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Above: Sherry Davis uses a torch to flame polish a candle at Creative Candles LLC.

Right: Ken Weiner and his wife, Pam Fleischer, hold some of their company's finished wares in the production area at Creative Candles. Weiner revitalized the old-line manufacturer by making the plant more efficient and updating the company's image.



Creative spark

Entrepreneurs carry a torch for reignited KC candle-maker

BY JIM DAVIS | STAFF WRITER

You've heard the story countless times: Entrepreneur, armed with a high-powered MBA, leaves corporate America to work on his own.

Ken Weiner's tale is a little different.

The Overland Park native parlayed his Northwestern University MBA and 25 years in telecommunications

not into some high-tech startup but rather a low-tech rebranding.

"This is what I need to do — I'm going to fix this company," Weiner recalled thinking when he bought Creative Candles in Kansas City in July 2005 with personal money for an undisclosed amount.

He said he wanted the intellectual and business challenges of resurrecting an old-line manufacturer. What he discovered was that marketing the

old-school product would prove more painstaking than the case studies he had taught at the Keller Graduate School of Management.

He spent the first year stabilizing sales that had fallen continually for five years. Now, in a new location, Weiner predicted that revenue will climb by 10 percent to 15 percent this year.

Creative Candles' makeover be-

CREATIVE CANDLES LLC

Description: Manufactures high-end, handmade candles.

Principals: Ken Weiner, Pam Fleischer

Founded: 1961

Employees: 25

Address: 3218 Roanoke Road, Kansas

City, MO 64111

Telephone: 816-474-9711

Internet: www.creativecandles.com

SEE CREATIVE | 22

CREATIVE: 'They can compete with anyone'

FROM PAGE 21

gan internally. Weiner realized that its two-level production plant near Union Station at 2101 Broadway St. was inefficient. So he found a single-level location at 3218 Roanoke Road, about a mile and a half away. Adding air conditioning, absent in the old building, further improved productivity during the summer, whose heat can melt candles.

Less expensive space was available in North Kansas City and underground. But such a move would have inconvenienced local customers and employees, some of whom have worked at Creative Candles for more than 10 years.

At the same time, the company freshened its image with a new logo, catalog and Web site.

The makeover, physical and virtual, cost more than \$500,000.

Weiner, who had no background in manufacturing or the gift industry, also engaged the consulting services of a friend, Paul Lerner, who had been a giftware marketer for 25 years.

Lerner said he wanted to extend the creative energy coming from Weiner and his wife, Pam Fleischer, a lawyer who left her practice to develop accounts for what is the family business.

The couple's skills are complementary, Lerner said. Weiner understands numbers and negotiations; Fleischer knows how to build relationships.

"They take it personally because it's their money," Lerner said. "They're passionate about it. They talk about it all the time. They live and breathe it. That's what defines an entrepreneur, a successful entrepreneur."

He said Creative Candles needed to be more actively promoted by manufacturers' reps. He wanted to position its products as part of a high-end portfolio — someone spending hundreds of dollars on a candlestick will be more likely to pay more for a Creative Candle.

Among his introductions was Paula Hugus, co-owner of Bray-Farmer Associates Inc., a manufacturer's rep in Atlanta.

Hugus, whose company began stocking Creative Candles in July, said her customers — retailers, florists and decorators — like the company's broad palette of 47 colors and its wide range of candle lengths.

Fieldstone Marketing LLC in Annapolis, Md., also added Creative Candles in the summer.

Seth McCulloch, Fieldstone's vice president of business development, said he had known about Creative Candles for eight years. McCulloch said the company's new packaging has raised its visibility. He praised its responsiveness and said its long tapers, measuring as long as a meter, are distinctive.

Weiner and Fleischer also call on customers. A recent trip took them to St. Louis, Memphis and Little Rock, Ark. The tour exemplified the owners' involvement — what Carol Smith, a friend of Fleischer's who last year became Creative Candles' marketing director, called "hands-on and a lot of hats."

Closer to home, Creative Candles' customer service also wins friends.

Patty Bays, buyer for Ranch Mart Ace Hardware in Overland Park, said the candle-maker's graciousness befits its merchandise. Bays said she can place orders for as few as a candle or two. Ranch Mart uses a custom-made rack that Creative Candles designed for the store to display its products.



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Keith Ritter dips a batch of tapers into molten wax at Creative Candles. The candles are dipped 25 times and cooled between dippings to build up the width of the tapers.

"I don't think many people realize the quality of the candles," Bays said. "They can compete with anyone."

Sheryl White, owner of Fiddly Fig in Brookside, said Creative Candles' products are up to date in a fashion-conscious field. Even more important, White said, they're readily available.

"I can say, 'I need 100 red floating candles tomorrow,' and they'll get them," she said. "I don't know if I could sell as many candles if I didn't know I could be sure."

Weiner said he recognizes the value of reliability.

"Customers were frustrated because products were out of stock," he said. "When a company is struggling financially, the customers feel it."

Every Creative Candle is made by hand. A 12-inch taper, the standard length, will get dipped as many as 30 times to form a seven-eighths-inch diameter. Tapers, the signature line, account for about half its sales.

Tapers are made of beeswax, which burns slower and more evenly than paraffin, a petroleum byproduct used in other candles. A meter-long taper will last a day and a half. Beeswax candles emit virtually no smoke and don't drip.

Among the other retailers carrying Creative Candles are Halls Kansas City, Barneys New York, Saks Fifth Avenue and Ralph Lauren, which sends the candles abroad.

Weiner, fiercely protective of what he described as an artisan product, said its quality won't be compromised. He dismissed suggestions of using inferior waxes or automating dipping to compete with cheaper competitors. In a business that affords no economies of scale that would allow bulk discounts, he professed "no desire by anyone here to cheapen the product."

"When you've got a customer who's willing to pay for the best candles," he said, "it's Creative Candles."