

Oprah's Favorite Things: A blessing and a curse

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Some small businesses dream of having their products chosen, but others say be careful what you wish for.

By Jessica Seid, CNNMoney.com staff writer

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NEW YORK (CNNMoney.com) -- "When Oprah came along, it exploded our business," said Pure Color Jeans CEO Kerry Jolna.

It's commonly known as the "O" Factor, but when Oprah Winfrey touts a product on her show there's nothing common about the craze that follows. Each year, starting in September, Oprah's staff picks products for her November "Favorite Things" show, which highlights a range of products from laptops to sleepwear to pastries.



And while many small businesses long for such exposure and the orders it can bring, there is also no way to fully prepare for the instant fame - particularly for a company with a tiny staff and limited resources.

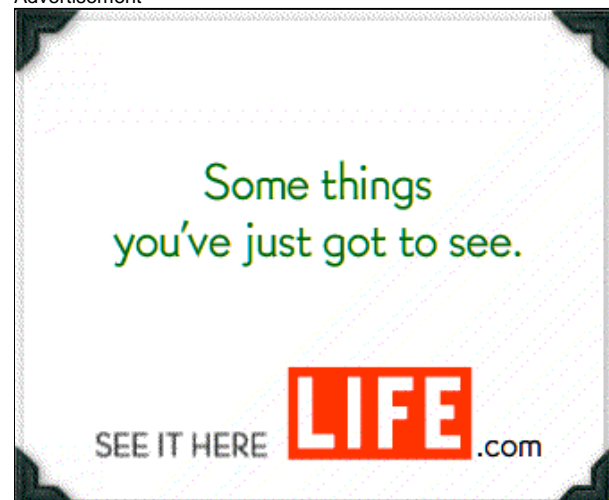
With that being said, here's how some small businesses fared when Oprah Winfrey picked their products as her 'Favorite Things,' and where they are now.

Like the Chicago commodities pit?

When Oprah started requesting more and more pairs of Pure Color Jeans, Jolna knew his business was on to something good, but "we had no idea it was up for a favorites show."

In fact, Jolna's jeans business only got the official word that Oprah had decided to feature their

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pants six weeks before "Oprah's Favorite Things" aired in November 2005.

All of a sudden, Jolna said, "it was like working in the commodities pit in Chicago. The first couple of weeks were really crazy."

It wasn't until the spring quarter that the company began to catch up. And almost a year later, Pure Color Jeans has doubled the size of its infrastructure but is still struggling with more demand, even though the jeans, at \$158 a pop, were the most expensive of the small-business offerings on the show last year.

From popping corn to an explosion

Scott Schroeder, executive vice president and chief financial officer of family-owned Garrett Popcorn Shops, said the consequences of having Garrett's Chicago mix of CaramelCrisp and CheeseCorn on the show were "absolutely remarkable."

"We had a hunch we would see an uptick in sales but not to the extent that we did," Schroeder said.

"The afternoon (Oprah's Favorite Things) broadcast we had over 100,000 Web hits and our sales volume for the month of December increased by over 100 percent."

But the surge in sales also brought its share of problems too, mainly long hours and few breaks. "We went from making popcorn eight hours a day to 24 hours a day."

And now, "the Chicago mix is still our most popular option. It's flying off the shelves."

Tents and turbulent times

When Oprah's producer called Moveable Feast last October and said Oprah wanted to feature their deeply fudgey brownies, owners Kim and Matt Lennert were ecstatic, but also concerned that their loyal, local customers might suffer.

Before the show aired, the Lennerts set up a mail-order business and erected a tent in the yard to sell brownies until they could secure some additional space, hire more people and set up a call center.

"Personally, I worked from the day we got that phone call until New Years' without a day off, and through the holidays," Matt said. "We were quite overwhelmed."

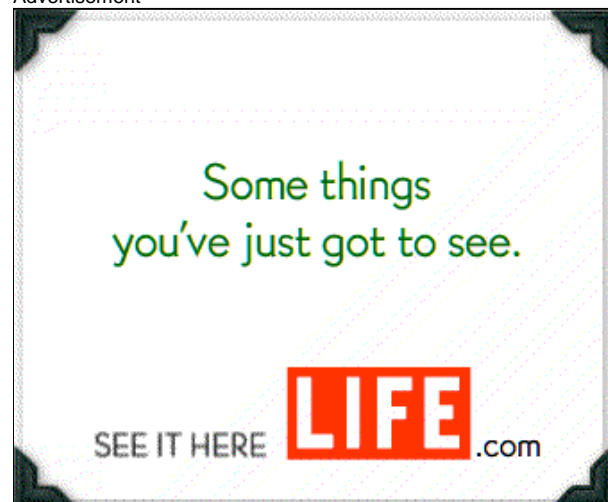
Although sometimes, Matt admitted, keeping up with the demand felt like an overwhelming burden, he said "if we could do it all over again we would."

The pop that never came

The chef at Fox & Obel Market would occasionally offer a container of cookie dough in the refrigerator case, but never considered making it available for purchase regularly - that is, until Oprah's people called.

Oprah wanted to feature the bakery's oatmeal cookie dough on her show. Great news, except the company feared that trying to fulfill orders for a product they didn't normally sell - and would need to be kept cold during delivery - would create a logistical nightmare, Judith Mara, director of marketing, explained.

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"We tried to convince her to do the cookies instead (of the dough) but she wasn't interested," Mara said.

So, within weeks Fox & Obel had to coordinate how to overnight all-natural organic oatmeal raisin cookie dough across the country, Mara explained.

"When the show aired, we thought things would go crazy but they never did."

And while it's hard to pinpoint why Fox & Obel didn't have the same kind of experience as Oprah's other picks, Mara believed "a lot of people were shocked at \$50 for a can of cookie dough."

But she said the company isn't disappointed with the results. "It exposed our web site to the world, it exposed our bakery and products - and the oatmeal raisin cookie dough is still the No. 1 seller," Mara said.

"They tried to warn us..."

Five days before the taping, Oprah threw a Kashwère robe down on the conference table at a producer's meeting and just like that, the robe was added to the selections for '05, according to Pete Seltzer, CEO of Kashwère.

With such short notice, Seltzer knew it would be a challenge. "They tried to warn us," he said. But after Oprah's Favorite Things aired, "for six consecutive weeks we could not get a call out, the phones were hammered and we did thousands and thousands of Internet orders."

People "assume everyone on Oprah is like Nike or IBM, sometimes the burden on us is overwhelming."

Seltzer offered his staff pizza and brought in friends of friends to handle the workload in the months after the show. And Seltzer, a single father, said "there were plenty of times I brought my kids to work just to be around them."

And now? "My company now is a much stronger company because of it, we can handle bigger volumes and make it look easy."

"Oprah saved our business"

When Oprah's team chose the We Take The Cake's Florida key lime Bundt cake as one of Oprah's Favorite Things in 2004, owner Lori Karmel said she was given no guidance.

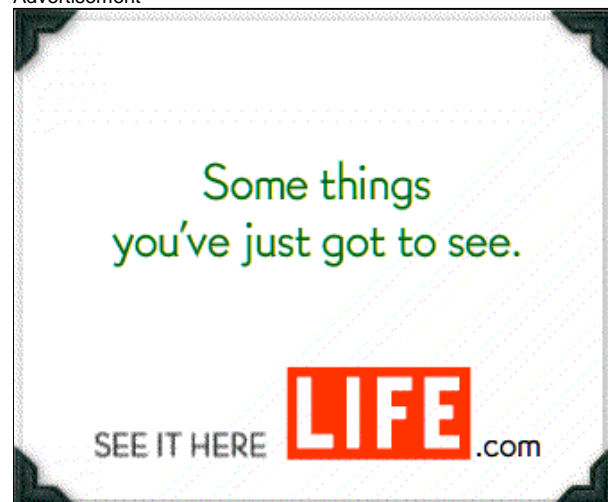
"They said be prepared because you're going to get slammed, but there was no indication as to what that meant."

As the only small business among Oprah's Favorites that year, We Take The Cake's five employees, three phone lines and one ill-equipped server were no match for the onslaught following the show.

"Our server got knocked down in the first four hours. The phone started ringing the minute our cake aired - and it rang off the hook around the clock for a full week," Karmel said.

With Karmel's friends and family returning calls from home, the bakery sold 10,000 cakes during the 2004 holiday season, most of which were key lime.

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"Oprah saved our business," Karmel said. "Our sales for 2004 were around \$450,000 and at the end of 2005 our sales were \$840,000."

Since then, the cakes have been on the Food Network and sold through Neiman Marcus and Harry & David. "We're also working on something for William Sonoma and I'm talking to Whole Foods and QVC," Karmel said.

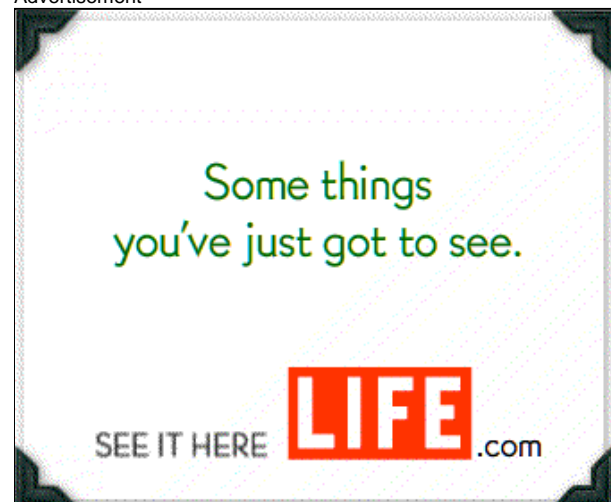
Karmel advises other small businesses hit with instant success to follow her lead, "once things slow down, you have to create opportunities."

Gallery: [See small-business products Oprah picked](#)

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