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## Simply successful: The real story behind Simply Suzanne's growing popularity

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*Crain's Detroit Business*

On Suzanne Vier's first day as a talent recruiter for software giant Oracle Corp., her boss' secretary thought Vier was hired as a secretary instead of an account manager and didn't know where to put her.

Suzanne Vier, founder of **Simply Suzanne LLC**, is not what she seems.

Her company just inked a deal with Grand Rapids-based **Meijer Inc.** to put her granola in stores across Michigan — increasing the company's revenue by nearly 600 percent.

Yes, I said 600 percent.

In 2009, its first year of business, Simply Suzanne, then-named **Randy's Granola Company**, generated \$24,000 in revenue. This year, the company is poised to generate over \$300,000 in revenue.

Her fast growth trajectory can be linked to the personality trait of being amenable to change and listening carefully to advice from other entrepreneurs.

### **What's my age again?**

I first met Vier during a brief encounter backstage at *Crain's Idea: Detroit* conference in March moments before she was due stage for a panel about being a young entrepreneur in Detroit.

In passing, Suzanne said she spent 15 years in Manhattan working in the corporate world, but there was no way that could possibly be true. She didn't look a day over 21.

While I should have been concentrating on revenue and sales growth, all I could think was... how old is she?

If you have ever met me, or looked at my profile picture at the top of this blog, then you know I look young.

No matter how long I wait before shaving or grow out my hair, it makes no difference, I can't shake the baby face.

So, when I met Vier at **Avalon Bakery** in Midtown the following week to get properly introduced, I had to ask her her age.

"I am 38," she said "and I get asked that all the time."

"I'm 28," I replied. "and I get asked that all the time too."

### **Made in Manhattan**

We chatted over coffee about Detroit's not-so-underground food scene, why she left New York and a deal she was working on with Meijer.

I told her I wanted to meet again after the deal was signed.

After receiving an email saying Meijer would soon carry Simply Suzanne granola I set up another meeting, this time at **Biggby Coffee**, also in Midtown.

Our conversation started with the same basic questions as most interviews; How did you get started? What is your projected revenue? etc...

But I had to know how her experience being a rather young looking woman in a competitive industry in New York City prepared her for entrepreneurship in Detroit.

"To be honest, I want to write a book about it," she said. "It's silly but I have battled this since day one."

Vier says it was challenge to gain the respect she deserved from her superiors and coworkers.

On her first day as a talent recruiter at software giant **Oracle Corp**, her boss' secretary thought she was hired as a secretary instead of an account manager, so she didn't know where to put her.

"She called my boss to make had to make sure I deserved an office since so few women had one," she said.

Before taking the job at Oracle, she was tested in peculiar way.

"I was invited to a dinner at a nice steak house where all the men were drinking bourbon and smoking cigars. I was in my late twenties and they thought I couldn't be the person I was, so they put me through tests like seeing if I would order a salad."

Instead, she ordered a steak, medium rare with a side of horseradish and a glass of red wine.

"All of that helped me develop a thick skin," she said. "It taught me how to be tough."

It was in that environment where Vier learned how successful businesses are run and how to leverage relationships.

But perhaps her most important lesson was how to take advice.

### **In the beginning**

Simply Suzanne started as Randy's Granola Company and was born out of a Facebook conversation Vier had with her college buddy Randy Tenbrink.

The two met while working on the Clinton/Gore campaign but after graduating in 1995, Vier moved to New York while Tenbrink stayed in Michigan.

The two fell out of touch but reconnected over the popular social networking site.

Tenbrink, deciding to live a healthier lifestyle, talked about how much he liked granola. The problem was, it was too expensive for him to buy regularly.

They began swapping recipes and came up what would eventually become the recipe for Simply Suzanne.

Vier looked at the food trends of the time and saw potential in the healthy snack and decided to invest in their product.

She would stay in the background making deals and handling the financials; he would be the face of the company.

Vier said she wanted Randy's to be a Michigan-based company which meant she would have to fly back and forth from New York.

But as sales increased, her desire to stay in the corporate world waned, and in the fall of 2009, she moved back to her home state.

Suffice it to say that things didn't work out between Vier and Tenbrink but Vier remained in control of the company.

Pulling from the lessons learned in the advertising world, Vier decided to reach out to successful food purveyors in Southeast Michigan to hear their opinions on her product.

### **Enter Garden Fresh Gourmet**

In Dec. 2010, Vier emailed the folks at Garden Fresh Gourmet to see if they could help her come up with some ideas for her product.

But she got a whole lot more.

Garden Fresh invited her to their facility on Bonner Street in Ferndale to have a brainstorming session.

Thus began the evolution from Randy's Granola to Simply Suzanne.

One of the first things they asked was, "Who is Randy?"

As a courtesy to this gutsy girl, Garden Fresh had Mike Griffin of its creative team help her re-brand her product and develop new packaging.

Most notably, the new packaging featured Vier's face, front and center, to give it a more personal touch.

Vier said her team finished the design, but if it wasn't for Garden Fresh, it wouldn't have promoted some key elements of the granola.

The new packaging emphasized its flavor profiles, veganism, the fact that granola is high in fiber and also, since Vier uses sea salt and black pepper in her recipe, it is a sweet and savory snack.

Randy's Granola was already in **Westborn Market** in Berkely, but it wasn't until the redesign that it gained attention from national retailers.

Vier set up a meeting with Whole Foods to see about getting her product in its stores.

She flew to their marketing regional office in Engelwood Cliffs, New Jersey to make her pitch.

"The purchaser said his customer base has a lot of vegans and he was interested in carrying it," she said. "He also really liked the fact that our granola was savory but asked why that aspect wasn't noted on the package."

So, Suzanne tweaked the design yet again.

She added a sweet and savory line atop the packaging. A large, faded circle with a check mark on the front denotes the product's veganism, and a high-in -fiber line was also added along the bottom.

Simply Suzanne is now in over 100 stores across Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois including Whole Foods and Meijer — and is set to expand nationally.

### **Parting wisdom**

Vier came to our final interview armed with a sales packet full of facts, figures and numbers but I have to admit, I was much more interested in the back story of Simply Suzanne.

Here is a woman who created a product, its packing, branding, and recipe only to have two other companies point out its flaws.

And instead of getting down on herself, or angry at them for not seeing her vision, she absorbed their advice and ran with it.

In my opinion, one of the most perilous things an entrepreneur can do is think their customers share the same tastes, likes and dislikes as they do.

So how was Vier able to detach her feelings from her products?

"It takes maturity in a business sense. The difference between a successful entrepreneur and some who is just passionate about something is the entrepreneur understands that there is a customer base out there from all different walks of life. You have to understand this is a service industry. You are providing for them, not yourself," she said.

Well put.