

The secret of MY SUCCESS

Michelle Hesse catches up with Patricia Vélez to gain some insight into her business and mind, and to see how her gia 2010 win and subsequent recognition has helped her company, Ambiente Gourmet, flourish.

There are some people who are born to spread word and inspiration to others through what they do and what they accomplish, and Patricia Vélez is one of those people. Through her store Ambiente Gourmet, Vélez helps others to solidify the connection between cooking, design and lifestyle and inspires them to make them all a part of their daily lives. It's not an easy thing to do, as any retailer knows, as Vélez is essentially asking people to trust in her vision and to spend their money on objects that she gathers and presents in her stores, and to basically have faith in the fact that their lives can be enhanced by the many and varied offerings of the Ambiente Gourmet brand.

Building that trust with potential clients and customers is the first step in creating any successful business and winning a Global Innovator Award (gia) at the 2010 gia awards at the International Home + Housewares Show in Chicago helped Vélez to create and nurture that trust, as the awards are recognised across the world and are considered the 'Oscars' of retail in the Americas.

"We were so very happy and proud to represent our country at gia," says Vélez. "While we had our minds set on winning, it was a pleasant surprise to have our efforts validated and to learn that the Ambiente Gourmet model is competitive internationally."

Vélez immediately recognised the importance of gia in her marketing and the overall growth of the business, and so after celebrating internally ("after all, it was a collective triumph," she says) she set her mind on a plan of expansion and brand development. It's an understatement to say that her plan has been working beautifully and the store, which was founded in 2004 on the belief that 'the art of the table is a universal language', continues to garner more and more attention from discerning shoppers and the media.

After the win, Vélez had her marketing team create a list of all means of communication that were likely to reach current and potential stakeholders. As soon as she returned from Chicago, Vélez then held a press conference with the most prominent media in the country including economic newspapers and specialised magazines, and organised an interview and article with Fenalco (the most important



merchants' association in Colombia, which sponsored Ambiente Gourmet in gia), which was published in the organisation's newsletter.

It didn't stop there. Vélez's marketing team sent the articles from the various publications to the shopping centres where their stores are located, explaining the importance of the gia award to her staff and the standard of other stores around the world that they competed against to really increase the sense of pride within the company.

As most people in business know, word of mouth is one of the best marketing methods around and so what better way to use that through the proud staff, dealing with Ambiente Gourmet's customers every day? It was a great move on Vélez's part. Posters were put up in every store for six months after the win and every email, every conversation and every piece of marketing material let others know of their gia win.

"And of course, we emailed our 300,000+ client database informing them and thanking them for their faith and support in our company," says Vélez. "We have really involved our customers, allowing them to share in our win."

Once the ball started rolling, the company received a lot of publicity from local radio stations and television shows, and that's when word spread even further afield and abroad. With the winds of success beneath her wings, Vélez then had the assurance she needed that the company could continue to expand.

"We realised that as long as we continued expanding with the moderation of the past, both investors and international consumers could benefit. We went on to open two franchises in Costa Rica, which have been a great success. We will soon be opening stores in Ecuador, Peru and Panama. The recognition and support from the gia panel was the driving force behind our decision to bring



our growth strategy to the next level and gia is now a part of our business on a daily basis," says Vélez.

Vélez is incredibly business savvy and gathered a lot of experience and direction from her past work and a move that she made with her husband and three children. "I am a lawyer by profession and had always worked in the trade, but during a certain stage of my life I had the opportunity to live with my family in the US for five years. Spending time around the table and kitchen became the hallmark of our family life and the inspiration for my future business."

During this time she also had the opportunity to visit the industry's main exhibitions including the International Home + Housewares Show, in search of new ideas to create her new business and she knew right from the beginning what she wanted.

"I needed to create a business that would fulfill 100 per cent of my expectations from both a commercial and personal standpoint," she says.

Upon returning home, more research showed Vélez that in Colombia there was a commercial vacuum in the area of kitchenware and yet a strong audience existed that was very interested in culinary products and related know-how.

"Aside from just products, I wanted to sell ideas to help families enjoy the moments around the kitchen table and improve their lives, and ultimately have a business that would beat the one tenth statistic," she explains. "I had heard somewhere that only 10 per cent of all new businesses survive the first two years and I didn't want to be in that 10 per cent."

So Vélez created a basic collection of around 180 products and rented some small spaces called 'corner shops' within a big supermarket chain. The collection grew rapidly due to great demand, so she decided to move into a bigger space in a shopping centre. As demand grew, so did Ambiente Gourmet.

Back at the time of the company's inception, Vélez was a lot more hands on in every one of her stores, but today her attention has to be of a more overarching nature. The business has a full working team dedicated to marketing that is supported through communication and input from the other departments within the organisation.

"However, as the general manager of Ambiente Gourmet, I try to be always present in as much of the marketing process as I can in order to drive the strategy through the firm and achieve desired executions."

Vélez is always on the lookout for inspiration around the globe, constantly visiting trade fairs and stores to learn from other successful business models and garner new ideas for all facets of her company. "It keeps me updated and generating ideas to stay ahead of the curve," says Vélez. "I love going to the International Home + Housewares Show, for example. I find it amazing; it brings together a unique group of providers and products, and has an excellent academic programme that does a great job in disseminating trends, expertise and research on marketing strategies. I am also fond of the retail tour and reunions that the IHA host."

The latest inspiring addition to Ambiente Gourmet is a new brand aptly called Patricia Vélez. "This brand embodies our efforts to become a greater part of our customers' lives, increasing our communication with them to fulfill their needs. Originally, the brand consisted of generating practical advice in the form of recipes and tips

through online media with great success (see www.patriciavelez.com), but now it has grown into a business in its own right."

This new brand came about organically—it was a natural growth from the company's original roots. "From the beginning, we created a very uniform product line that embodied all of our values, a true collection that has translated into a very tangible brand image upon which value can be built. It is very modern, friendly, easy to use and preserve, and with fair pricing," says Vélez. "I always say it's important that people do not buy with pain and don't stop using their goods from fear of wearing them out. The time when grandma's special kitchenware was locked in a cupboard has been taken over by consumers' needs for practical and beautiful goods that they can use every day."

What Ambiente Gourmet has managed to do is to offer collectible goods to customers from product lines previously thought of as stagnated. "Our customers tend to collect our pieces and I have heard

that exact dialogue within our store: 'I have this, I have that, what else do I need?' Then they come to us and proudly announce, 'all my kitchen is Ambiente Gourmet,' and they send us pictures online with emails that say things such as 'I set my table just as you showed me.'"

This online banter and community presence that is continually developing is crucial to Ambiente Gourmet's ongoing success and Vélez knows how important it is to keep up with innovations and advances in social networking and online media. Her team utilises networking sites such as Facebook (Patricia Vélez Cocina Divertida) and she has created a channel for cooking recipes produced in her own stores. Flickr, Vodafone in Spain and iTunes are also great communication outlets for the company.

"Our strongest presence remains on Facebook where we do sales, raffles, games, publish cooking recipes, tips, cooking notes and photos," explains Vélez. "And while not a great percentage of our sales is online, our channel is growing very fast. Additionally, we are offering a variety of 'free' products through our Patricia Vélez brand, which we consider online sales. This has created huge brand value that we will soon begin to take advantage of through a new range of products. In this sense we have great benefits from our online business that have translated to greater in-store sales and will mean an increase in future sales."

There are of course hundreds of stores in the world worthy of gia and the world will see many more arise, but it's the thought that has gone towards the growth of her company and brand after the award was accepted that makes Ambiente Gourmet stand out as an exceptional example of a global, innovative retailer.

In the words of Vélez, the company has "a unique identity, merging the efficiency of the modern lifestyle with elegance and distinction at an affordable price". And behind it all is the grounding passion of the woman who started the business. "Success in business is about having a passion for what you do and a clear idea of the business strategy," Vélez says with certainty. "Our underlying strategy is similar to many other companies, simple but essential—to make our stakeholder's lives better with our goods and services, with simplicity, innovation and quality." 
More information on the International Home + Housewares Show and the Global Innovator Award (gia) can be found at www.housewares.org and www.housewares.org/gia

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