

# Home accents with soul

An online retailer shows her commitment to fair trade through the products she carries and her educational efforts.

By Megy Karydes, contributing writer

Doing good and doing business aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. I launched my e-boutique—World-Shoppe.com—in the summer of 2004 as a way to support women artisans around the world. I carry handmade items that are fairly traded by artisans in more than 22 countries. World-Shoppe.com offers home and kitchen accessories, garden items, stationery, children's toys, women's jewelry and handbags from countries including India, Cambodia, Vietnam and Ghana.

Fair trade refers to paying above-market rates to small- to mid-size growers and manufacturers in Third World nations for goods produced using environmentally sustainable methods. It is a way of doing business that benefits everyone along the supply chain.

Does this mean the products cost more to a retailer or end consumer? Not necessarily. Fair-trade organizations and companies (which pay the above-market rates) work directly with producers, cutting out about three to 10 middlemen (who raise the price along the way in conventional trading). Fair traders can return a larger share of the price to producers and artisans and still keep prices competitive for consumers.

What really prompted me to launch World-Shoppe.com was the fact that nearly 3 billion people survive on less than \$3 a day; that's less than what we pay for a cup of specialty coffee. Up to 80% of laborers in some of the poorest countries are women. Fair trade allows women to work at home and be with their children while contributing to their family's income and to the economic development of their communities as a whole. That's a powerful thing to be able to do by just selling products.

As fair-trade products receive more mainstream media coverage, consumer demand will grow. In the four short years I've been offering fair-trade products, our sales have increased every single year, some years even doubling.

One of my challenges initially as a retailer was finding products that appealed to a more mainstream American consumer. Fair trade has been around for more than 50 years but, until recently, was mostly popular among the hippie, hemp-wearing audience.

I wanted to market to the masses, so it was important for me to find products that were not only unique and culturally significant, but on trend as well. Luckily, more and more product development is taking place, and we're beginning to see products that are more contemporary in either style or design. Eco-friendly materials are being used whenever possible.



**Zen Zen Garden + Home.** These 100%-cotton napkins (\$8.25 wholesale set of four) are silk-screened by hand in Bali. The napkins measure 18½ inches square and come in a variety of designs. All-natural batik soaps are \$8.25 for a set of four or \$9 for a set of six. They come in two sizes and a variety of scents. The first-order minimum is \$200, and the lead time is one week. The company exhibits in Atlanta, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and New York.



**MayaWorks.** The Aguas Calientes multistripe cotton runner (\$15 wholesale) is woven on a treadle loom by Maya artisans in the Guatemalan highlands. It measures 14½ inches wide and 80 inches long, and features 1½-inch twisted fringe on both ends. Aprons (about \$2 each) are handmade with sturdy 100% cotton. There is no minimum order, and the lead time varies.

## Looking for color

I tend to look for lots of color in products because they show well on a computer screen. I've found orange, green and blue salt-and-pepper sets from Morocco, fuchsia patterns on napkins from Indonesia, striped runners with many complementary colors from Guatemala, recycled paper frames from a women's studio in Chicago and colorful beaded bowls from Kenya. These are items that can be easily incorporated into any retail shop across America.

Another challenge was finding online sources from whom I could buy, as many of these fair-trade organizations are small and grass-roots. Some countries barely have Internet connections, let alone computers. However, as the movement grows, so do its resources.

Typically, though, I begin my search by visiting the Fair Trade Federation's website (fairtradefederation.com). The site includes importers that have been approved as fair-trade businesses. I've found many wonderful resources and groups there.