

Into the wild

There's a bear on her store sign, but in the border town of Rossland, B.C., retailer Dawn Manning is known as 'the cougar lady'

By Jane Nahirny



Few of us can imagine life without summer – life without golf, the cottage, camping, sailing, or the beach. But for many years, winter was the only season Dawn Manning knew – that is, until the owner of Bear Country Kitchen in Rossland, British Columbia, decided to become a retailer.

Dawn, who grew up in Red Deer, Alberta, was studying to become a dietitian at UBC in Vancouver when she met her future husband, Mark Impey, a career ski instructor. After the couple married, they turned their efforts towards building Impey's ski business, Canadian Ski Quest. Soon, he was teaching skiing practically year-round. "We spent our winters here in British Columbia, and our summers in Australia," she says.

Business was good, but once the couple's daughter was born in 2001, the dual-hemisphere lifestyle became a strain.

"In our busy winter season, it was hard to make family a priority," she remembers. "By the time I was pregnant with my son in 2004, I was done with having winter eight months a year. I wanted to enjoy summer again. I wanted to wear flip flops and shorts and get out on the golf course!"

While her husband continued to teach

Last year Dawn Manning, above, owner of Bear Country Kitchen, successfully scared off a cougar that had attacked her son while they were out hiking. Word spread quickly around the small town of Rossland, B.C.

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It wouldn't be Bear Country Kitchen without a bear in the window. The store is also known for hand-painted Polish dinnerware and upscale baking accessories.

in Australia and New Zealand during the summer months, Dawn ran the couple's business from their home in Rossland, a picturesque mountain town in B.C.'s West Kootenay region. "We had three rental houses ourselves in Rossland and at least nine others that I managed. It was very hard with two small children and a husband who was away for most of the summer," she admits.

Finally, she told her husband that she needed a change. He hired staff, and Dawn went to work for a local orthopedic surgeon. Her new job only lasted 18 months. "I enjoyed it, but it wasn't the right fit. I needed my own passion," she says. "I like to make my own hours, and I like to be in control."

Dawn wanted to open a business in Rossland, but quickly realized that there was nothing the town really needed. "We have a very interesting economy here. The businesses in town have really made a niche for themselves."

There are no chain stores, except for a Pro Hardware and a Subway restaurant, and the main street offers a great independent grocer, good restaurants, two

women's clothing stores, a shoe store, an antique store, a toy store, coffee shops, an insurance agent, and skateboard and ski shops. The larger centre of Trail, just a short drive away, provides big box stores like Walmart and Canadian Tire and area residents of Rossland also travel to Kelowna and Spokane, Washington, to shop.

She decided instead to take over an existing business and, given her BSc in Nutrition and Food Sciences, one retail outlet had an obvious appeal: Bear Country Kitchen, a 1250-square-foot kitchen and housewares store that had been operating successfully on the town's main street since 1993.

"I approached the owner, and we danced around a bit. Then finally she said, 'I'm ready to retire,' and we made it happen." Dawn quietly took over the business on April 28, 2008.

Six months later, acting on the advice of Portmeirion's Tom Sherwood, she held a customer appreciation/grand re-opening. "I wanted to wait until I was feeling confident in the store," she explains. "We thought we'd have 50 people through the door, but we had more like 200."

Dawn employs three permanent part-time employees and one high school

student. "I'm really blessed with my staff," says Manning. One of her employees, Mary Zanussi, came with the store. "She's been with the business for 12 years. She actually trains me."

The store's merchandise is a blend of "inherited" lines and products Manning has sourced. "We're definitely not looking to reinvent the wheel," she says. Among the products she's introduced are Rosti tools, Breville appliances, Riedel glassware, a line of handpainted Polish stoneware, and a selection of sassy aprons from Domicile and McFab. "I have had the best success and the most fun with these aprons," she says. Manning also expanded the store's gourmet food section and updated the cookbook selection.

She continues to offer ice cream and frozen yoghurt sales, and says the treats get people in the store – and keep them there. "We can only scoop so fast!" she laughs. "Kids are waiting in line, and parents are looking around the store. On a hot July day, there's a line out of the door."

Dawn offers trendy impulse items from Fred, Blue Q, and Kikkerland for customers to add to their ice cream order. Adjacent to the sales desk/ice cream counter there's also a small section of the store Dawn calls her fun corner. "I created it in the fall of 2008, when

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Above: Well-worn wood floors, track lighting and deep yellow walls provide a warm atmosphere for browsing. The store offers a wide assortment of cookie cutters and other baking accessories but the top-selling category is kitchen linens. Left: An antique oven provides the perfect place to display beverage items and tea pots.

everyone was so worried," she explains. "There's something in that section that will make everyone smile."

Manning attends both CGTA shows in Toronto every year, and says she bases her buys on perceived quality and also on "wowness factor". "I want to give my customers something to talk about," she explains. "I want them to say, 'You have to see what I bought at Bear Country Kitchen!'"

Electrics, gadgets, and those fabulous aprons are among the store's top sellers. "Linens have really picked up," nods Mary Zanussi. "We didn't sell nearly as many aprons before Dawn took over the store. She's got a fresh twist, and there are a lot of younger people coming in to the store now."

The two main employers in the area are Cominco, a refining and smelting operation in Trail, and provincial health service provider Interior Health. About 75% of the store's customers are female.

"My main customer ranges in age from 40 to 60. She has more disposable income, and has lived all over," she says. "She understands the value of shopping locally and saving on travel time."

Men are another key customer group, she adds. "They know exactly what they're coming for, and they're less motivated by price versus quality."

Still, Dawn is careful to be competitive with her pricing structure. She wants her customers to think of Bear Country Kitchen first, before they get in the car to cross-border shop in Spokane or drive for hours to the larger centres like Kelowna, Calgary, or Vancouver.

"I constantly research the local and long-distance big box competitors and aim for a consistent price and a better price whenever possible," she says.

The store also provides a warranty service, with same-day replacement whenever possible. "Choosing to purchase from us will save them gas, time, and frustration," adds Dawn. "And the warranty service will save them money as well."

Locals account for 95% of all sales throughout the year, though tourists do frequent the store as well. "It's exciting

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The centre of the store features vignettes of gadgets and baking tools. Shown above, a display of scales and serving bowls. Below, a wall of tableware and tea accessories.



to see how strong business has become," says Dawn.

The store has experimented with print and radio advertising, but the retailer says her business is too young to accurately measure its impact. She does the voiceovers in her own radio ads, and has focused on the bridal market to date. "I have a recognizable voice, so I figured I should do that."

The store offers a bridal registry, as well as complimentary gift wrapping and local delivery. Dawn will also deliver gifts to a bride's house for out-of-town guests. There's also a unique service for new home, holiday, and condo owners. Customers can choose packages or custom items from a mix of dinnerware, stemware, flatware, serving pieces, and appliances. The products are delivered washed and installed, and all cardboard packaging is removed. Prices for this service begin at \$1,900. And while she doesn't anticipate selling on her website in the near future, the store does receive a lot of requests through it for gift baskets.

Bear Country Kitchen also offers local restaurants an industry discount for their regular stock and special orders. "It's a convenience to them, as opposed to them having to find a restaurant supplier and having it shipped," says Dawn. "They'll come to me if they need something like stemware, dinnerware, special-order knives, or a diamond stone. I really appreciate that."

Dawn also appreciates her cadre of about 25 to 30 suppliers, many of whom were particularly helpful to her last fall, when she was coping with the aftermath of a cougar attack on her five-year-old son, Simon, during a family hike in Washington State.

"I shared my story with some of them, and the compassion that's been shown towards me has been amazing," she says. As news of the story spread, her customers were also empathetic, often stopping by to share their own stories with Dawn. "I learned that everyone has had tragedy in their lives, and that I'm really lucky our story ended well," she says. "I've also learned that I'm human, I can't do everything."

Reflecting on her first two years as a

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retailer, Dawn says that what she finds most rewarding about her work is that no two days are ever the same.

"I never look at the clock and think, 'Ugh, it's only 2 pm. I look at the clock and say, 'Wow, is it really already 2 pm!'"

Servicing her customers is like solving a puzzle, she adds. "You never know if they are coming in for something simple, like a tea ball, something larger, such as a cappuccino machine, or some new gadget that they have seen in the media – it's my goal with every customer to exceed their expectations with respect to quality, service and price."

Dawn smiles and hands me a waffle cone filled with fresh strawberry frozen yoghurt. Her eyes shine as she talks about the passion she feels for her business. Yes, she has her summers back now, but there's more to it than that.

"This is my happy place," she admits. "I'm the most relaxed in my store. I can come here at night, four nights a week

A vendor's viewpoint:

"I knew as soon as I met her that Dawn would bring a fresh approach to Bear Country Kitchen. Although she didn't have a lot of experience in retail, she was eager to learn from my 23 years in this industry. She was open-minded and able to pick up on every detail. And she looks after every detail of her business, whether it's helping a customer find the perfect gift, answering the phone, or hauling out another bucket of frozen yoghurt to scoop. Dawn Manning is a true and genuine entrepreneur and it's very rewarding to see her succeed."

– Tom Sherwood, B.C. Sales Rep, Royal Selangor & Portmeirion Canada

until 11 pm., and still be happy about it. I hope it never wears off."

Moving forward, Dawn says that she plans to continue building on her reputation for exceptional customer service.

"I want my customers to feel welcome to browse, peruse and request specialty items," she says. "I want all my staff to know their names and their interests and always be greeted with a sincere welcome to my store."

Communicating to current and po-

tential customers that shopping locally and buying from independents is primarily good for their personal economy, in addition to benefiting the local economy, will also remain a key priority for Dawn. "But most importantly, I just want to continue enjoying my business, and making sure it is a 'happy place' for them, too." ■

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