

five

Keep it simple

In character, in manner, in style, in all things, the supreme excellence is simplicity.

—HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

★ **M**ichele Sipolt Kapustka loves the mail. Michele, the middle child of five kids, still lives in the same blue-collar Chicago neighborhood where she grew up, is married to her high school sweetheart, and now has a large family (four boys) of her own.

Throughout her life, Michele has loved getting, sending, and working with mail. She fondly remembers the birthday cards she received as a child from her great-aunt Zoe, even though she saw Zoe regularly, because they “made

the birthday special.” And when she was ten years old and her best friend moved to Florida, she enjoyed writing letters back and forth all the time, making every delivery day potentially special too.

Michele, who worked as a creative director at a direct-mail company for seventeen years, eventually saw her interest in writing letters develop into a passion for mailing *objects*. Wherever she might be, if she saw something she liked, from a sugar packet to chopsticks, she’d think to herself, *Who can I mail this to?* After all, she says, “Lumpy mail is exciting—when you get a stack of mail, isn’t the one with something unusual in it the most fun?”

One day in 2000, Michele was in a drugstore, buying a greeting card for a new mom, when she saw a bunch of balls in a bin and decided it would be more fun to send a ball than a card. She bought it, wrote on it “Have a ball with your baby!,” and off it went to the post office, with no further packaging. And then, because her friend loved it so much, Michele started sending balls to other friends for other occasions—fun, but not a serious business.

Three years later, Michele was at the post office, mailing yet another ball, when the man behind her in line asked what she was doing. Michele showed him. He loved the idea and asked if she would do the same for him. She said, “Hey, it’s easy—just run on over to the drugstore, pick up a ball, grab a Sharpie, write a message, come back here, and mail it.”

But he wanted her to do it for him. She said no. He pleaded. She declined. Finally he offered, “I’ll give you five dollars.” She consented.

"Lady," he said, "you're selling yourself short. I would have given you twice that."

She smiled. Bingo!

Michele immediately called her sister Melisa, who said, "Mich, we are really onto something here." Melisa went online and bought a website, www.SENDaBALL.com, and a business was born.

Michele and Melisa live across the street from each other, and for years they had been trying to figure out a way to allow at least one of them to stay home with the kids (they have seven between them). Now they had a home-based business that would let them do that. Their brother Marc offered to help as well, and soon they were sending balls all over the world and making a living with their new company. In 2010, SENDaBALL shipped over 20,000 balls—in 2011, it will be 25,000 to 30,000 and they will break a million dollars in total sales.

The SENDaBALL sisters received constant offers and advice from people suggesting ways to expand, change, or grow—even how to develop a manufacturing arm. But Michele's philosophy for the business is based on baby steps: "I can't take those giant leaps. I don't want to branch out. I just want to make this simple idea better."

The only change SENDaBALL has made has been to expand into the corporate business marketplace, sending out custom balls to mailing lists. In the meantime, the business remains pure and simple: an order, a ball, a Sharpie, and a couple of stamps.

In fact, Michele still writes some of the messages on the

balls herself. "It's not complicated. You have to have good handwriting and a sense of humor. That's it."

Simplicity is simple.

Perhaps this sounds redundant. But it's true, and it's important. If you're searching for success—whether you're starting a business, already working in one, or thinking about switching to a new career—think simple. Businesses like Michele's SENDaBALL long ago realized this wisdom and have used simplicity to make both waves and money.

At TOMS, this philosophy guides two primary areas: simplicity of product design and simplicity of business model. The latter value applies to all businesses. The former pertains only to businesses that are design-oriented. If your business is a service, there are ways to keep your service simple as well. More about that later.

Let's
the
than
forta
of ca
look
whic
deal

shoe,
more
com-
piece
ole. It
quickly,
ave to
n into