

# Feathering a New Nest

In a move to create a distinct brand identity, a green gift store in Virginia throws down a set of fresh roots in a new bigger space.

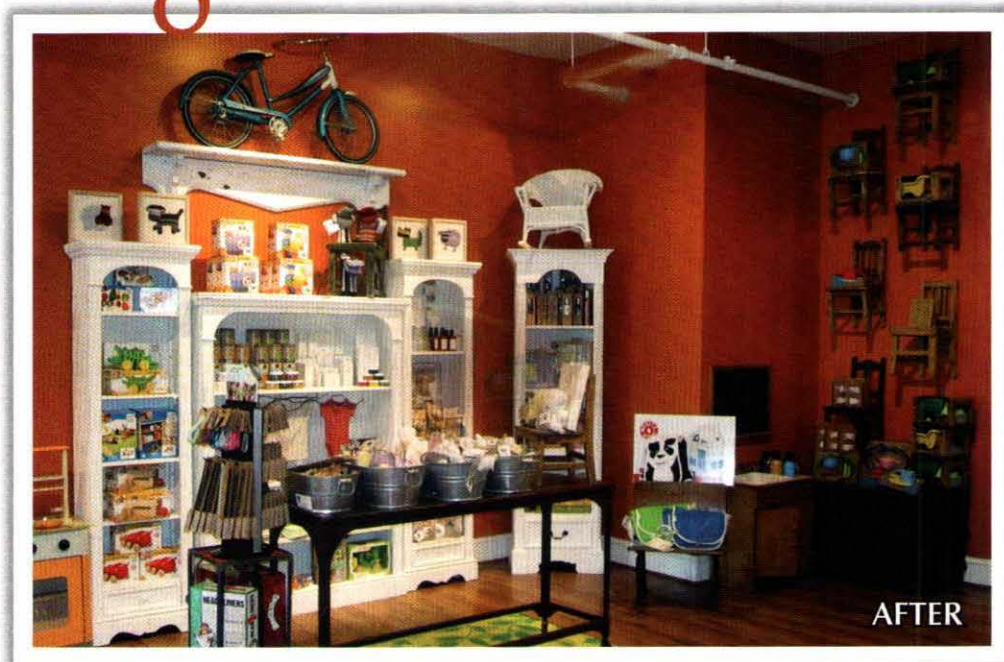
**Beth Mattson-Teig**

**G**reen Nest took a big leap last year when it decided to test its wings with, well... a much bigger nest.

Based in Culpeper, VA, Green Nest is a specialty boutique that focuses exclusively on selling environmentally friendly and sustainable merchandise. Products range from eco-chic flip-flops and hand-woven belts to organically grown cotton clothing. The store first launched in February 2009 in a tiny 250-square-foot space as a store-within-a-store concept. Although the concept certainly had a lot of potential as "green" living continued to resonate with consumers, Green Nest struggled with its small footprint—and a lack of identity.

"We sat down and realized that Green Nest was barely hanging on," says new Green Nest owner Kelsey Carlson. So when a large space opened up across the street along Culpeper's busy "main drag," Green Nest pounced on the space before it was snapped up by another retailer. The location had been occupied by Frenchman's Corner, an upscale kitchen store that expanded to a larger space next door.

"It was the right space at the right time. We saw this as an opportunity to see if this store was going to make it in this town," Carlson says of the move. That leap of faith has proved worthwhile. Since opening its new, larger store last August sales have jumped 50 percent and the business is thriving.



## Identity crisis

Green Nest is the brainchild of Sharon Clark, owner of Pepperberries, which is a gift and fashion accessory store located in Downtown Culpeper. "Sharon saw that the market was trending towards environmentally friendly gifts and started doing some research," says Carlson. Clark decided to test the concept by converting a small office at the back of Pepperberries into a new specialty shop devoted to earth-friendly products.

Even though Green Nest borrowed space from its sister store, it was created and operated as a separate limited liability company. Carlson was hired as the Green Nest manager in October 2009, and after nearly two years of putting her "blood, sweat and tears" into the business, she also purchased the store from Clark this August.

In the beginning, the small store carried just 30 product lines. It wasn't long before Green Nest moved into a more prominent position within Pepperberries to give it a chance to grow. Green Nest tripled in size to about 750 square feet at the front of the store. That move was definitely beneficial. The extra space allowed Green Nest to expand its product lines, including adding a clothing line.

Despite the upgrade, Green Nest still struggled. "There wasn't a lot of demand in the beginning," says Carlson.

"Things started getting better because we had more presence, but still people didn't know we were a separate store." Although Green Nest had a small base of loyal customers, the store was largely dependent on the customer traffic coming into Pepperberries. Founded in 2003, Pepperberries is a successful boutique in its own right, carrying a variety of gifts and fashion accessories from brands such as Vera Bradley, Pandora and Brighton.

The problem was that Green Nest lacked its own separate identity. "Because Pepperberries was bigger and had been there longer, most people assumed that Green Nest was part of Pepperberries," says Carlson. So in July 2010 when a phenomenal retail space opened up across the street, it created the perfect opportunity for Green Nest to relocate, expand and see if it had what it took to fly on its own.

### Making its own mark

Green Nest was fortunate enough to find a new home in the heart of Culpeper's main shopping district, East Davis Street, which attracts a steady flow of traffic from both local customers and tourists. The town of some 14,000 residents sits along the main thoroughfare of Route 29 in Virginia. Tourists often stop here on their way to and from bigger cities such as nearby Richmond and Washington, D.C.

The central hub for shops is a two-block section of East Davis Street. "People very infrequently leave that block," Carlson says. Not only is the new store a great location, but it also is situated in a "gorgeous" historic building, Carlson adds. The retail space features exposed brick walls throughout, hardwood floors and plenty of glass windows at the front to create eye-catching displays. In its new home, Green Nest is now situated right across from the town bakery and one of the most popular restaurants in town. "So people are very familiar with the space," Carlson says.

After 18 months of struggling to carve out a niche for itself within Pepperberries, Carlson wasn't about to lose any of her loyal customers. Carlson took advantage of every marketing opportunity from word-of-mouth to newspaper ads and digital media including e-mail blasts, Facebook and Twitter. "There is always the hardship of possibly losing some customers because they think you have closed. When they come and they see someone else, they assume you're gone," she says. "I really took any opportunity that I could to let people know that we were here."

The move—and the marketing—have given the store a fresh start and a significant boost in customer traffic. "I would say that 80 percent of my customers now never even knew we existed when we were across the street," says Carlson. So even though Green Nest had been in business a year and a half before its move, for most people, Green Nest only opened the day it relocated to its own store. "We really broke into our own identity when we opened the doors over here," Carlson adds.

### Chance to grow

For the most part, the new space was move-in ready. One of the few changes that Carlson made was that the previous store had laminate counters that





were running along the side of one of the brick walls. "I love a central counter in a store," says Carlson. She removed the laminate tops and redesigned the existing counters to create

a U-shaped counter in the center of her store. She even rolled up her sleeves to pour new cement countertops. Keeping with the sustainable mission of the store, she gave the old laminate tops back to the landlord, who was able to re-use them in another building.

The relocation represented a major expansion for Green Nest with a new home that was nearly triple its former size at 2,200 square feet. Although Green Nest's new lease started July 1, 2010, Carlson spent nearly a month ordering more inventory, merchandising and preparing the new store for its grand opening on August 1. Finances were the biggest challenge given that Green Nest had to significantly expand its inventory. "We really had to start bulking up and figuring out how we were going to fill this new, large space, because we were used to being a very small store," says Carlson.

The larger store has allowed Green Nest to significantly expand the product lines that it carries. Currently, Green Nest is working with some 200 different vendors to provide environmentally friendly products that are made locally, nationally and internationally. The store has both added new product lines, as well as expanded existing product lines such as clothing, jewelry, handbags and candles. Green Nest works with a variety of vendors such as Yala, Threads 4 Thought, Make Love Not Trash, Green Toys and HollyBeth's Natural Luxury.

A big part of Carlson's job is researching companies to make sure that Green Nest is buying products that are legitimately green. Carlson is careful to select products

made of organic, natural or recycled materials, as well as products that use no animal testing. The companies that Green Nest forges relationships with also must be socially responsible, abide by Fair Trade guidelines abroad or within the States and support the sustainable use of our planet's resources.

Carlson is committed to finding new products that are also sustainable in how they are created, packaged and shipped. "If you are going to send me a jewelry line, and every piece is packaged in its own separate plastic bag within another plastic bag in a box stuffed with Styrofoam peanuts, that is something we are not going to carry," says Carlson.

One of the biggest changes is the addition of a vintage furniture line. "We go to junkyards and thrift stores and antique stores and get these old pieces and refinish them ourselves," says Carlson. "We are re-using pieces, so no one had to manufacture anything new."

Not only is the store much bigger, but it also has a very different look than any other store in town. "I am big on merchandising and working in the old with the new and using creative displays," she adds. "People embrace that. In the old space, because we were smaller, I didn't have the ability to do that."

Also keeping with the sustainable theme, Green Nest does not use any commercial displays. Instead, Carlson uses the store's re-purposed furniture such as cabinets, tables and mantles for its product displays. Green Nest also uses the vintage furniture it sells, as displays.

### Growing green

As the new owner, Carlson is continuing to make plans to grow the business, and she is constantly looking for new and interesting products to add to the mix at Green Nest. "The thing that I love about being earth-friendly and being conscious of what we are doing to our planet is that more and more people are getting into it in terms of vendors, and everyday there are more and more gorgeous, phenomenal products," says Carlson.

The best advice Carlson has for other retailers is something that she gleaned from her former boss and mentor—make educated risks. "We saw that we might not make it in the old place," says Carlson. It was definitely a risk to take on the new lease and a bigger space and more inventory. But in the sense that it was educated, we saw that there was more foot traffic in this space, there is more exposure, we are going to branch out and be our own thing and start our own identify separate from Pepperberries," she says. "So, it was a risk that I knew that was going to pay off."

*Beth Mattson-Teig is a freelance writer in Minneapolis, MN.*