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Weiss offers Fun and Function for special kids

Outsourcing warehouse activities has been a great help

Philadelphia Business Journal - by [Adam Stone](#) Special to the Business Journal

MERION STATION — As a pediatric occupational therapist, Aviva Weiss sometimes needed toys and exercise equipment for kids with special needs. Weiss was less than impressed by what she saw in the marketplace.

“The offerings were poor, they were expensive and they weren’t kid-friendly,” she said. “You would have a child on the cover of the catalog who is drooling. Granted many kids with disabilities drool, but I don’t think parents ever see their kids that way.”

In March 2007 Weiss launched her alternative, an online store called **Fun & Function** ([funandfunction.com](#)). Aimed at special needs kids — autism, cerebral palsy, Asperger syndrome — the site greets visitors with bright colors, images of active children and a vast, well-organized selection of toys and equipment.

“I used to have to look in half-a-dozen catalogs to find everything I needed,” said Nicole Hoffer, an occupational therapist in Manheim. “[Weiss] has it all, and she also has resources for parents and therapists, so it is all in one place.”

Weiss and her husband Haskel tapped family money to muster \$300,000 in startup funds for their home-based business. They spent it on Web site design, legal fees, inventory, a print catalog and outreach to therapists and parents.

The site brought in about half-a-million dollars last year, and Weiss expects to double that figure this year. The potential market is considerable, she said, with one in every 150 U.S. children diagnosed somewhere on the autism spectrum.

Weiss said her biggest challenge, and biggest success thus far, has come in the area of fulfillment. She decided early on to outsource that end of the business to fulfillment center New Jersey Pick Pack, a move that has freed up cash and taken a major task off her hands.

“It means we can focus on growing the business instead of worrying about all the small details of order fulfillment,” she said. “It also means we have great customer service. Our products ship within 24 hours. We probably could have done that ourselves, but there would have been a learning curve. Nothing is as simple as it seems.

“In December, which was a particularly busy month, we spent \$3,523 on fulfillment. This is roughly what we would spend on a shipping clerk if we would have had our own warehouse. We also paid \$1,288 to store our 160 pallets of inventory. I believe this would have been double [without] a fulfillment center.”

More to the point, outsourcing gives the business a degree of flexibility. “Our fulfillment costs are based on volume,” Weiss said. “So if we have a slow month, then we don’t get charged as much.”

Even as the business finds its feet, Weiss already has growth initiatives in play. She is expanding her Internet presence with By Kids Only ([bykidsonly.com](#)), where kids will be able to decorate their own clothing. It’s another way to serve the needs of autistic kids, who may have sensory processing problems or be hyper-responsive to touch.



Curt Hudson

Aviva Weiss with her year-old daughter Rachael, and the inflated ‘peanut’ (like a double exercise ball) that is in her online catalog.

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Such plans depend on cash flow, and here things get tricky.

“You cannot get a loan right now no matter how strong your business plan is, no matter how strong your sales are. We tried, it’s just impossible,” Weiss said. “We’ve gone to banks who didn’t even look at our business plan. They just said: If you don’t have positive cash flow for at least three years, you’re off the table.”

Weiss has borrowed from family and friends to keep the wheels turning. Right now she has an eye on opening an Amazon store as her next growth channel. That store could offer not just a way to gain exposure but also a means to make parents even more comfortable with shopping for special-needs products.

“It normalizes what we are and our mission,” she said. “Once you can find something on Amazon it becomes a ‘normal’ thing, and we have found that therapists and parents like to be able to shop in a big-box type environment. They like to have that sense of normalcy.”

Looking to get onto Amazon? Prepare for hoop-jumping. “There are a lot of rules and regulations, for example the pricing all has to be congruous between your warehouse and what you see on Amazon, so you need a way to make that happen. It’s my husband who has been doing it and all I know is that he has been complaining a lot, and he is not one to complain.”

Meanwhile Weiss continues to seek out new directions, forging ties with friends and colleagues who are ready to point her in the direction of possible new markets.

“When you are on that quest, when you are always looking and always researching, you are going to find those connections,” she said.

Up Close

Name: Aviva Weiss

Age: 28

Company: Fun and Function, 214 Upland Road, Merion Station, Pa. 19066

Best business decision: Outsourcing warehouse functions

Key challenge overcome: Managing cash flow

Advice to other young entrepreneurs: “If you believe in it, stick with it.”

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