



Robyn Hargrove



Barb Delf



Jean Christopherson



Katie Whetzel

HORSE-BASED

Ever dream of being your own boss and running a horse-related business from home? Get inspiration (and advice) from four horse lovers who've figured out how to turn their good ideas into profits.

The alarm wakes you up for another workday, and you wish you didn't have to face it. Maybe it's because you dread the commute, or you're stuck with a boss and co-workers you don't respect. Maybe you work long hours for inadequate pay, or just plain find yourself bored and restless by the humdrum nature of the job. Maybe it's not your job that's the problem, but your need for money over and above what it pays. Or, perhaps you're simply longing for an outlet for creativity that's been locked in a stall for too long.

In any case, wouldn't it be great if you could find some way to earn money from home, doing work somehow related to horses?

You're not alone in having that

thought. We'll introduce you to four fellow horse lovers—"equi-preneurs," if you will—who've had that thought and acted on it. Each one started and now runs a home-based business, and each one has a clientele made up of other horse people. For inspiration, we'll share their stories and their best advice. We'll provide a few of our own smart-start biz tips as well.

Go ahead and hit that snooze button a couple of times. You've been late for work for flimsier reasons than taking time to read about something that could be your springboard to a job with built-in enjoyment and satisfaction.

THESE BOOTS WERE MADE FOR...DYEING

Equi-preneur: Robyn Hargrove, Lynn, Washington. Married, with three

children ages 18 to 30, she's supported the show careers of two daughters, one of whom still shows on the Pacific Northwest Quarter Horse circuit. Robyn worked in the nursing and computer-services fields before becoming a stay-at-home mom who sewed show clothes on the side and sold them via eBay.

Horse-based home biz: The Boot Lady, www.thebootlady.com; thebootlady@aol.com.

What she does: Robyn custom-dyes Western boots to match outfits worn by show competitors and rodeo queens.

Inspiration: "About four years ago, when both our daughters were showing, they got their first outfits in non-neutral colors, and I couldn't find boots to match," says Robyn. "I found a source for white boots and started experiment-

HOME BIZ

 BY JULI S. THORSON

ing with various ways to color them. I tried four or five different methods before I found the one I use now. One day in 2004, when I was at a Western store picking up several pairs of boots I'd ordered for dyeing, another customer asked, 'What are you—the boot lady?' I liked the sound of that as a business name, so when I got home, I checked to see if that Web site address was available, and it was. I bought it and switched my focus from sewing show clothes to dyeing boots."

Clientele: Show exhibitors and rodeo queens from all across the country. "My initial customers were people I knew, but as word of my boot-dyeing service spread, I ended up with a clientele that's now more national than local."

Marketing measures: Her Web site; ads in *The Equine Chronicle* and on www.pleasurehorse.com; offerings on eBay; fliers and business cards passed out at shows; direct contact with trainers and show-clothes vendors and designers; business ads on Google; word of mouth.

"I also have an account with Internet Advancement, a firm that works to promote Web site visibility for Google searches," Robyn confides. "My background in computer work has been a big help in understanding how to market on the Internet."

Key materials/equipment: Besides a source for boots, Robyn also must stock dyes, brushes for applying them, and shipping materials. Her business requires workspace for boots being dyed and dried, plus office equipment that includes a computer. While she declines to share all her trade secrets, she will divulge her favorite method of color-matching. "I use embroidery floss, which comes in 250 numbered colors," she says. "It's much easier for a customer to send me a skein of floss to be matched than to send an entire outfit. I also work from fabric swatches and paint chips."

Behind the scenes: "It's very repetitive work," says Robyn. "If you were to spend a day with me in my workshop, it wouldn't be an exciting day!"

Greatest satisfaction: She loves going to shows and seeing her custom-dyed boots worn as elements of fully coordinated outfits.

Biggest headache: "People who don't plan ahead, and want their boots 'tomorrow,'" Robyn states. "I quickly learned to charge extra for rush orders, but I've also had to turn orders down because the customers didn't leave me with enough lead time for dyeing, drying, and shipping."

Home/horse life impact: "The business hasn't had a major negative effect on my home life, because I treat it like a regular job—I set regular hours for myself and stick to them. But I did have to miss some of my daughter's horse shows last year, because I had to stay home and work to fill orders."

If she'd only known: If she were starting her business over again today, Robyn says she wouldn't do anything differently. Still, she says she keeps her mind open for ways to improve her business. For instance, she's learned to offer sales and

do more advertising in November and December, when most customers are between show/rodeo seasons and sending in fewer orders.

Advice to you: “Create a system for organization,” urges Robyn, “and make yourself stick to it. Otherwise, you’ll drive yourself and your customers crazy, and if your business involves sending out a finished product, you’ll eat up all your profits by having to use expensive overnight shipping.”

EXTENSIONS ARE HER JOB’S DIMENSION

Equi-preneur: Barb Delf, Blue Grass, Iowa. Married, with no children, she and her husband have shown Quarter Horses since the 1970s. Barb worked as an executive secretary for 13 years, then retired from that job to help her husband stand a stallion and haul youth exhibitors to shows. She now works full-time at the business she started in 1999.

Horse-based home biz: Custom Tails, www.customtails.com; bdelf1394@aol.com.

What she does: Barb manufactures, sells, repairs, and reconstructs tail extensions for horses. She also offers manebanding services at shows, and sells equine hair-care products.

Inspiration: “When the American Quarter Horse Association legalized the use of tail extensions in 1997, the rule change caught everyone by surprise,” remembers Barb. “After extensions were allowed, I was like everyone else, scrambling just to find one. I remember trying to make an extension for my horse, using a hot-glue gun and tail hair stolen from one of the broodmares. Not pretty! Eventually, I found a good source of horsehair, and kept experimenting at making extensions until I got good results. Then people started asking me to make extensions for their horses.”

Clientele: Barb says her customers come from all over the country. Now that the use of extensions has spread beyond the Quarter Horse realm, her customers represent a variety of breeds.

Marketing measures: According to Barb, her online store, which she advertises in *The American Quarter Horse Journal*, *Paint Horse Journal*, and at www.pleasurehorse.com, generates strong business, as does word of mouth and taking her Custom Tails booth around to shows. Still, she says she conducts the majority of her business by talking to people on the phone or by learning of their needs via e-mail. “People usually have questions

START-SMART BIZ TIPS

1. Assess yourself. A successful home-based business takes more than a good idea—you also need high levels of self-discipline and persistence, solutions-based thinking, willingness to work long hours (often with no one to keep you company), and an interest in meeting needs of others—the people who’ll be your customers.

2. Look before you leap. Besides studying your potential market, to learn how much potential need exists for your idea and whether competitors already are filling it, find out all you can about zoning laws, tax structures, licensing requirements, and other factors that could make or break you.

3. Build a team. Even if you’ll be the only person working on the business itself, you’re still likely to need help from such professionals as an attorney, an accountant, your banker, a Web designer, and so forth—not to mention support from your family members.

4. Write a business plan. Whether it’s as simple as a brief outline of your goals and resources, or as elaborate as the sort of plan required by a business-loan officer, this will help you focus on the realities as well as the perceived glamour of being in business for yourself.

5. Set aside get-rich-quick expectations. Along with hard work, it also takes time to get a home-based business up and running to a profitable point. Even then, you may well find that you earn more in personal freedom and satisfaction than you do in dollars.

before they give me an order, so that phone and e-mail contact is important,” she adds.

Key materials/equipment: Along with such office equipment as her computer, phone, cell phone, and fax, Barb needs a steady source of the horsehair she incorporates into extensions. Her suppliers, who send her cleaned, color-sorted tail hair, are based in Asia. “The climate near Mongolia makes horses grow more hair,” she explains.

Behind the scenes: “When I meet non-horse people at parties and tell them what I do, they’re just dumbfounded,” Barb reveals. “First, they’re astonished to learn that horses wear tail extensions in the first place, and second, they want to know where the hair comes from—that’s usually the biggest mystery.”

Greatest satisfaction: “I love the challenge of resolving a difficult situation, and of doing what it takes to make a customer happy. I’m totally wrapped up in what I do, so really, almost every aspect is satisfying to me.”

Biggest headache: Delays in horsehair shipments from overseas. “I buy the hair in 300- to 400-pound lots, and since I rely on that for my inventory, the occasional late shipment can be a worry.”

Home/horse life impact: Until recently, when she moved her business into a workshop devoted solely to the business, Custom Tails threatened to take over Barb’s house. “I started at the dining-room table, then moved to a corner of the basement, then needed over half the basement! It’s great to finally have a

dedicated space,” Barb says. “As for impact on our horse life, the business complements our horse activities quite well. I get to take Custom Tails on the road to shows that I’d probably want to go to anyway.”

If she’d only known: “Ignorance is bliss!” she exclaims. “I started with what I thought was a good idea, and just jumped in, without giving much thought to what’s involved in running a sales-based business. I had to learn that aspect of it as I went along.”

Advice to you: “Base your business on something you really, really love, because you’ll find yourself immersed in it, pretty much 24/7,” Barb advises. “Do what it takes to provide unparalleled customer service, and be prepared to turn your life over to what you do. You’re as professional as you make yourself be.”

SHOW RIBBONS, PUT TO USE

Equi-preneur: Jean Christopherson, Cave Creek, Arizona. She and her husband have three grown children, all of whom have left home. The family’s horses have left home, too, going with one of their daughters. Jean stays connected to the horse world through her business.

Horse-based home biz: Barn Smart, www.barnsmart.com; barnsmart@earthlink.net.

What she does: Jean’s business is based around her ability to sew. Besides making stall drapes, stall bags, and custom-fitted horse clothing, she also turns customers’ show ribbons into quilts, wall hangings, stuffed animals, pillow covers, and other items.

Inspiration: “I’ve been sewing since I was a child, and got into sewing show clothes and slinky-type horse hoods when the kids and horses were still at home. Everything just kind of grew from there. The ribbon-based items came about after someone approached me with a request to make something from her ribbons. Ironically, she never ordered anything from me, but I took the idea and ran with it.”

Clientele: Jean has a variety of customers, ranging from trainers who’ve learned to count on her for textile-based items, to owners who want their ribbon collections turned into colorful conversation pieces.

Marketing measures: Along with her Web site, and distribution of fliers and business cards, Jean relies on word of mouth, and on exhibiting her wares at horse shows. For instance, she was among the vendors at this year’s Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show staged a few miles from her home.

Key materials/equipment: According to Jean, her most important pieces of equipment are “great scissors and a great sewing machine.” She also needs the computing and communications equipment required by most other businesses, plus a generous-sized workspace.

Behind the scenes: “People probably don’t realize the number of hours that go into the kinds of things I make,” says Jean. “It’s a time-intensive business. When it comes to the ribbon items, the design process is different for each project. The ribbons themselves dictate what I can make with them, and I have to let the colors speak to me before I can come up with a design.”

Greatest satisfaction: “I love people’s reactions when they get their ribbon projects back,” she says. “They’re usually so thrilled to see that box filled with years’ worth of ribbons turned into something they’re proud to display.”

Biggest headache: “Selling! I come from a Minnesota Scandinavian background, where modesty’s seen as a virtue, and I’m hesitant to promote myself. But, I keep working at it.”

Home/horselife impact: Jean’s husband works from home as a consultant, and she says they both find it difficult sometimes to turn their work off. “I often have to remind myself to do other things besides work on sewing,” she confesses. “We don’t have horses at home anymore, so there’s no impact there.”

If she’d only known: Jean claims she wouldn’t do anything different if she

were starting her business today. "This is the first job I've had, other than being a mom, that I really, truly love. I love the scheduling flexibility of working from home. And that every day is different. That makes it fun."

Advice to you: "Jump in and follow your heart. Don't hold back from doing what you love just because you don't have experience in running a business—you can take a class, or find good books, or get good advice from others on that aspect. And, once you are in business, listen to your customers. Some of the best ideas come from them."

A BUSINESS PLAN FOR BLANKETS

Equi-preneur: Katie Whetzel, Pullman, Washington. Besides running her home business, Katie holds down a fulltime job as office manager for a plumbing store, and gives riding lessons. She and her husband have a 2-year-old daughter.

Horse-based home biz: Whetzel Blanket Services, www.whetzelhorsetraining.com; katiwhetzel@yahoo.com.

What she does: Katie launders and repairs horse clothing, along with other equine-related items such as leg wraps and haybags.

Inspiration: "In 2003, I took an agricultural-entrepreneur class at the University of Idaho," she recalls. "As part of the class, I had to write a business plan for a start-up business, and came up with the blanket-services idea. When the class was finished, I put that business plan into action," she explains.

Clientele: Horse owners within driving distance of her home.

Marketing measures: Katie says phonebook advertising generates the most business. "My husband was a full-time farrier for five years, and from that experience, we learned that most new business came from people who found his name in the phonebook." Katie also posts her business card at area tack and feed stores that serve as pick-up/delivery sites for the horse-related items she launders and repairs. Info about her blanket service is included on her Web site, too.

Key materials/equipment: Katie had to purchase a heavy-duty sewing machine, washing machine, clothes drier, and shop vac for her business, and needs a steady supply of blanket fabric, thread, and blanket hardware. While she does have a home computer, it's not a primary tool for her type of business.

Behind the scenes: "People would be surprised by what serious damage horses can do to blankets!" she exclaims. "I think they might also be surprised by what it takes to put those blankets back together again."

Greatest satisfaction: Katie's most satisfying moments occur when she sees her end products finished, neatly folded, and placed inside the clear plastic packaging she uses for sending items back to their owners. "Before I had my own repair business, I used to get my repaired blankets back in the same black, smelly garbage bags I used for bringing them to the repair shop. I remember thinking that there had to be a nicer way to send items back to their owners, and now my return-packaging method brings me lots of compliments."

Biggest headache: "The fact that people send me blankets to repair that are almost destroyed by the time I get them," Katie says. "They can be a real puzzle to put back together, and I often wish people would send me their blankets before they get to such a ripped-up point."

Home/horselife impact: "My home-based business takes time away from both those areas," she points out. "When I'm in my workroom sewing up a blanket, that's time I don't get to spend reading to my daughter, or riding my own horse."

If she'd only known: "When I wrote my business plan, I wasn't prepared for the amount of patience required to do this kind of work. I've had to teach myself to take a deep breath and refrain from throwing my seam ripper out the window!"

Advice to you: "Know your limitations. If you intend to start a business before giving up your fulltime job, be realistic about what you can accomplish on evenings and weekends," Katie urges. "Expect that your business will take up more time than you originally thought. Keep learning about the field you choose, and about what it takes to run a business. And never be too proud to say, 'I don't know,' or to ask for help or outside advice." ■

"I found it easy to identify with the home-based entrepreneurs I interviewed for this article," reports *H&R* Lifestyle Editor Juli S. Thorson. "I've run my self-employed writing-editing business from home for close to 20 years. Every article I've ever done for *H&R*'s been produced from a spare bedroom in my house—where I can look out a window and see my horses as I work."