

Hear us roar

Framework for a successful print business



MANDIE CRAWFORD

For Jill O'Hara, the ability to adapt may have been the master key for her success.

Like many entrepreneurs, she began her business with an idea in mind but

found it morphing before her very eyes.

She started out in the picture business when she was just 17. Now 30, she already has 13 years of experience to her credit.

She began her career in photography as a colour technician, working for Colortron, a film developing company in Stoney Creek. If you took your photos to be developed at any drug store in the early 1990s, chances are that O'Hara had a hand in their development.

The company, eager to see their employees improve their skills, recognized O'Hara's enthusiasm for her job.

They helped pay for the many courses she took in photography and dark room work at Mohawk College. Eventually, O'Hara returned to school full time, this time attending Sheridan College. She took the applied photography diploma program, which she finished in 1998.

She began as a freelance photographer, but also did custom colour work in the dark room on a contract basis.

"I loved to develop photos the old-fashioned way," she tells me, "and I love what I was doing."

But she also saw the writing on the wall — the industry was very quickly going digital. O'Hara knew she needed

to keep up, so she returned to school to upgrade her computer skills. While she was doing this, she found herself drawn to graphic design, which was a good match for the skills she already had.

She continued to do contract work, while she searched for a full-time job as a graphic designer. She worked for a couple of years as a colour technician doing art reproduction, matching up print colours to original artwork. But with her keen eye for colour, she soon became discouraged that the equipment she was using at the company she worked for was not as good as it needed to be. It was not long before she became confident with her skills and realized it was time to step out on her own.

In 2000, O'Hara launched The Design House, where she specializes in art reproduction. Her initial investment was more than \$50,000, including purchases like a printer that cost over \$23,000. Her goal is a process for colour copying original watercolour and oil paintings where the hues were so exact that even the artist would be hard pressed to tell the difference between a print and an original.

She begins by scanning an original piece of art and creates a digital file that she continues to print until the colours are a precise match. Once the digital file is created, the artist can order one print or thousands — they all come out looking the same as the original. The printing process sprays the paint in a process known as Giclee printing. Giclee printing originated in France and the word — originally the verb *gicler* — means to spurt or spray. The reproduced images can be applied to canvas or watercolour paper, creating prints that are exact replicas of the original.

O'Hara, originally based in Hamilton, realized very quickly where her business was going and knew she needed a large studio. "My business comes from all over North America," she explained, "so it really did not matter where I lived."

She searched for studio space and found just what she needed in a 6,000-square-foot home in Dunville, on the shores of Lake Erie south of Hamilton. She plans to open a gallery



RON POZZER, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Jill O'Hara's Dunville business makes high-quality reproduction art.

Lessons learned

■ Look for open doors: O'Hara had put a business plan together that looked good on paper, but found the need to adapt. She followed the market demands and never lacks for work.

■ Allow your best clients to influence the direction of your business. These are the people who are already purchasing your product or service, so accommodate them. It is much more cost effective and easier than trying to find new customers.

■ Treat your suppliers as an extension of your business. "My suppliers have their fingers on the pulse of the industry and can research and keep me informed on new processes and products," O'Hara explains. She treats them well, making sure they receive cards or gifts on holidays. She also ensures they know how much she appreciates them.

in the sprawling circa 1869 home.

Her business, which has come by word of mouth, has grown from \$50,000 her first year to well over \$150,000 this year.

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THE DESIGN HOUSE