

## MAKING IT

## Step It Up

A young shoe designer creates a custom strategy

**AFTER LEAVING CORPORATE AMERICA** to follow her passion for embellishing and designing shoes, Candra Palmer found out that pursuing one's dreams often means making sacrifices—in her case, a much tighter budget. But she was pleasantly surprised to find that skills she'd learned as a child from her seamstress mother not only helped her stay on trend and on budget, but also generate revenues.

"I was flabbergasted by pieces I loved, but couldn't afford," says the Chicago native about the expensive shoes she came across after moving to Los Angeles. "So I started to create my own idea of what a René Caovilla or a Giuseppe Zanotti [shoe] was."

Her handmade designs quickly caught the attention of L.A. stylists who commissioned shoes for their celebrity clients such as actresses Vivica A. Fox and Eva Marcille (Pigford), and R&B singer Angie Stone. Palmer officially launched the custom shoe business, Artyce Custom Footwear ([www.artyce.com](http://www.artyce.com); 310-838-7463), in October 2004 from her living room, naming the company after her mother. The 32-year old along with her two employees have been designing a lucrative future for Artyce Custom Footwear. For 2008, the company raked in \$400,000 selling personalized flats, boots, sandals, pumps, and platforms in silk, satin, leather, and exotic skins including stingray and python. Palmer projects 2009 revenues will reach \$700,000 due largely to her new semi-custom line.

Manufacturing shoes requires considerable investment in special tools, adhesives, thread, and materials. Palmer cashed out the 401(k) she'd accumulated while working at a global technology firm and pursued a niche strategy to get started. Rather than trying to mass produce shoes and sell to national retailers, she focused on working closely with customers to design unique shoes for special occasions. She also went against the grain and invested in a dizzying array of options—25 different shoe styles, 55 different colors and patterns, and 62 different types of material and decorative selections that includes feathers and Swarovski crystals. All for creating shoes—in sizes 5 through 13 in narrow to wide widths—that stand out. In all, Palmer estimates she's invested about \$150,000 of her own funds into her enterprise.

"Most women put a lot of time into putting their look together for that day, event, or occasion," says Palmer. "And we've created an avenue where women can create something that no one else has."



A PERFECT FIT. PALMER (CENTER) HAS HER FEET AND BUSINESS ON SOLID GROUND.

But for Palmer, running the business from home stalled growth. "I had to move the business out of my one-bedroom apartment," she says. "People don't value your product the same as they would in a store." So she borrowed \$50,000 from friends and family to rent retail space in Culver City, California. Annual sales nearly quintupled to \$200,000 after the 2006 move. Participating in two Swarovski crystal tours last summer broadened her reach with stops in Paris, Tokyo, Las Vegas, New York, and Chicago. Also, last year, Palmer was a **BLACK ENTERPRISE** Small Business Awards B.E. Next Award nominee.

Business is still booming. Brides account for 60% of sales and Artyce has a large following. Full-custom shoes start at \$500 and semi-custom shoes, made from existing patterns with limited embellishment options, start at \$200. Before visiting the appointment-only design studio, customers spend 30 to 40 minutes talking to a footwear specialist by phone, Skype, or iChat about the design process and the outfit or occasion the shoe is tied to. Palmer or an associate will sketch a design, peruse patterns, select materials, and offer samples. The finished product ships in four to six weeks.

While customization and an intimate shop setting are central to her brand, Palmer hopes to grow the business by selling a ready-to-wear line of fancy flip-flops through boutiques and licensing her design-your-own-shoe concept to franchisees in other regions of the country. She's proceeding with caution though. "Customer service is No.1 for us," she says. "Potential partners have to be committed to relationships and communication with the customer." —Maya Payne Smart



For advice from Palmer on keeping your company on solid footing during rough economic times, visit [www.blackenterprise.com](http://www.blackenterprise.com).