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A STITCH IN TIME: EMBROIDME QUICKLY SEWS SUCCESS IN COLUMBIA MARKET (Published Jan. 29, 2005, in the Columbia Business Times) - 1/19/2005

January 19, 2005

About 900 words

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A STITCH IN TIME: EMBROIDME QUICKLY SEWS SUCCESS IN COLUMBIA MARKET

COLUMBIA, Mo. – For three years, Curt Kempf held what many would consider the job of a lifetime – telecommunications manager for the America's Center, which includes the Edward Jones Dome, home of the St. Louis Rams.

But the charms of the big city soon wore off; and he and his wife, Susie, wanted to return to Columbia, their former home for 25 years.

An EmbroidMe franchise provided the answer. Kempf opened up his shop 18 months ago in the Broadway Business Park west of HyVee, a few doors east of Shakespeare's West. Curt runs most of the store operations, and Susie handles the accounting.

"After living in Columbia for 25 years, we did a St. Louis hiatus for three years, and we really wanted to get back home to Columbia," Kempf said. "My wife had kind of been in the embroidery business at our house, and we were looking for a good franchise that we could invest in."

An international chain of 200 stores headquartered in West Palm Beach, Fla., EmbroidMe is a full-service provider of embroidery, screen printing, promotional products and athletic wear. After earning an engineering degree at Mizzou, Kempf sold computers and worked for nearly 10 years in the City of Columbia's Information Technology department before heading to St. Louis in 2000.

CenturyTel is one of Kempf's best customers, having ordered both clothing and specialty items. "One of the reasons we're Curt's customer is that we like doing business here locally with the people in Columbia, and it is nice to be able to deal directly with the owner, someone who is very customer oriented," said Don Neely, public relations manager for CenturyTel. "We've been dealing with him since he opened, and he has never disappointed us."

Kempf's store is open from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and by appointment on Saturdays. He said his location has been great, generating plenty of walk-in traffic. It is easy to give directions to his store, and there is plenty of parking.

EmbroidMe is one of the few embroidery or screenprinting shops in Columbia that has a

showroom in which customers can see and touch the merchandise up close before they purchase it. "The showroom floor allows business people to come in and see the selections," Kempf said. "Businesses like coming into a professional environment like this. The show floor is soothing and comfortable, and they're not used to that. A lot of times the sale is made when they feel a garment, and they like it and say, 'I want this.'"

Kempf's company is also one of the few stores that offer embroidery, screen printing and promotional products all in one place, and it carries women's sizes and styles as well, so that women aren't forced to choose from unisex styles. "As far as product selection, if you're looking for specialty items, he's got an incredible software program that can locate about anything you can dream up, so it makes for pretty much one-stop shopping," Neely said. "Tell him what you want, or tell him what you're looking for, and he can come up with some solutions or some ideas in a hurry."

Business is good; the company now employs six people. His customers are both businesses that want to promote their company name and individuals who commission a specific job. One of his stitching machines might be cranking out hats with a trucking company logo on the front, while another is stitching an intricate flower pattern on a satin dress. Licensed to reproduce the University of Missouri-Columbia logo, the company can put an MU Tiger on just about any garment or promotional product.

For most of his products, there is no minimum order, which is helpful to small businesses on a budget. Screen-printed t-shirts require a minimum order of a dozen because of production costs.

Kempf said people often want to personalize an item, such as a gift, a baby blanket, Christmas stockings or sets of towels. To get a good result on a project, it is important to look not only at the logo design itself but also at the fabric on which the design is to be placed, Kempf said. The design needs to be digitized and created to match its fabric medium.

"We treat every person the same, whether they are bringing in one baby blanket or if they are ordering 100 polos, we try to provide the same customer service," Kempf said.

Kempf said he started out knocking on doors at first, but now he gets most of his business through referrals and says that membership in groups such as Business Network International has been helpful in generating referrals for his business. He is a member of BNI's Columbia Referral Network chapter, which meets for lunch on Wednesdays at the Lenoir Community Center.

"I find personal satisfaction in helping people grow their business with the products we provide, helping to brand their name and make their company more visible," he said. "We love our community in Columbia so much, and it was apparent when we were in St. Louis for those three years that this was home. We were born and raised here, so Columbia is home. We feel good about contributing to the economy and to providing consumers a good quality, good value product."

