

## Maid Naturally evolves from service to products maker

All-natural cleaning supplies made here, distributed to 15 states

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**Ruthanne Eberly, left, and Heather Brown, right, hold a gift basket of all-natural cleaning products manufactured here and sold by their company, Maid Naturally.**

—Staff photo by Kim Frlan

A Spokane company that began as a maid service launched by two entrepreneurial women who needed part-time jobs has evolved to include manufacturing of its own line of all-natural cleaning products.

The company, Maid Naturally, says it now employs 14 people, is cleaning about 200 homes and three businesses, and has its products distributed in 15 states, with Internet sales nationwide. Sales, it says, are growing rapidly, and the company is considering further expansion.

Ruthanne Eberly, who launched the business in 2006 with partner Heather Brown, says it began using "green" cleaning products right out of the gate, because that's what they used in their own homes. The two women's decision to make their own products followed quickly, in Eberly's home, to cut costs.

"It's a healthy choice, not having those chemicals around," Heather Brown says.

Eberly says she's still affected by the memory of a young cousin who drank bleach and almost died. "You take a risk just by having those things in your house," she says.

Initially, the maid service used all-natural cleaning supplies the company bought from an East Coast distributor, but added to them essential oils, which are concentrated liquids that contain volatile aroma compounds from plants, to give them a pleasant scent.

Most of the recipes were fairly simple, says Heather Brown, but adding essential oils such as orange, lavender, and mint to improve their scent became problematic. The oil kept separating out from the other ingredients, so they couldn't get an equal amount of it in each bottle. They tried putting several drops of the oil in each individual bottle along with distilled water and the cleaning agents, but the oil still separated out in the bottles. They finally solved the problem when they learned of a natural emulsifier made from coconut and olive oil.

When mixing the products by hand and bottling them with funnels in Eberly's kitchen became overwhelming, Maid Naturally approached Lee Tate, owner of Tate Technology Inc., a Spokane contract manufacturer.

"We told him our idea, and he offered to let us use his facilities," says Nathan Brown, who began working full time with his wife, Heather, and Eberly in June, having quit his job in insurance. "We've been there now for two years. He's got this big pressurized tank with a paddle that keeps the product mixed well, and a spout that can fill bottles much faster than we could do with funnels."

The Eberlys and Browns do all the manufacturing work themselves.

Tate says he allows Maid Naturally to use Tate Technology's FDA-approved clean-room facility about eight hours a month, free of charge.

"Someday, they'll get big enough for us to fill their bottles for them," he says.

Says Nathan Brown, "It's always been our goal" to have others do the manufacturing labor, but the company's business plan involves remaining debt free, and it can't afford to hire out that work. Product sales right now amount to about 15 percent of Maid Naturally's revenues, which the company declines to disclose.

After about a year of using its own products to clean clients' homes and businesses, Maid Naturally began selling the products through retail stores here.

"We had customers asking us when we would have our products in stores. We started calling stores, and they said 'yes.' It was an eye-opening experience—we could do this!" Heather Brown says.

The first stores to stock the products were Rosauers Supermarkets Inc. and Yoke's Foods Inc., but now they are sold by 32 retail outlets from Sandpoint to Yakima. In Spokane, the company's line of seven cleaning products now is sold mostly through natural food markets, such as Huckleberries Natural Market, Main Market Co-op, and Fresh Abundance Inc. Each bottle retails for about \$6 to \$8.

In 2008, Azure Standard, a Dufur, Ore.-based distributor of bulk and natural foods, cleaning products, and other items, picked up the Maid Naturally line, and now distributes it to 15 states. The products are ordered by retail customers on-line and by phone through a printed catalog, then are distributed to "drop points" across those states where customers pick up their orders.

Nathan Brown says Azure Standard began by ordering about six cases of products a month, but that order has increased to more than 40 cases a month.

Several other companies that sell all-natural products, including two in Chicago and one in Alabama, are buying Maid Naturally products and reselling them, he says.

The company says it buys most of the ingredients for its products locally, although essential oils have been hard to find locally. It has purchased them from as far away as Florida and Paris. Ross Printing Co., which uses solvent-free printing processes, makes Maid Naturally's labels, which Eberly's husband, Drew Eberly, designs.

Nathan Brown says the company strives to be environmentally friendly by allowing customers to have product bottles refilled at a discounted rate at the company's headquarters above Eco Depot Inc, at 1324 E. Sprague. It's also planning to offer products in five-gallon buckets.

"We're working with stores to get that up and running," he says.

The company also plans an independently owned and operated maid service and cleaning products outlet in Puyallup, Wash., next spring. Nathan Brown says the Spokane headquarters will license and direct the new facility.

"We'll start with that location, and continue to grow," he says. The company intends to keep manufacturing in Spokane, though, he says.

With its growth, the company says its greatest challenge these days is training and retaining staff. New maid-service employees undergo two weeks of training in the company's apartment-like training facility at its headquarters. Eberly then spends two weeks supervising the new hires in clients' homes to ensure they've learned all the company's procedures correctly.

Most of Maid Naturally's new customers come through referrals from current clients, Heather Brown says. It also gets customers through a billboard downtown, door hangers in target neighborhoods, the company's Web site, and online referral services such as Angie's List and Servicemagic.com, she says. Maid Naturally charges \$65 an hour for regularly scheduled cleaning and \$70 an hour for a one-time cleaning.

The venture began four years ago, when Eberly was looking for part-time work, but couldn't find a position that fit with her husband's work schedule. She says she asked Brown, her longtime friend, if she'd like to start cleaning houses as a team.

They bought aprons and a business license, then placed ads in the newspaper and put up fliers.

The business cleaned about 10 homes at first, but within a year it was cleaning 50 homes and had two employees.