

WORD WITH... **Alicia Vanderschuere**





Photo by Patrick Sweeney

'Everything I've done has prepared me for this'

Alicia Vanderschuere is founder and CEO of RosieMade, an online marketplace that sells products made in the United States by women-owned or women-supportive companies.

In order to sell with RosieMade, a company must be owned or co-owned by a woman, must have a woman as president or CEO, or must have women in 50 percent or more of the top management positions.

Idaho Business Review sat down with Vanderschuere to talk about why she started a business to sell women- and USA-made goods and what she's learned so far. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you decide to start Rosie Made?

I had been a retail buyer in Ohio, and there are two things that made me want to pursue something different.

I felt like most of my career I had been pushed to outsource. At certain times I was leading a team and had to ask them to do business where it didn't necessarily make sense with a Chinese factory just for cost savings of a penny or two per item. I'd been reading a lot about the U.S. economy and how important manufacturing was to the backbone of this country.

I worked at a company that was a 95 percent female customer base, and in management committee meetings I would be one of only two women in the room. I felt if I could create something that was actually built for women in business, then I could do two great

things: create new jobs domestically – or at least help support that process – and help women in business.

What type of products do you want to sell?

A lot of the companies with really strong design have outsourced. The major players have huge design teams devoted to making the product great, but they outsource the product to make it. The USA-made companies didn't have the same design skills or the design team. The design seemed to lack a lot. My hope was to offer good-quality design, and USA-made.

Where and how do you find your vendors?

In my old world I would've gone to a trade show. This is a lot more challenging, because a lot of times we're working with smaller companies that can't afford to go to trade shows. So it's a lot more online research.

I've worked very closely with the women's business center and the (Small Business Development Center), asking them for leads. And then everywhere I go, I'm looking. I had no idea it was going to be so hard for me to find product, especially good-quality product and vendors that could actually perform.

Now that the word is getting out, people are contacting us.

What do you mean by vendors that perform?

Can they meet timelines? Do they

agree to a lead time and then can they actually ship accordingly? Do they have a pretty good business model to start, so are they still going to be in business? Can I feel comfortable that when they ship us something that it's going to be the quality that I expect?

Branding is important, making sure that they're aggressively managing their business so that when I carry it in my shop, I'm not going to have to be working constantly to promote it. They need to be doing something out there in the world to make it so that their brand is growing as well.

What do you think a small business can do to ease the process for someone like you?

Manage your business well. Make sure that you understand your target audience, and then if you're trying to sell to a retailer, who is their target audience? Make sure that you're pitching products that make sense.

Spend time looking at trends or understanding how the market works. Make sure that you have a blog to be able to help support a company like RosieMade.

How do these tasks differ from your experience in the corporate world?

It's the same, except now I have a really small checkbook. Before, I used to be able to say, "I need you to do this, because it's what's right for the business," and it might be the next day that I get a response. Now sometimes I don't even get a response.

And I have a much smaller team.

How did your previous experience prepare you for this?

Everything I've done has prepared me for this. The only thing that I really wasn't really prepared for is how everything works on a small-business scale. Even just how to manage inventory when you don't have a multimillion-dollar inventory management system, or how to find the right vendors that you can afford that can provide you good quality service in a timely fashion and not break the bank.

If you could go back to November 2012, when RosieMade officially launched, and give yourself a couple of tips for dealing with small businesses, what would you tell yourself?

One of the biggest things is going with my gut. There've been a couple times where I've overridden that when it comes to a service provider, and I went ahead with them even though I didn't feel like it was the best fit. I ended up figuring out afterwards that I really should've just gone with my gut.

Patience has never been a strong suit for me. In a big company, I didn't have to be patient because you say, "I need you to do this, and if you don't do it I'll give my business to somebody else who will." You always have somebody who's willing to jump in and help you out because there's big business to be had. It's a whole different thing now.