

Fran and Emma KUPIAK - Big Rock Bags

What happens when there is a need that is not being met by current retailers? For the mother and daughter team of Fran and Emma KUPIAK, it means there's a niche in the market and they want to be the ones to fill it.

Emma KUPIAK's need for a hip, yet functional, book bag for college was the starting point for Big Rock Bags. Soon, Emma was not the only one who wanted a more unique and personal bag for her books and binders. Driven by the interest of fellow students, friends and even strangers who approached her on the street, Big Rock Bags was in business before the KUPIAK team knew it.

Emma was enrolled in the Entrepreneurial Management program at Royal Roads University in Victoria where she was able to combine the development of Big Rock Bags with her formal education. "At school there is so much emphasis on knowing your target market," she says. "We chose to test our market by approaching a couple of different types of venues, for example, surf/skate shops and gallery shops, in order to establish which segment was going to be more successful."

And growing to success they are! Big Rock's three styles of custom-made bags are available in retail locations in Nanaimo, Victoria and West Vancouver as well as the Portobello West Fashion Market in Vancouver. They have also just launched an e-commerce side to the business with a new website where customers can actually design their own bags.

"The expressions and reactions of a customer creating their own bag is so rewarding for me. It puts a smile on their face and on mine when they have put together a bag that reflects who they are. We wanted to bring that to the website by allowing our customers to pick their choice of fabric, style and components to make a bag that is personalized."

Coming from a managerial background, Fran wanted to advance her business skills in order to further grow and develop Big Rock Bags. In order to do so, she attended Women's Enterprise Centre's *Focused Marketing* and *Growing Your Business* workshops.

"I found both the information and the environment provided by these programs really helpful because they were focused on women in business," says Fran. "Women tend to share ideas readily with one another, and the atmosphere was less intimidating than a mixed business setting can be."

Following the workshops, she became involved in women's business networks in the area, gaining inspiration, passion and knowledge. Her advice to other women who are new to business is a reflection of her experiences in these groups.

"I feel successful businesses are built on good relationships. So whether it is with your suppliers, your employees, your customers, your fellow women in business or your business partner, if your relationships are positive and strong, your venture will be so much more rewarding and gratifying. You never know where those positive relationships will take you."