

The following is an excerpt from Raising Your Business, a Canadian Woman's Guide to Entrepreneurship by Joanne Thomas Yaccato with Paula Jubinville, Toronto. Reprinted with kind permission from the author, and quoted exactly as written.

Designing saddles for women

Sabine Schleese: Specific Need, Untapped market

...we have a classic story of someone finding a very specific need in a very specific market. Enter Sabine Schleese. Sabine is a wickedly busy mother of three. With husband Jochen, she also manages a custom Saddlery company, and a retail equine accessories shop. Most of the Schleese's clients are women, since dressage, according to Sabine, is a very popular pastime with the 'moneyed fairer sex.' Ironically, traditionally riding saddles have been made by men for men, with the exception of ... side saddles. Here's the kicker. No one got it that, anatomically, women are built quite differently.

One of the Schleese's clients, who was an important horse show judge, was having recurring bladder infections and was experiencing bleeding in the urogenital tract. She was rubbing herself raw every time she rode. She went to the Schleeses with her problem. She wanted to continue riding but obviously not at this physical cost. The light bulb went on.

It became apparent to the Schleeses that the physiological differences, evident in the sport of dressage, hindered women in riding properly. Because of the angle of women's articulation, the width of our pubic bone, and the depth of women's seat bones, women are fighting the saddle, the very tool that was supposed to help them achieve the proper position. What the Schleeses came up with was a design that would allow women to achieve the proper position and be able to concentrate on riding properly, rather than trying to sit properly at the same time as trying to avoid pain. What makes the Schleeses' work unique is their mission to build saddles that accommodate the specific anatomy of every individual rider. They did this by using their plaster cast method to customize each mold. Sabine said she always wondered why most of Jochen's saddles felt so uncomfortable, until looking at her own cast. She saw quite vividly how wide her pubic bones were, probably from childbirth, yet how narrow she was in the seat.

The saddle tree they designed, with its integrated air pocket, has been awarded a U.S. patent and is referred to in the vernacular as the "crotch comfort saddle". The initial premise of their technology was to serve an unmet need of women riders. It turns out that, eventually, the customization feature became an innovation that was also highly regarded by their male clientele for, uh, obvious reasons.

Sabine is a networker extraordinaire, which has helped her business greatly. But a definite advantage is the fact that her market segment is 95 percent women. Interestingly enough, she doesn't need to develop sale and marketing materials specifically for women because the Schleeses have a product that speaks for them. This is the ultimate in market segmentation. They also didn't need to do much conventional advertising because of another indisputable fact: Women are fabulous referral base. Word-of-mouth has been the main source of the Schleese's advertising. And it has worked!

Sales for the Schleeses have increased over the last five years by almost 150 percent. They have tripled their work space. Schleese Saddlery Service is a supplier to the U.S. and Canadian Olympic Equestrian teams. In 1990 they set up a three-year apprenticeship program with the Ministry of Skills Development to make Saddlery a registered and certifiable trade in Ontario and, as such, became the only authorized training facility in Canada. The company won an Award of Merit from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce in 1997. Even the *Wall Street Journal* and the Discovery Channel have found their story compelling enough to profile them.

Sabine's words of wisdom for the baby entrepreneurs? "Find something that needs to be done and then go out and do it. It's what you do and how you do it that may be just that little bit different from what's already available that will gain you a position in the marketplace. Oh, yeah, and be sure to blow your own horn because nobody else will."