

Squish makes solid start



photo NANCY PIERCE

KID APPEAL: In launching Squish, co-founder William Grasty made sure the company's products would be attractive to parents, shop owners and even children such as his son, William II.

Ex-banker, artist team up, make items for kid's rooms

FRED TANNENBAUM
STAFF WRITER

In 2003, William Grasty moved back home to Charlotte after six years launching business units for Hewlett-Packard Development Co. in California. He was ready to become his own boss.

Grasty, a former commercial and investment banker for First Union Corp., saw an opportunity to tap into the creativity of Nancy B. Westfall, an artist friend in Atlanta, while also selling to the growing market of parents with young children.

Grasty and Westfall, both parents themselves, struck on the idea of making high-end décor items and accessories for children's rooms — a product line that ranges from picture frames and lamps to shower-curtain hooks and Matchbox-car garages.

Westfall would handle the creative flourishes, while Grasty would take care of the business side.

Their venture — dubbed Squish — has taken off. After a slow start in 2003, the company made a major breakthrough last summer with a product debut at the Atlanta International Gift Market. Squish's items were a hit.

Using contacts gained from that show, as well as others around the country, Squish is selling to a fast-growing network of boutiques and specialty retailers.

By the end of last year, the number of stores carrying Squish merchandise totaled 130. Grasty and Westfall expect to double that to 260 this year.

Starting at the ground level

That doesn't mean the company's success has been easy.

QUICKINFO

SQUISH

Business: Creates and sells gifts and room décor for children to retailers

Founded: 2003

HQ: P.O. Box 6147, Charlotte, 28207

Principals: William Grasty, Nancy B. Westfall

Employees: 2

Phone: (704) 376-8476

Web: www.squishme.com

Despite his banking background, Grasty had no experience in this type of business. At the outset, the Squish duo also lacked money for market research.

So, along with learning about the industry via trade publications and the Internet, Grasty took Westfall's prototypes of lamps and other items to friends to ask their opinions, and he also visited gift shops throughout the Southeast.

"I would take a prototype into a store and say, 'Tell me what you think of this product,' or 'Tell me how this product would sell,'" Grasty recalls.

Then, in a move to keep their prices low, Grasty and Westfall found a Chinese manufacturer to make Squish's products.

Looking to expand

With those early decisions behind them, the partners' next goals include creating apparel and furniture based on its décor designs. Grasty and Westfall also want to bring other artists on board to create items.

Such foresight differentiates the Squish principals from their competitors, says Laura Mosso, co-owner of Christian Mosso & Associates Inc., a home and gift sales agency that sells Squish products.

"You always have to do something new, and Squish has done a good job researching it and putting something new in here," Mosso says. "They're energetic, willing to learn a lot on their own and always making improvements in their product line and growing it."



Westfall