
Self-esteem Marketing Brings Surprising Rewards

How a former model, actress, and therapist tapped all three careers to find “Purple Cow” success in the competitive and lucrative lingerie market.

By Melinda Kaitcer

Valentine’s Day 2003 Amanda Kennedy was getting dressed for a dinner date with her husband, and she says that when she caught a glimpse of her back in the mirror, she didn’t like what she saw. “I was 44 and starting to gain a little extra weight; some of the new, close fitting fashions just didn’t look good on me. It was very frustrating, and my self-esteem was dropping” Kennedy remembers. “Usually from the front I looked fine, but from the back, I looked ten years older. This sweater was especially frustrating because it was a fine gauge cashmere and very unforgiving, especially with a bra that was creating a bulge on my back. I tried every bra I had with it and they all caused the same problem.

Her inventive, spur of the moment solution was the spark of what now has women raving about the smooth silhouette Kennedy’s Sassybax bras create under today’s close-fitting fashions and clingy body-emphasizing fabrics. And, after navigating the challenges of entering this tough market by combining her creativity, inventiveness, and common-sense practicality to find some equally inventive business solutions, Kennedy is reaping the rewards of her innovative thinking with \$2.4 million in wholesale sales last year alone.

So how did Kennedy take this novel idea from concept to reality, and then break into the highly competitive lingerie market to capture the loyalty — and the purchasing dollars of the lucrative and highly sought after market



of American women? “The success of Sassybax is really about tapping into women’s psyche and emotional needs,” Kennedy says. Manufacturers of bras have forgotten how important it is to help women look good in their clothes and not just in their lingerie. This is the success of my product as well as what I call a self-esteem marketing approach.”

And Kennedy should know about clothing and how it plays into the female self esteem. Starting at age 14 she started to work as a model, followed by becoming Miss Texas, USA, and then went on to a successful career as an actress on such television shows as *BJ and the Bear*, *Cheers*, *Remington Steele*, *Hart to Hart*, and many others (*Barbra Horan* was her birth and stage name). After eleven years of the ups and downs of Hollywood, she decided to pursue her interest in helping other women with self-esteem issues related to all kinds of life situations by becoming a licensed professional therapist. After nine years in private practice, Kennedy, by then 42, faced two brain surgeries for aneurysms, from which she had to recuperate for several months. Because of the uncertainties she was facing, she closed her practice. Although Kennedy recovered completely and much faster than expected, she wanted to do something different — something that would synthesize all her talents. For about a year she painted large abstract canvases and hung them at local restaurants for sale. She sold several but describes painting as “too isolated for a people person like me.” Then her idea for updating women’s bras literally possessed her from the moment she thought of it. “In retrospect,” she says, “I guess I was unlocking my creativity with my painting.”

And because the power behind marketing to women had also sparked her imagination, when the idea that eventually evolved into Sassybax came along, Kennedy says she had to give it — and her own theories borne of a decade spent counseling women — a try. “Tapping into emotions is an ex-

tremely effective strategy for marketing a product to women,” she says. “Women don’t buy from their heads as much as from their hearts. If your product and your marketing grabs them emotionally, you’re going to have a much better response, especially when it comes to beauty and fashion products. This is not about vanity — women want to look pretty because of an emotional need to be accepted and seen.

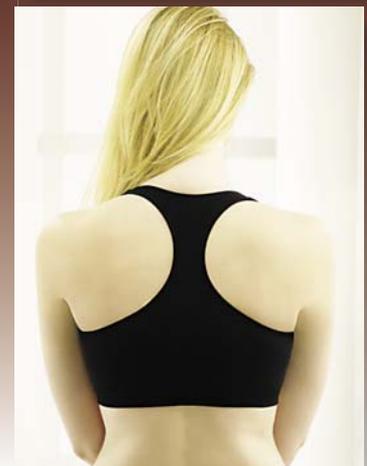
With Sassybax, Kennedy has combined her natural talents, personal interests and educational and professional backgrounds to prove her theories correct, much to the delight of her customers. She shares her path to success — and her special insights on marketing to women with \$1,000,000aire Blueprints readers.

First tell us about that “light bulb” moment when you devised the fashion solution that later evolved to Sassybax.

The light bulb flashed on Valentine’s Day, 2003. I was trying to put myself together for dinner with my husband. I wanted to wear that little blue cashmere sweater that I loved. I hated the bra strap bulge on my back and in a moment of frustration, I turned a pair of control top panty hose upside down, cut off the legs, cut out the gusset and slipped it on instead of my bra! When I put the sweater back on, my back was completely smooth. I began to laugh, but it started me thinking. Later that same evening, as I shared my new secret weapon against bra bulge with my husband, I said, I’ve got a crude prototype here for a product women will love.”

So what did you do first?

I started researching how I could possibly make something that was an alternative to a bra, and especially something comfortable. I was so tired of bras being uncomfortable. I got on the Internet and did a Google search of hosiery manufacturers (www.google.com). I found a Hosiery Association with dozens of phone numbers. I called



Frustrated with the visible bulge that most bras left on her back through her clothes, Kennedy created the first Sassybax prototype by cutting a gusset from a pair of control top panty hose. Today she is reaping the rewards of her innovative thinking with \$2.4 million in wholesale sales last year alone.

every one of them, described my idea but not in full detail, lest someone steal my idea, and asked if they had any interest or information that would help me develop it as a product.

What was the best piece of information this research turned up?

One woman knew of a machine that would knit around the torso without a single seam, the Santoni machine from Italy. (For more information about this machine, see the sidebar or go to www.santoni.com.) Women in Europe have been wearing seamless lingerie and loving it for years but women in America weren't familiar with it even though companies like Wolford is very popular in this country and uses that technology.

Once you found the right technology, what did you do next?

I investigated factories that had these machines in this country and found a very small number. I wanted

do my manufacturing domestically, because it's so much simpler to get to the factory quickly, to say nothing of the convenience of speaking the same language. I had never run a business manufacturing anything, so the less complicated I could make it, the better. I have discovered that producing and selling a product is much more complicated than acting, modeling or even practicing psychotherapy because of all the details and different pieces of the puzzle you must learn.

Tell us your thoughts now about this decision.

I'm happy my factory is in this country. To hop on a plane and go overseas is time consuming and I wanted to give Americans jobs. I believe we're farming out too much to other countries and mills in this country are folding every day. However, at this point, I am not opposed to overseas manufacturing anymore. As things evolve, I can see the need for that in my future.

Once that decision was made, what was the first step to making your idea a reality?

Armed with just my drawings, ambition and enthusiasm, I went to several interested domestic factories and talked to them after they agreed to sign a non-disclosure document. Basically, I went with hat in hand to ask for help in manufacturing a new garment no one had ever heard of.

What was their response?

They were skeptical, of course, and asked for some kind of assurance that they would not invest money in developing my idea and lose money if I couldn't sell it. Most were cordial, but "not interested, thank-you." However, there was one lone guy, head of sales in his factory, who was incredibly impressed with my idea — he got it and he appreciated my passion for my product. (He is now working with a factory overseas and we are still in close contact.) Others in that same fac-

MORE ABOUT SANTONI TECHNOLOGY

Using sophisticated technology that allows for a circular system of fabric knitting that can create a knitted, "tubular" garment that is completely without seams, the SANTONI company (www.santoni.com) is headquartered in Italy (address and phone numbers below). The Santoni School offers training courses on the advanced technology of Santoni Seamlesswear machines, as well as:

- Design software courses
- Designers staff for Seamlesswear creative collections.
- Training for young designers, fashion and mechanical-textile schools
- Permanent exhibition of all Santoni machine families
- Cooperation based on Research & Development with the most important Yarns & Fibres producers
- Showing the whole Seamlesswear production process: washing, dyeing, pre-boarding, boarding, sewing, packaging etc.

- Customers and brands support in the study and development of their new tendencies and creation of New Collections.

Key advantages of this technology, as listed on the Santoni Web site include:

- Reduction of labour costs
- Reduction of working machines number
- Reduction of industrial spaces
- Reduction of energy costs
- Reduction of yarns stock
- Reduction of fabric stock
- Reduction of sampling time
- Reduction of fabric rejects
- Reduction of sewing costs
- Complete garments
- Production reduction of finishing process costs
- "Just in time" production
- Production of complete garments





In the beginning Sassybax operated on a shoestring budget, so Kennedy did everything that she could on her own or with help from family and friends. Left to right: Name 1, Name 2, Name 3, Amanda Kennedy, Name 5 and Name 6

tory got it, too —women, of course — because they could understand the need and see the possibilities for sales. My only assurance to them was, that if I could sell myself as an actress, I could sell my product. They trusted me, and they were right to do so, because they have made quite a lot of money from my product.

So what did you do to capitalize on this interest? What did they do next?

They produced a prototype for the product. Then we spent nine months perfecting it. We had an understanding that they would get the order once I had a finished product. They were looking for business and they liked my idea, they believed in me — it was a meeting of the minds.

How did you evaluate the prototypes, since there was nothing on the market?

I knew exactly what I wanted. How I wanted it to look and how it had to function on the body.

Did you get any other opinions on these prototypes?

I gave them to friends to wear and critique — everyone had opinions, feedback and input. I put together an informal focus group with wine and cheese for about twenty strangers. I didn't want to know them or for them to know me. These women came and tried on the samples, and they all ended up sitting around in them all evening — not taking them off. I knew I had a winner when I saw that.

What was some of their feedback and what did you do with it?

They didn't know I was the designer, so when I heard comments like, “. . . It's so comfortable, it makes me feel sexier, it makes my back feel more sup-

ported, the long one helps me keep my tummy in, and, best of all, when can I buy this bra?” That was all I needed to hear. I didn't go through the whole corporate thing with 100 people and a research firm. I didn't have that kind of money to spend. Everything had to be done on a shoestring budget. Besides, this group told me what I wanted to know — that the average person was impressed enough to validate out loud what my original objectives were in creating it.

When you say, “Everything had to be done on a shoestring.” Can you tell me what that meant to you at that point?

Everything I could do myself or through friends I did to keep my costs down. For example, I spoke to several logo companies and they all wanted around \$20,000 to create my logo. That, to me, was insane.

But you have a great logo — how did you get it?

After I shopped around among the “logo companies” I just thought, I can’t afford this; I’m an artist, maybe I can come up with something. I had an idea of what I wanted — a “Varga girl” look from the 40s, when women had shape-ly and curvy figures. A friend of mine said she knew someone straight out of art school who was doing an internship with *Gucci* in London who might love the job. Her internship was not paid, and this extremely talented art student was happy to have the work — and the experience for her portfolio. So I got a great logo for \$1,500 and I still love it. It’s a very positive image for women because it’s an image that women can relate to. The Sassybax girl is sexy and sassy.

Speaking of that — how did you come up with your name?

Just like there are “logo companies,” there are “naming companies” but they are expensive too. I decided to do it myself. The independent woman in me liked the image I think of when I hear the word, “sassy.” And, because of what this bra actually does — make women look sassy, even from the back — its name needed to have something to do with the back. So Sassybax seemed like a catchy solution.

What were some of the other pieces of your marketing strategy — and how did they fall into place?

I knew I should take advantage of the Internet. I searched for a Web designer by asking people I knew who had Web sites. Again, it was very expensive with \$5,000 being the lowest bid I got. Some were as high as \$20,000. So, in true independent fashion, I found a Web designer who was willing to work hourly and I did the graphic design myself. I spent \$1,500.

I’m starting to understand this “shoe-string” marketing. Tell me more!

It’s commonly said that there are lots of good ideas out there, but that you must have lots of money to bring them to market. I managed to work my way around that by cutting corners wherever I could. I knew I was going up against established companies like *Victoria’s Secret*, but I also knew I had a wonderful product that filled an unmet need for women.

What about a patent — didn’t that cost a lot?

No, I didn’t apply for one because in my business, proving anything in patent law can take up to 15 years and thousands of dollars. I have not figured out the drug to cure cancer or AIDS so I am just doing my thing better than

anyone else. To be an entrepreneur, you must become the best one you can be.

But doesn’t it protect your product from being copied?

No. Fashion is a knock off business and everyone in our industry knows that. Footless panty hose were in the marketplace before someone made them popular. It was done with great marketing. And they did them better than they were done previously. So, if someone wanted to, they could make them too and just change the knitting patterns to get around the patent. But why bother? The market has been cornered. And as I said before, my product is not a cure for a dreaded disease, it’s just fashion so we’re not talking about billions of dollars. Enforcing a patent is an endless stream of legal bills and an exhaustive ordeal. I would rather put my energy into creating new products.

With your special understanding of marketing to women, what was your marketing strategy?

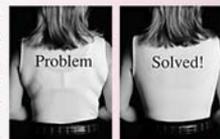
I am marketing Sassybax as a comfortable and functional garment that accommodates you—you don’t have to accommodate it. That slogan plays back into the woman’s psyche — women are sick and tired of squeezing themselves into garments like corsets, girdles and bad bras. My



The Sassybax bra doesn’t look great on the hanger, but it looks great on the body. Kennedy designed the Sassybax hang tag to show consumers how the bra solves the problems that visible bra lines cause.

The Sassybax Strapless with our unique one-piece flexible underwire provides staying power in comfort.

The original Sassybax styles promise to make you look slimmer by eliminating visible bra lines. Ask about our Bralette & Torso Trim.



Save Your Hair and Make Up:
Step Into Your Sassybax...
...Like a Bathing Suit!

Sassybax promises to make you look slimmer by eliminating visible bra lines.

— Amanda



marketing message is decades apart from my mother's generation that believed to be beautiful you had to also suffer. Our marketing angle is creating beauty that is also comfortable.

How did you arrive at that approach?

I just marketed from a gut level and from the truth about my what my product does. I have learned that women are much more alike than we are different. Body issues are so deeply ingrained in all of us and on some levels, we believe we're supposed to look like the models that we see in magazines and the actresses in the movies. I used to be in that world and I was even insecure when I looked like that

How did you create packaging that would complement this marketing strategy and appeal to women's emotions?

I thought of many packaging ideas, but since this is a bra, it had to be seen, touched and tried on. A bag or box would only get opened and ruined. So I just put it on a hanger with a great hang tag that shows what the product does for you. The challenge was that my product doesn't have great hanger appeal — it's not lacy or pretty on the hanger per se, but it is beautiful on the body. That's why the hang tag had to communicate more than just the logo.

OK, so you've got your product, your Web site is up and your marketing strategy in place. Then what?

Next I needed to find someone to represent and sell Sassybax at the LA apparel market. This was familiar territory for me having been a showroom model when I was in college in Dallas so I went to the LA Mart (www.californiamarketcenter.com) and shopped my product around to different lingerie representatives. To do this, I walked in the show rooms and asked for a minute of their time. I had a quick little sales pitch in which I described the bra and what it does. Then I showed them my samples. Everyone I talked to

looked at it and said, "I don't want to take on anything new right now." After awhile I walked down the hall and just burst into tears. I knew that I could not lose faith, so I dusted myself off and marched into another room, to pretty much the same response.

That sounds pretty discouraging. Then what did you do?

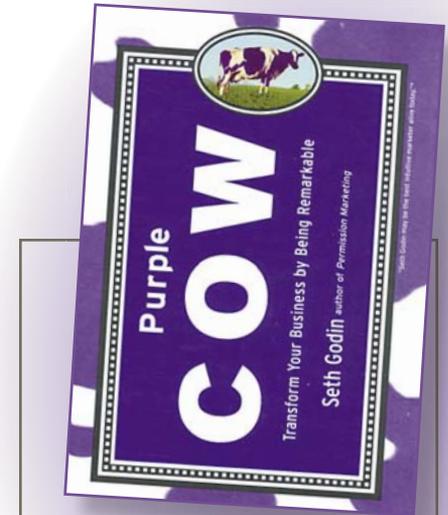
I was telling my woes at a party with friends. Then someone told me about a book called *The Purple Cow (Find Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* by Seth Godin www.amazon.com for \$19.95 or less.). This is a book about marketing a product that is unlike anything else on the market. I read it the next day, and it provided just the encouragement I really needed because it explained how it was good to be different. It made me understand that I had created something truly unique and that it would take time for people to accept it.

So what did you decide to do next with your "purple cow"?

I decided to go to Las Vegas to The Magic Show (Find out all about The Magic Show at www.magiconline.com and see the resource page at the end of this story for more information about attending.) This is the one of the biggest clothing shows in the ready-to-wear industry. I wanted to go there, see who I could meet, and see what I could learn. After a few rejections, I finally found one woman who said, "This is fantastic!" She went to the bathroom and tried it on. She was convinced that I could sell it. She invited me to the upcoming October market to rent a space in her showroom. For that she got a showroom fee. She didn't help me sell, but she offered me the opportunity to be there — in a tiny space with ten bras, two styles and five colors, I made my first few sales.

How did that go?

More than 1,200 people saw my product. I felt pretty intimidated by



Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable by Seth Godin

This book about marketing an unusual product provided the encouragement Kennedy needed to make Sassybax a success because it explains how being different is good.

the other lines in the room. But, by the end of market, I had ten customers and \$3,000 worth of sales. I deducted the \$1,200 showroom fee and said, well, at least I made a profit! It was small, but it was better than a loss. And best of all, I had a list of stores who were now familiar with Sassybax.

What opportunities grew from that Market exposure?

I approached a rep who sold lingerie exclusively. She loved the product and I knew she could sell it to her stores. In February, she and I went to the Neiman Marcus buyer. She understood it instantly and bought it, and we walked out with a test order for 10 stores.

What were the conditions of this test?

They said if it sold well, in a couple of months they would start adding stores — up to a total of 37. (They have 36 brick and mortar stores

and their online store — see www.neimanmarcus.com.) They tested it for a month and it sold so well they put it in all of their stores within a month. That was in February of 2004 — almost exactly one year from the Valentines' Day “light bulb” moment. That first big order was my “legitimizing” order — like a Good Housekeeping seal of approval. It was one of the greatest days of my life.

So how have your sales done since then?

Between October 2003, when I started selling Sassybax, to October 2004, seven or eight months after that first Neiman's order, we did about \$500,000 at wholesale and Internet retail. Between October 2004 and October 2005, that figure jumped to \$1.5 million and is steadily climbing.

What is your best advice to someone out there who has a great idea for a new solution?

The main thing is you just can't get discouraged. You have to believe in yourself, believe in your product, and for me, believe in the power of prayer. I couldn't have done all of this without my faith. Joseph Campbell said, “When you are doing what is right, there are a thousand helping hands.” That was so true with this business I cannot tell you. From the time I started this business my motto was, “failure is not an option.” I repeated that to myself during the tough times like a mantra. I didn't do this business just for fun; I really needed for it to work because I lost my nest egg in the stock market crash of 2001.

What financial sacrifices did you make to help this business succeed?

My husband and I sold our home, and we sold one of our cars in order to cut back on expenses so we could put everything extra into the business. We decided to do this business together. He was a lawyer but hadn't actively practiced for a long while. After that, he ran two businesses, but I convinced him to pursue this venture with me.

How did you approach that arrangement?

It's a lot like raising a child. You just have to pull together and do what you have to do. We have totally different skill sets; his is administrative and mine is creative, so we don't overlap and don't get in each other's way. People ask us how we can work together, and I say, “How could we not?” If we hadn't been working at it — this common goal — together, putting that kind of time in it, we'd probably be divorced. We ask each others' opinions on things, but the buck stops with the person in charge of that particular area.

What would you say is the secret of working with a spouse?

Even in business with a partner who is not your mate, you are going to step on each other's toes if you don't have clear job descriptions. Partnerships can be so difficult, especially when you have strong individuals, strong opinions and strong ideas. The whole thing can unravel if you are not clear about how to get through those issues. To set things up that way, my husband and I sat down one day and each wrote our own job descriptions. By delineating “this is what I do and this is what you do — I'm the boss of my domain and you're the boss of yours,” you respectfully keep out of each other's area. Of course you have to trust your partner to do that. That is first and foremost.

Kennedy says she believes that another key to a business's success is its innate sense of purpose. “If it's only about money, it doesn't have that strong sense of purpose,” she adds. “My business is about so much more than money. It is about helping women feel good about how they look in their clothes.” In continuing to provide this kind of help to other women, Kennedy has found a creative outlet for continuing her therapist's work of helping women build self-esteem in a new venue. And, by tapping into the powerful women's market for lucrative financial rewards, she has used this success to create a business that models both a sense of purpose and the creation of a successful partnership that she, by example, encourages others to follow. MB



Apparel and Textile Industry Resources

TRADE SHOWS

In addition to the Las Vegas Magic Show www.magiconline.com and the LA Mart www.californiamarketcenter.com, \$1,000,000aire Blueprints researchers found the additional fashion trade shows around the world at www.biztradeshows.com/apparel-fashion. For more information about any of these shows, go to this site and click on the link to each individual show for more information.

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Dusseldorf Fairgrounds

CPD DUSSELDORF
Dusseldorf Fairgrounds

DALLAS FABRIC SHOW
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SA FASHION WEEK
Sandton Convention Centre

ASSOCIATIONS

The Hosiery Association
www.nahm.com/publications.html

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Apparel and Textiles

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- Industry indicators for comparisons across industries
- A user's guide

PROTOTYPES

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