



The welcoming exterior of the Funky Monkey Paperie features a table and chairs for passersby.

Going Ape for Paper

Funky Monkey Paperie's business has swung from retail to manufacturing ... and beyond.

When a customer purchases an imprintable invitation featuring a gymnastics image for their daughter's birthday party, Laura Kelly – owner of the Funky Monkey Paperie in Apex, NC – is happy for several reasons. First, she loves having hard-to-find items that customers want, such as the gymnastics-themed invitation. In fact, it was demand from her customers that led vendor Paper Girls to produce the gymnastics imprintable.

Second, this particular image is now the best-selling imprintable in the Paper Girls line, which translates into more sales and more operating revenue for ... the Funky Monkey! That's because Laura Kelly not only owns the store, she is also the founder/artist of Paper Girls.

"When I was shopping the National Stationery Show for my first stationery store in the late 1990s, every time I saw a whimsical, kids-oriented design in a booth I thought to myself, 'I can do that,'" recalls Kelly. Driven by a passion



Funky Monkey Paperie carries numerous lines of stationery and imprints, including store-owner Laura Kelly's own Paper Girls and Laura Kelly Designs items.

to share her own art "with the world," Kelly closed her retail store in 2001 to launch the Paper Girls stationery line, got a booth at the 2002 National Stationery Show and promptly secured 37 accounts. If Kelly thought her retailing days were over due to her successful manufacturing venture, she was happily mistaken.



Multitalented retailer Laura Kelly, owner of Funky Monkey Paperie.

“My customers didn’t disappear just because I closed my store; they began showing up at my home and at the Paper Girls warehouse,” states Kelly. While the interruptions to her life and business “got old really, really fast,” she soon realized how much she missed taking care of her customers’ needs and enjoyed interacting with them – sharing their joyous occasions and being a partner in their celebrations. So, when a historic brownstone became available in 2003 in the renovated shopping district of Apex, Kelly decided to take the lease and “do it all” by creating the Funky Monkey

Paperie in the front of the building and putting the Paper Girls warehouse in the back.

Interestingly, customers walking into the bubblegum-pink-walled Funky Monkey would never know by the product mix that Paper Girls’ stationery was any more important than that of other vendors’. Actually, Kelly buys imprint-

ables from approximately 40 different companies, including Putnam House, Checkerboard, Bert & Harry, Sugar Cookie Designs, Penny Laine Paper, Cross-My-Heart and Stevie Streck; only about 15 percent of the store’s imprintable inventory comes from Paper Girls. “I make a conscious effort to mix our lines in with everyone else’s,” she explains, “because the store isn’t about me or what I do, it’s about presenting a whole collection of ‘trendy’ merchandise with sass, whimsy and attitude that appeals to women who are ‘girls at heart,’ love to shop in a place where there’s no pressure



Bubblegum-pink walls provide an eye-catching backdrop for the array of colorful merchandise offered at Funky Monkey Paperie.

“The fun and professional atmosphere of the SFIGF really sets the shopping tone for buyers.

Our customers attend to see new products and write orders.”

Alma O’Brien – Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy

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to buy, and there is always someone who listens to them.”

Listening to customers makes Kelly both a better retailer and a more successful manufacturer. “Every stationery store owner needs to be honest with themselves and face the truth head on: nobody needs a single thing from our store,” she states, listing “needs” as such things as food, water and medical supplies. “However, we sell ‘wants,’ so it’s important to discover what the customer wants

and then provide it. Listening is what sets us apart!” As it turns out, stationery retailers around the country also benefit from Kelly’s listening ability.

According to Kelly, customers will surprise you with what they want, be it a graphic design element or a new type of product. “We get mothers coming in after they drop off their kids at a nearby preschool, young girls stopping by when the middle school down the block lets out, and teachers popping in at the end of



Among products sold at Funky Monkey Paperie is a book entitled, “The PolkaPlaid School on Turner Creek,” written and illustrated by store owner Laura Kelly; images from the book also appear on products from her stationery company, Laura Kelly Designs.

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the day. These customers started cuing us in that gymnastics was growing in popularity, and we tested a few Paper Girls products in the store to be sure they would sell before introducing them nationally,” Kelly says of the now-popular imprintable design. When the student-parent-teacher faction began requesting something that groups of kids could sign as a class or a team or at parties, it led Kelly to develop a line of “Autograph Posters” that tested well and is launching at the 2006 National Stationery Show (see sidebar). “Fortunately, if something doesn’t fly out the doors of the Funky Monkey, it’s really a minimal investment in relation to the potential rewards,” she says.

There is one other person that Kelly says every retailer and manufacturer needs to listen to: themselves! “I am an independent retailer. I am the owner of a small stationery company. I don’t need anyone else to say it’s okay to do something. If I think something is a good idea, I get to do it,” she states. Thanks to heeding her “inner voice,” Kelly has recently ventured into several other business areas, including licensing her artwork to Checks In The Mail for checks and to its Expressionary.com division for personalized stationery. She has also published a children’s book, “The PolkaPlaid School on Turner Creek,” from which she has pulled graphic elements to use on a variety of stationery products, including memo pads, notecards, journals and autograph posters. These are among prod-

ucts now being sold through Laura Kelly Designs – Kelly’s newest stationery-manufacturing venture.

She does have a caveat about pursuing one’s personal passion, however: employees and customers are not automatically committed to your ideas. “You need to clearly and constantly communicate your vision and purpose, and do whatever it takes to earn the respect of the people that work for you and buy from you. If you’re passionate about your business, whatever it is, the message will get through. Also, I like to keep this adage in mind: Do what you love to do, and you’ll never work a day in your life.”

Lessons From A Former Teacher

For five years before she opened her first stationery store in 1996, Laura Kelly was an elementary-school teacher. She says that the “process of teaching” is still part of her life and her business. Today, with several schools located nearby her Funky Monkey Paperie store, Kelly has a knack for creating and selling merchandise that teachers really appreciate. For back-to-school merchandising, she shares these “lessons”:

- Teachers are typically in their profession for a long time, so after a few years of “World’s Best Teacher” and “#1 Teacher” mugs and frames, it’s time to get more creative in the gift-giving arena. Personalized stationery, notecards, thank-you notes, etc. make good gifts because they get used up, so receiving more from future students will be appreciated.

- See if students can find out a few details of their teachers’ lives outside of school, such as pets, hobbies, travels, etc. Use this information to break away from “teacher” themes on gift and stationery products.

- If a teacher has a “pet” phrase or two they like to impart to their students, encourage them to use the lines to create personalized stationery. A moral, quote or adage can stay with people for a lifetime, so it might be nice to know where they heard it first. Remember, “you can never learn less of anything ... you can only learn more.” ■

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