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Travertine Spa owner looks to make bigger mark in body-care market



Terry Carter is trying to grow his La Palma-based business despite the sluggish economy.

By Ronald D. White, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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During these ugly economic times, selling beauty products takes a little extra sweat, maybe a little more road time.

For Terry Carter, owner of La Palma-based Travertine Spa Inc., the quest for the next big sale took him to Dubai last November.

» Travertine Spa at a glance

Travertine Spa peddles body-care products and unisex yoga and Pilates apparel to first-class hotels, spas and all "who believe in treating themselves well," Carter said. Where better to look than the oil-rich Middle Eastern emirate, which is on a resort-building binge.

Carter didn't come home with signed deals, but he still thought the trip was worthwhile.

"A lot of the spas there do not do retail yet," the 38-year-old entrepreneur said. "It will take another year or two for that market to develop, but if I can be there from the beginning, I can become a brand of choice. I regarded it as homework."

Carter is trying to expand sales of Moroccan Tangerine Hand Soap and other products at a time when many Americans are cutting out luxuries because of the weak economy, record fuel prices and plummeting home values.

The situation is so grim that one spa industry blog urged establishments to turn off the TV news, lest some of that negativity pollute calm spa environments.

"People's pocketbooks are really hurting and, unfortunately now, our marketplace is quite crowded," said Hannelore R. Leavy, executive director of the Union City, N.J.-based Day Spa Assn. "There comes a time for a shakeout and that is happening now. The best will survive. Those who were just riding the wave won't."

Carter says his company's strength is the quality it offers, using natural ingredients such as an Australian camphoric oil used by Aborigines for centuries "for its antibacterial and therapeutic properties." Travertine Spa offers 30 items, ranging in price from \$14 for hand soap to \$150 for a French terry-cloth hooded jacket.

Part of Carter's plan to weather the tough economic climate is to feature his products on well-browsed websites to bring in customers for his five-employee company, which is on track to have about \$700,000 in sales this year.

Travertine Spa products, which are produced by an outside contractor, aren't carried in retail stores other than at salons, spas and hotels. In fact, when a discount department store chain offered to carry his line of products, Carter wound up saying no despite the revenue the deal would have represented.

"It's rough. It would have diluted my label," he said. "Then the high-end clients won't carry me because I'm not unique enough for them anymore."

A key facet of Carter's marketing push is to attract a celebrity clientele, but there were a few bumps along the way, such as when he discovered that this was one business where customers really do judge the book by its cover, in terms of packaging and labeling. He had to absorb the cost of doing both over when customers found the packaging too plain and the warning labels a little too frightening.

"I had to realize that some people would buy it for the packaging and not even care so much about the product. They would buy it if it looked pretty in their bathrooms. It took me four months to repackage everything," Carter said.

At first, Carter took products along in his car to hand out to anyone famous that he saw. Now, he uses a more sophisticated approach by participating in celebrity gift suites associated with major entertainment industry events such as award ceremonies, where stars can sample products. Positive responses are quick to appear on the testimonials page of his website, www.travertinespa.com.

Actress, singer, songwriter and music producer Michelle Williams, formerly of Destiny's Child, said she ran through a number of skin-care products that carried too much perfume and irritated her skin. Then she came across Carter's line.

"I've been a fan of his products now for three years," Williams said in an interview. "He makes a lavender-scented shower gel that definitely calms me down and helps me feel relaxed. I'm hooked."

Carter also counts non-celebrities among his customers.

Peggy Langin, a 34-year-old banker in Fullerton, has to perform the good-eye-contact-and-firm-handshake routine several times a day. "What could be worse than having to shake someone's rough, dry hands?" she asked.

Carter's Petal Body Cream and other products fit the bill because "I needed something that retains moisture and doesn't leave a residue," Langin said. "I really love it."

Carter's first brush with the business came during a science class at the University of Puget Sound for which he wrote a class presentation on a plant-based skin-care line.

He dumped premed for international affairs, French and Japanese, aiming to become a diplomat. Carter later earned a law degree and worked for a Fortune 500 company, Fidelity National Financial Inc., just before starting Travertine Spa.

"I always knew I wanted to run my own business. I just didn't know what it was going to be," Carter said.

Eventually, Carter decided to mix business with one of his favorite release valves for stress from his legal career: visiting spas wherever he was in the world.

"People relax in a lot of different ways," Carter said, "but my Johnny Walker Red is a Jacuzzi."

Carter said his training gave him the legal skills to write his own business contracts and the foreign language and people skills to pick the brains of spa experts and lab technicians in formulating his products.

"These are skills I use every day in my business," Carter said. "In striking out on my own business, I've left nothing I've done on the table."

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