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Entrepreneur brings resale out of basement

by K. M. Lang

When Ann Siner and her sister, Jennifer, first set out to open a resale clothing store in 1991, they found fellow business owners less than welcoming. Some were downright snobbish.

“We had signed letters of intent at a couple of different shopping centers,” recalls Siner, CEO of My Sister’s Closet. “As soon as another tenant found out a resale store was moving in, they threw such a fit that we weren’t allowed to come in.”

Today nothing is standing in Siner’s way. She and her sister own 10 upscale resale stores in the Valley, including

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STSN photo by Gordon Murray

OLD IS NEW: Ann Siner, co-owner of My Sister’s Closet and My Sister’s Attic in Southern Chandler, has helped create a series of popular resale stores for clothing, accessories and furniture around the Valley.

My Sister's Closet and My Sister's Attic in Southern Chandler. They employ about 150, and in 2009 when other businesses saw flat sales, they watched theirs increase by a whopping 20 percent – a figure they've matched during the first half of 2010.

To assume, however, that recent tough economic times and the cost-conscious consumers it has produced are solely – or even mostly – responsible for My Sister's Closet's success would be to ignore the company's ever-profitable history.

Within six months of their first store offering shoppers "cute, current, clean" consignment clothing, Siner knew her enterprise was a winner, and for nearly two decades her hard work, innovation and business savvy – along with her partnership with Jennifer – has kept her company thriving.

A business is born

Siner, who moved to Phoenix in 1984 to pursue a graduate degree in international business, first conceived the notion of starting a resale store when she was in her early 30s and working as director of marketing for PetSmart.

During a business trip to Texas, she visited her first second-hand store "and the wheels just started spinning," she says.

"I thought, why couldn't you do a resale store that looked like a new store?"

Siner took the idea with her back to the Valley and recruited Jennifer, a recent college graduate, as her partner. The two researched their idea for about a year before opening My Sister's Closet in a 1,200-square-foot space at 20th Street and Camelback Road.

"We looked to see what was already in town, and our impression was that resale stores were dark, dirty

and dingy," says Siner, explaining that she and Jennifer worked hard to create a different environment for their customers.

Along with its strict policy on clothing acceptance – no more than four to five years old, a retail value of at least \$50, clean and wrinkle free – My Sister's Closet and its "siblings" offer prompt payment to consigners and extended hours to shoppers.

"It was about simply serving a customer need and kind of changing the whole industry from mom and pop to 'okay, let's do what's convenient for the customer, not what's convenient for the store owner,'" Siner says, adding that she feels her company is doing shoppers "a huge service."

"Say you're a secretary making 10 bucks an hour. You can come in and buy a beautiful business suit for \$15. Conversely, you can clean out your closet and get some money for it."

It was an extension of that customer-driven philosophy that led to the opening of My Sister's Attic, which sells quality consignment furniture, and Well-Suited, which offers men's resale clothing. Although shoppers were clamoring for the additional stores, Siner admits that she was initially uncomfortable with the idea of delegating responsibilities.

"The first store made a beautiful profit for us, so it was a big question. Do we really want the hassle?" she explains, adding that, when a "premier"



Submitted photo

SMART: To visit the 10 upscale resale stores in the Valley owned by Ann Siner and her sister, Jennifer, they own a fuel-efficient Smart Car.

Scottsdale location opened up, it was her partnership with her sister that helped make the expansion possible.

"We're a really good match," Siner says. "I have to give her 90 percent of the credit. She's a very easygoing personality. We're also kind of the yin and yang of working together because she's very artistic and I'm this nerd who likes to sit down with spreadsheets and crunch numbers."

My Sister's Closet recently began offering wedding dresses at its Chandler location. The company will soon add online selling, and is "always looking at expanding and potential new markets," says Siner. In the meantime, she's seen the "shame of resale shopping" largely disappear.

"When we were first in business, we'd be out somewhere, and we'd see somebody who we knew was a customer or consigner, and we could kind of see them put their head down like, 'Don't look at me like you know me.'

"Now it's a whole different atmosphere. People say, 'You have My Sister's Closet. I love that store!'"

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