

Low-Waste, Plant-Derived Body Care

BY SUSAN PALMQUIST

It's not too surprising that a few years ago Teresa Andry's career took a 180 degree turn. After working as a product developer in the personal care industry, she witnessed firsthand the waste and harmful chemicals connected with the production of things like fragrances and shampoos. So in 2007, she launched SunLeaf Naturals that sells soaps, candles, diffusers and body balm.

Andry's goal was simple, to produce responsibly packed products made from ingredients inspired by and found in nature. Each item is developed and handcrafted by her at the company's headquarters in Waconia, Minn.

"I've always dabbled in mixing and making things. When I graduated from college and went on my first job interview, I told the interviewer that I loved experimenting with things and grew up making my own candles and soaps. That seemed to get me the job," said Andry.

Besides dabbling with soap mixes, another lifelong passion had been spending time in the great outdoors. She recalls her time in the family's cabin in Northern Minnesota where she grew up



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAULA KELLER

SunLeaf's Naturals' Teresa Andry is committed to responsible packaging and well-balanced, high-quality body care products.

appreciating and respecting the environment.

"Apart from my concern for the chemicals and their toxicity, another thing that shocked me was the waste in

the personal care industry. I'd walk by dumpsters and see them full of plastic bottles that had been tossed away just because a label wasn't centered correctly," she recalled.

So when she started her own company she made a conscious effort to do things differently. There'd be no excess packaging and no plastic bottles. The shampoos and soaps are made in bar form and wrapped in environmentally friendly paper.

And less packaging isn't the only reason Andry opted to go the solid bar route. "You don't need water, which means the product doesn't spoil, so you can eliminate things like preservatives and parabens."

And in fact, working so long with chemicals has caused her to experience yet another problem firsthand, sensitivity to handling anything with fragrance.

"One night I was sitting at the kitchen table with my husband telling him I'd love to create a dishwashing soap but I knew I wouldn't be able to handle it. He suggested putting it on a stick," she said.

Each product can take more than a year to develop. Andry tests all the formulas, making records of her results and then letting family, friends, and even customers test them. They have to get a positive feedback before she markets any new product or fragrance. She said she tries to balance out fragrances, asking herself, "Does this have too much citrus?" or "Maybe this is too masculine a scent." She uses only plant-derived 100 percent essential oils in all her products.

So far, the shampoo and body soap has been a customer favorite. And because the products have no excess packaging, they've become a must have on every traveler's wish list. They now

sell a travel pack that Andry says became the season's bestseller.

SunLeaf products are available in a variety of stores, but Andry admits co-ops are a favorite place for her. "I go there to shop myself, so it seemed fitting I'd want my products to sell there, too. I'm pleased to say that co-ops and their customers have philosophies identical to SunLeaf's, which means a lot to me. Plus, while I'm in the stores I get to chat with customers and co-op staff and get their feedback."

Like all successful businesses, she quickly admits she can't take all the credit. First of all, there is her husband, who, while not involved in running the business, built the wooden racks that display the products in stores. Andry also credits him for finding SunLeaf's first employee.

"He's a remodeler and was working in a lady's house. He was telling her about the company I was launching. She jumped right in and said she wanted to help me. She came on board as my sales and marketing person and [was] working for me even before I'd made my first product.



PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY SUNLEAF NATURALS

She's a stay-at-home mom who does a wonderful job."

The company also has two other women who help out. One is in charge of wrapping and packaging, the other, another stay-at-home mom, does the artwork for the marketing materials. Work takes place in a warehouse that is a former soda pop bottling factory. A typical day is usually spent mixing batches of soaps and trying new formulas.

Adding new products is on the horizon. The first is a hand and body soap that will be harder and longer lasting with a lemon vetiver scent. One day, Andry would like to add products for cleaning the home wherein customers will buy a premade mix and simply add their own distilled water. However, for now, she's just happy to supply customers with products that are both good for them and the environment.

Susan Palmquist is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in such publications as Health, Arthritis Today, Relish and American Profile. She's also the creator of the website, *The Budget Smart Girl's Guide to the Universe*, which was named one of the top six money sites to watch in 2009 by U.S. News and World Report.

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