

Entrepreneur mom Mei Xu, 41, mother of Alex, 8, and Michael, 7; cofounder and owner, with husband, David Wang, 46, of **Chesapeake Bay Candle**, Rockville, MD. Number of employees: 50.



EXOTIC INFLUENCES: Mei Xu introduced candles made with bold botanicals to a bland market and brought her line to the masses via big-box stores like Target.

Burning Ambition

My story: I'm not exactly what you'd call spontaneous. Passionate, yes, but anything unplanned, ad-libbed or off-the-cuff isn't for me. I plan. I research. And then I plan some more. So even before I had children, I sketched a detailed blueprint for a career that would offer flexibility. Realizing that being my own boss was my best bet, I traveled to China—where my husband, David, and I were born and educated—to find a product that would launch our business. After much debate and testing, David and I decided to start a candle company, where I could apply my passion for art and design. Then the research began: I studied the home departments in major retailers and boutiques for home and gift products. I learned all I could about the players in the market. Stores were awash with crisp, hip, stylish fashions. But the selection for home products,

lessons learned

1 MAKE IT PERSONAL.

The key to convincing a buyer to place your product is a face-to-face meeting. Bring your samples. Tell your stories. You want the buyer to be impressed with you as a person, not only with the product. We're a success because a young buyer took a chance on me.

2 DON'T PROMISE MORE THAN YOU CAN DELIVER.

When Target first agreed to carry our candles, we had to scramble to find a new factory in China because our old one couldn't handle the volume. We worked night and day for weeks to fill the order. Envision your greatest success, then be ready for it.

3 THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX.

During our start-up years, in the mid-1990s, we noticed that candles were usually sold without accessories. In a development meeting, we came up with the idea to combine candles with a candleholder and decorative pebbles in a candle gift set. It opened a whole new earning opportunity for us.



including candles, was decidedly unhip—think vanilla and pumpkin spice. In 1994, armed with reams of research, we launched Chesapeake Bay Candle, a company that would produce clean, contemporary candles with fresh, bold colors and exotic botanical scents. And that's when all my detailed planning went awry—thank goodness! You see, the detail that made us a hit with retail buyers was actually an accident. I was experimenting in my basement and forgot to add a very crucial chemical to the wax. So the first batch came out mottled—and gorgeous. The mistake led to a new candle look, which further differentiated my product.

We realized that fast-tracking our business was all about distribution. One of the first companies I approached was Bloomingdale's because I knew one of their buyers. The chain ordered several hundred units that first year, and I was thrilled to see my lime-green candles displayed near the store's entrance. But to turbocharge our company, I set my

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sights on something bigger. That's when I went to Target.

Naturally, I researched my would-be partner and knew its customer bases and market positioning cold. But I couldn't get past the buyer, who just wouldn't return my calls. I continued leaving messages for months, and then, finally, I heard a new voice on the voicemail. A new buyer! It wasn't until she took over that I got a shot at making my pitch. I hired a Target sales representative to help me (many big-box retailers won't let you in the door without a rep). I prepped like crazy, but once there, I wasn't even sure the buyer listened to

what I was saying. She was too busy smelling the candles. Within minutes she said, “I want to ship to all stores.” “How many is that?” I asked. “Eight hundred and fifty,” she answered. And that was that. That year, 1997, we were forecast to sell \$2.8 million worth of candles—we shipped more than \$8.2 million worth of candles. Since then we've also partnered with Kohl's and Pier 1 Imports. Because of our relationships with retailers, we've averaged 30 percent annual growth over the last ten years.

As the business has expanded and thrived, so has our family. My sons, Alex and Michael, love learning about the company. On the weekends we visit stores so I can check out how our candles are displayed. In the aisle, the boys take turns closing their eyes and smelling the candles, trying to guess the scents—and often succeeding. And with sophisticated, multi-note fragrances such as Tobacco Flower and Bamboo Jasmine, I must say I've taught them well.

—As told to Michelle Roberts

ask a pro

Managing the Marketing

How do you get top-tier distribution for your products? Here's advice from Heather Allard, president of The Mogul Mom, an online coaching and consulting business for entrepreneur moms.

KNOW THE RETAILERS. Compile a list of stores you'd like to approach and visit their websites to learn all you can about them: What's the retailer's niche? What's its specialty—customer service or huge selection? Use their sites to learn about their retail guidelines.

STUDY THE COMPETITION. Read reviews of competing products. Is there room for improvement or creativity? Maybe the one thing the other product lacks is the one thing yours has. Figure out what single thing (it may be price, selection or durability) differentiates your product from the rest and capitalize on it.

KNOW YOUR “RETAIL DETAILS.” These include minimums, wholesale price, suggested retail price, shipping costs, packaging specifications, payment terms and returns to vendor. Generally, your wholesale price will be double your cost, and retail will be double wholesale.

Payment terms are typically 30 days by check. You may want to offer retailers a discount if they pay by credit card—this prevents your accounting department from having to hunt down retailers whose payments are past due.

SHOWCASE YOUR GOODS. Tell retailers what promotional items you'll provide with opening orders, like display stands, signage or gift with purchase. Shop owners will want to know

what type of packaging your product comes in because they often have limited space—is it a bag with hanging hook or something they'll have to put on a shelf? The less work they have to do to merchandise, the better. Be ready to provide product samples so retailers can know and test the product before selling.

HIRE AN INDEPENDENT SALES REP. This is crucial if you hope to place your product in major retail chains, which usually have very specific guidelines, price requirements and shipping manuals. Find a sales rep by searching the websites of competitive wholesalers or through word of mouth.



THE EXPERT: Heather Allard coaches entrepreneur moms via her site The Mogul Mom.

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