



Stephanie Estrin first began making the handmade monster dolls for her own children, ages 3, 6 and 15, after toy recalls had her sending some of their favorite creatures back to the manufacturers. She has increased her Web presence and has been able to grow her company entirely online.

BUSINESS

'Mompreneur' gets Web 2.0 savvy

BY CLARA COBB
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There once was a monster named Stu.

The Internet is a big place for business — and for Stu, the subject of a Feb. 3 Twitter post by Cedar Park entrepreneur Stephanie Estrin, who developed her company entirely online.

"He was orange and purple and blue. He loves to play and keep terrors away, which is all that a monster can do," it says in the CurlyQ Cuties Twitter post.

"We try to do these little poems and people really seem to like them," Estrin said. "We like to have a little humor. You know, we like to keep it fun."

Twitter is a social networking Web site that allows users to post comments (of 140 characters or less). Basically, it's a MySpace or Facebook status, or instant messaging "away message" — an online conversation in a mini e-mail. Users write "tweets," and get other users to follow them.

Estrin is president and founder of CurlyQ Cuties, a company that makes customizable, handmade monster dolls. She started her company about a year ago, she said.

"We haven't done a lot of advertising," she said, but the Web 2.0 marketing effort has been effective for Estrin and her home-based business. At the time of press, CurlyQ Cuties had nearly 4,000 followers and counting on Twitter.

Estrin first began making the dolls for her own children, ages 3, 6 and 15, after toy recalls had her sending some of their favorite things back to the manufacturers.

"I was looking to find safe and imaginative toys for my own children," she said. "And I have a lot of sewing experience."

And so the first monsters were born. As she began creating more monsters for friends and family, she thought if she was looking for safe toys, other moms probably were too.

Before monsters like Stu made it on the tweet scene, Estrin posted some ready-made monsters on www.etsy.com, a Web site allowing artists to sell their handmade work.

"It was a good starting point for me to see if people would even buy my creations," she said.

Soon customers were asking for customizations. Estrin responded with an interactive Web site, where children

can pick the attributes they want their monster friends to have.

"I think that's half the fun of it," she said, adding children have a real ownership of their toy when they have part in creating it online.

The bloggers agree. With more than 100 blog mentions, most of the buzz is in relation to the interaction children have over the Internet in the creation process.

"The Internet is a very large place," Estrin said, noting the possibilities it has allowed her and her company.

She started with a small investment and "bootstrapped it from there," she said.

Estrin maintains a Facebook fan page for CurlyQ Cuties and keeps in touch on LinkedIn, a professional networking Web site, as well.

Though she uses the Web as a marketing tool, she said sites, especially Twitter, have helped her answer some basic marketing questions, get feedback on the CurlyQ Web site and arrange for product reviews.

Even when a monster leaves the building, as it says in a Jan. 25 tweet, more can still be found online. Follow the monsters at <http://twitter.com/CurlyQCuties>.