and try out the shoes first," she says. "I love talking to customers to see what they like and what designs they want."

Thieu appreciates that customers are spending wisely in today's economy. Having walked a mile in their shoes, Thieu selects luxurious shoes that are affordable.

"We do offer high-end shoes, but you can walk out of our store with a great pair of \$30 shoes," Thieu says. "We always take time to go over how to keep the shoes in great condition."

Thankful for her profits, Thieu uses her success to give back.

Shoe store owner with soul

In an industry dominated by men, Thieu looks for opportunities to speak to women about entering the business. "Women are the ones who buy the shoes," she says, "so I think it makes sense that women are the ones to pick out the products and run the stores."

Thieu also donates a portion of her profits to charities such as Grace Centers of Hope, Oakland County's oldest and largest homeless shelter. She downplays her generosity. "I do what I can," she says. "If a friend mentions that her neighbor's kids can't afford winter boots, I'll head to the store to set up an Ugg delivery. It's the least I can do."

At just 5'2", Thieu is a standout — before she ever dons the four-inch heels she always wears to work.

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<http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/545c0222#/545c0222/42>

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SUMMARY

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