



By Melanie Moul, mmoul@nrha.org

A Space for Makers

How The Grommet Empowers Entrepreneurs

Becoming a successful entrepreneur requires time, networking and forging ahead, despite hearing “no” for the hundredth time. As an independent retailer, you’re likely familiar with the willpower and determination it takes to achieve your dream. Jules Pieri, co-founder and CEO of project launch platform The Grommet, has seen that scenario happen, too.

The Grommet started in 2008 based on an idea Pieri and her co-founder Joanne Domeniconi had to create a home for innovative products developed by entrepreneurs, who the company calls makers. During their time working in consumer product development for children’s apparel and toy companies, Pieri and Domeniconi saw many great ideas never reach customers because there wasn’t a space for them on store shelves. The solution: Offer a way for entrepreneurs to get their products straight to consumers.

“We were determined to create a place that would uncover the most innovative products and tell their stories, and that’s what we did with The Grommet,” Pieri says.

Hardware Retailing learned more about the evolution of The Grommet, how it chooses products and its recent relationship with Ace Hardware. If you’d like to learn even more about how the company identifies upcoming trends and the next hot items, attend Pieri’s keynote presentation for free at the North American Retail Hardware Association (NRHA) All-Industry Conference, May 8-10 in Las Vegas. Learn more at nrhaconference.com.



Ace Hardware Corp. acquired a majority stake in The Grommet in October. The partnership puts innovative products discovered by The Grommet on Ace Hardware store shelves throughout the country.

What Makes a Maker?

With The Grommet, everyday innovators have a more significant opportunity to get their products in front of consumers. It also means supporting small businesses in communities across the country.

“When we hear talk of revitalizing small businesses and preserving Main Street, there are actions that need to take place on the national level to help, but there are so many actions we can take every day to influence change,” Pieri says. “Systemic change takes time, but one way to influence it is by supporting makers and maker communities. Investing in them supports entrepreneurship and innovation—probably right in your own community.”

When selecting a product to feature on The Grommet platform, the company evaluates the item based on 10 values, such as products Made in the U.S., which shoppers can sort by on the website. The most recent value, Made for a Lifetime, is about providing products with lifetime guarantees and was inspired by consumer campaigns on social media.

The Discovery team at The Grommet attends trade shows, researches online and meets makers in their communities to find striking new products.

“We’re always on the lookout for a product that solves a distinctive problem,” says Meredith Doherty, vice president of discovery for The Grommet. “Along with that, it’s also important that all of the products we support have at least one of our values represented.”

Doherty says it takes about eight to 10 weeks for a new product to be launched on the site. While that timeline is fast, sometimes the conversation happens over the course of several years before a product is ready to go to market.

“We do work with a lot of people who are in the concept or prototyping phase,” Doherty says. “If we think it’s a fit, we keep in touch. It’s important that the makers we work with have inventory on hand.”

Products also come to The Grommet through creator submissions on the website and through recommendations from other makers.

The Caring Consumer

Consumers are driving the market for products made by values-focused entrepreneurs, and The Grommet offers them a place to know exactly what they’re getting with its platform.

“People are caring more about where their products are made, and they’re more deliberate with how they spend their money,” Pieri says. “We wanted to give people the opportunity to shop for values they already want to support.”

Along with having a passion for creating innovative products, Pieri says it’s important that the people who sell their products through The Grommet are those the company is proud to partner with.

“We’ve been lucky to work with more than 2,500 makers who are inspiring and pushing boundaries, and we can’t wait to meet, work with, and support thousands of others who are out there,” she says.

Being Part of the DIY Movement

In October, Ace Hardware Corp. announced it had purchased a majority stake in The Grommet. The companies had been collaborating since late 2016, bringing products from The Grommet into independently owned Ace Hardware stores. Nearly six months into the partnership, Pieri’s perspective on the relationship between makers and home improvement retail stores is unchanged.

“The DIY movement right now is strong, and home improvement remains one of the biggest avenues within it,” she says. “Our community responds strongly to products that solve everyday problems, and many can be used in DIY projects.”

Pieri says independent retailers can compete against big-box and online retailers by differentiating themselves through local, handmade, unique goods.

The Entrepreneurial Spirit

Pieri says entrepreneurs shouldn’t be afraid to go all in.

“Make whatever it is you’re pursuing worth your time because you should expect it to take a while,” she says. “Anything worth doing will take five to 10 years, maybe even a lifetime, and that’s OK.”

Like success, knowledge doesn’t come overnight, Pieri says. Investing in the training you need at the outset will be enough to get started, but you can’t know everything you need to know immediately.

“In the early days, you cannot be fully operational or skilled at all areas of your business,” she says. “Know what matters. Know what makes you distinctive and gives you a competitive advantage and double down on that. Also, have your own vision and be confident in it. If you’re not the lead dog, then how do you know why or when you need to turn left? Live two years in the future and always look for what’s next.” ➔

The Grommet’s Personal Values

The Grommet exists to help consumers find reputable products with a story to tell. Since it launched in 2008, the company has helped brands like Fitbit, OtterBox and SodaStream become mainstays in consumers’ lives.

The Grommet organizes products based on 10 personal values, and shoppers can filter products on the website by those values. Learn a little more about each of the company’s guiding values below.



Crowdfunded

Products in this category were created with the help of consumers who donated to a campaign to bring the product to life.



Sustainable Living

Products in this category are made using natural and eco-friendly materials, often through sustainable production processes.



Philanthropy

These organizations are nonprofits committed to helping people in need around the world, through time, money or resources.



Tech & Innovation

The products in this category are created by makers who are producing groundbreaking tools to enhance and improve everyday life.



Social Enterprises

Makers in this category provide a supportive workplace, make a positive environmental impact and foster other social good policies.



Made in the U.S.A.

Products in this category are produced in the U.S. and create jobs in local communities throughout the country.



Handcrafted

Products in this category are created by makers by hand, whether that’s sewing, woodwork, jewelry-making or other handiwork.



Independent Maker

These products are developed by small businesses in local communities throughout the country.



Underrepresented Entrepreneur

Makers in this category are people of color, people considered too young or too old to be makers, veterans and other minority groups.



Made for a Lifetime

Products in this category come with a lifetime guarantee, and they are made with materials that are meant to withstand time and use.