

# BusinessMonday

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Intelligencer Journal photo by Barry Zecher

Susan and Steve Adams, left, oversee the daily operation of Intercourse Canning Co., a look-and-learn operation that allows customers to follow the company's product — canned foods — through the production process.

## They thought they could, and now they can

*Husband/wife team turn canning factory into a retail success by cultivating customer curiosity, loyalty*

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Serves thousands.

Formulas for creating a successful small business can be notoriously simplistic, but Intercourse Canning Co. has developed its own commerce recipe into a business delicacy.

NBC's Today Show recognized that achievement recently, featuring the company on its program. The show highlighted Intercourse Canning Co. as an outstanding edu-

cational stop on a family vacation, along with more familiar names like the Crayola and John Deere factories.

It has been a relatively quick rise to success for Intercourse Canning Co., which got started when Susan and Steve Adams purchased a small cannery in the village of Intercourse in 1997. Over the next several years they expanded the product line and switched the cannery's focus from

production to retail, offering a unique multisensory experience for customers.

The plain warehouse look is gone, and a comfortable, upscale country market atmosphere prevails. Delicious product samples abound alongside the sights and smells of the actual production line, visible to visitors from behind glass walls. Once just a small producer of jarred goods, the location is now a popular destination for

tour buses and individual tourists, as well as locals.

The products are the foundation of Intercourse Canning Co.'s success. Traditional Lancaster County favorites like chow chow, bread-and-butter pickles and pickled beets, also known as "Amish hors d'oeuvres," are top sellers and are especially popular with senior citizens. With home canning less prevalent than in days gone by, the cannery provides a convenient way to

enjoy those favorites.

"We're introducing (these foods) to the next generation, as well as bringing in things that they like," said Susan Adams.

Black bean salsa and peach salsa are among the additions aimed at younger or less traditional customers. Everything at the cannery isn't necessarily pickled or sealed in glass anymore, either. Gourmet dessert and dip mixes, homemade scented bath products and custom-roasted flavored coffees and teas also are popular.

Business has been good for the company from the outset, despite economic vagaries. Double-digit sales growth was the annual pattern for the company's first five years, and even in this year's shaky economy, sales are about equal to last year's.

"We're holding our own," Steve Adams said. "It's an indication of our (corporate) life cycle."

"We're still in a growth mode," Susan said. "(Our product) is a consumable, so people come back. We get a lot of repeat business. Our target market is primarily families, seniors and tour groups."

Susan Adams cited the speech that travel expert Peter Greenberg gave locally in connection with the Pennsylvania Dutch Convention & Visitors Bureau as confirmation of what her company has always tried to do.

"When people are traveling now," she said, "they want to experience something, not just go to a hotel. They need to have something they can relate to. Here, we try to offer that."

"Our philosophy is hospitality. We want people to experience a part of the country that doesn't exist elsewhere anymore — a lifestyle. We always want people to feel very comfortable about being in Lancaster County. September 12, 2001, was our busiest day ever. Tour buses that were diverted from New York and Washington ended up in Lancaster County because they thought it was safe. Since then, we've seen more extended families coming out — grandmas and grandpas, parents, kids, aunts and uncles."

Many of the tourists turn out to be more than just one-stop shoppers. The company maintains a Web site, [www.intercoursecanning.com](http://www.intercoursecanning.com), a colorful catalog and a mailing list of more than 15,000

customers. Repeat business often happens through these avenues, between customer visits to the store.

The fact that some of the company's regular customers have never set foot inside the store may be convincing proof of the products' quality. Jim Hiatt of Bristol, Tenn., first tasted Intercourse Canning Co. products as a gift from a neighbor several years ago. Since then, he's sampled a variety of the offerings, including the jams and jellies.

"We just like them all," he said, "but the pickled asparagus is our favorite. We slice a stalk and put it on salad. You can probably find (other brands of pickled asparagus) around here, but theirs is just good."

So good, Hiatt said, he orders them two or three times every year.

In fact, the many far-flung customers might be more aware of Intercourse Canning Co. than many people right here in Lancaster County.

"A lot of (Lancaster County) people think of Intercourse as a tourist destination," Steve Adams commented. "There's a tendency for the local people to avoid Intercourse because of that. A lot of local people saw us on the Today Show and came out. They didn't even realize we were here. Our prices are competitive, so we could be a regular stop for people."

The actual canning process can be observed Tuesday through Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., and the entire store is open Monday through Saturday, 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"We do special tours for groups of 10 or more," Steve Adams said. "With our Behind the Scenes tour, you can actually do some canning. That tour usually costs \$5 per person, but on Fridays and Saturdays in July, we'll be offering the tour three times a day for free, as part of our sixth anniversary celebration. We also offer one-hour tasting parties for \$5 per person, as well."

While the retail side is the most visible part of Intercourse Canning Co., the Adamses haven't put all of their canning jars in the same business basket.

"There's a little more than meets the eye," Steve said.



Intelligencer Journal photo by Barry Zecher

Matt Stoltzfus, plant manager at Intercourse Canning Co., takes a load of canning jars out of a hot water bath in which the lids seal.

Only about 10 percent of the cannery's products receive the Intercourse Canning Co. label. The production facility, which can turn out about 3,000 jars a day, also serves wholesale clients who supply their own recipes and labels. The cannery also produces some products that are sold by the store under agreements with that product line's owners. In addition, desserts, soups and salads are available not only in dry mix form, but also prepared for the wholesale market.

Despite their obvious success, not every facet of the company's development has gone according to the Adamses' plans.

"God directs our steps," Susan Adams said. "He has said, 'You have to trust me. You're not in charge.'"

The couple's faith is neither hidden from customers nor overruled by profit motives. Bible verses are printed on product labels and the store is always closed on Sundays, even during the height of tourist season.

Even as both the retail and wholesale operations flourish, Susan and Steve Adams continue to dream up new possibilities for the company, including expanding the gift basket program to serve corporations on a larger scale. Like all good cooks, they know that perfecting their (business) recipe is the key to keeping their masterpiece fresh and delicious.