

Matching innovators with shoppers

Amy Wallace

ONE Sunday a month, this column seeks out creative thinkers and tells their stories. You might think that finding these folks would be easy, and we acknowledge that the Prototype in-box is often flooded by readers' suggestions. But finding entrepreneurs whose sagas say something insightful about business culture — other than just "Buy my product!" — isn't always a cinch.

That's why Jules Pieri and Joanne Domeniconi inspire awe. What Prototype does 12 times a year, these women do five times a week at their e-commerce start-up, Daily Grommet. Their goal is to promote innovation by endorsing what they call "nice companies," ones with well-made products and impeccable service. If those products preserve a craft or protect the environment, they say, all the better.

Here's what distinguishes Daily Grommet from other Web marketplaces like eBay or Etsy: To be featured on Daily Grommet, you have to be chosen. In the tradition of the seal-of-approval judges at Good Housekeeping, the 15-person Daily Grommet team does its own research and features only products and companies it has battle-tested.

The women behind Daily Grommet say their goal is to enable consumers to find products that support their values. That doesn't mean every item on the site claims to do good; there's plenty of whimsy for sale. But by offering a curated list, the site seeks to help people patronize innovative companies that its team believes will treat customers well. Ms. Pieri calls this link between buyers and inventors "citizen commerce."

Amid recent blunders and betrayals in corporate America, consumers have "a burning hunger for real leadership and access to authentic experiences and trustworthy people," Ms. Pieri says. Daily Grommet's solution is to highlight inventive products that often don't have the marketing muscle to promote themselves.

What, you must be wondering, is meant by the use of the word "grommet"? The site, whose logo is a drawing of the real thing (a metal ring used to reinforce an eyelet), explains: "It's a wonderful product still waiting in the wings, just ripe for discovery. It comes from a designer, or inventor, or artist or manufacturer who is clearly passionate about what they create."

Every weekday at noon Eastern time, the site, based in an 1880s Victorian house in Lexington, Mass., posts "Today's Grommet," products like a hands-free flashlight, a newfangled pogo stick and an embroidered Peruvian belt. There are pictures and prices, as well as a video made by the site that shows how to use the product and often introduces its creators.

"We are seeing an unprecedented democratization of innovation, but existing retail and distribution systems don't give everyday people access to the fruits of that trend," Ms. Pieri says, noting that new, cheaper prototyping tools have made it easier to become an inventor. Of Daily Grommet's chosen partners, she says, "We raise their game."

Then the site makes that game — or salad bowl, or bracelet adorned with a USB drive — easy to buy. Ordering is simple, and Daily Grommet promises buyer satisfaction and a money-back guarantee. "We're responsible for the customer's experience," Ms. Pieri says. In return, the site gets a cut of the revenue; she won't say how much, though it's enough to enable the site not to carry advertising.

The lack of ads is important because the Daily Grommet team seeks to be more than a buying platform. It wants its endorsement to stand for quality, which won't happen if customers perceive that praise is for sale.

Not long ago, Ms. Domeniconi, whose title is chief discovery officer, drove three hours north to visit Custom Cordage, a company in Waldoboro, Me., that weaves doormats out of recycled fishing line, or "float rope."

In the resulting video about "the most beautiful doormats you've ever seen," she explains that the colorful rope has been banned because it harms marine life. She lauded Custom Cordage for helping the lobster industry and for keeping people employed year-round.

Daily Grommet started in October 2008, in a week when the financial markets plunged. The site, whose investors include Geraldine Laybourne, founder of Oxygen Media, was the brainchild of Ms. Pieri, an industrial designer with a Harvard M.B.A. who's worked at companies like Stride Rite and Keds. She grew up in Detroit, the daughter of an autoworker. From childhood she was interested in how products were designed, engineered and made.

Daily Grommet was inspired, in part, by her belief that social media can promote ingenious inventions and the people who thought them up. Its videos, meanwhile, drew inspiration from Mike Rowe, host of "Dirty Jobs," the Discovery Channel program that profiles workers who make their living doing things most of us can't imagine.

"He tells their stories," Ms. Pieri says. "That's incredibly engaging."

Daily Grommet is unabashedly idealistic in that it seeks, Ms. Pieri says, to "amplify good in the world." How does a golf-swing training device called the Orange Whip, which was featured last week, do that? If the product delivers and the company treats its customers right, Ms. Pieri says, that's a victory. Referring to the inauspicious climate in which Daily Grommet began, Ms. Pieri says it offered opportunity. "People were not pursuing the risky and the improbable like we were, and so we had some time to figure it out," she says.

While other sites highlight cool products — Incrediblethings.com is one — many are aggregators, not evaluators. Quirky.com, meanwhile, is more of an incubator for inventors.

"We still don't have a direct competitor," Ms. Pieri says. "Which makes us genius or crazy. I don't really know which."

Fonte: New York Times, New York, Aug. 7th 2010, Business, online.