



Robyn Smalletz, Gloria Duchin Inc. president, left, shows a display in the East Providence facility. Below is its Newport Preservation Society ornament.

JOURNAL PHOTOS / KRIS CRAIG

# Taking a shine to success

As eBay and Wal-Mart have taken off, East Providence-based Gloria Duchin Inc. has grown to be the leading manufacturer of metal Christmas ornaments.

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EAST PROVIDENCE

It can take decades to become an overnight success.

Nearly three decades after its founding, a Rhode Island manufacturing company finds that its sentiment-laced Christmas ornaments are traded by collectors on eBay and are the subject of national media reports.

"When you have 100 million ornaments in circulation, it begins to resonate," said Robyn Smalletz, president of Gloria Duchin Inc. "Our customers are trying to tell us something when they put us online."

Based in East Providence, Gloria Duchin is one of the nation's leading manufacturers of metal Christmas ornaments. The company prides itself on producing more than 400 types for retailers, from a popular line of hearts to miniature Craftsmen tools and Disney figures. The ornaments generally cost from \$1 to \$20 each, with most selling for \$5 to \$10.

It also produces business accessories such as key chains and family keepsakes, such as photo frames.

Smalletz, the daughter of company founder Gloria Duchin, places special emphasis on the company's Rhode Island roots.

"Some of the most talented vendors remain here," she said. "The quality in Rhode Island far surpasses anything coming from Asia."

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## Ornaments

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Duchin founded her company in 1979 after a stint as an executive for cataloger Lillian Vernon. A specialist in Christmas novelties, Duchin decided to start her own business, specializing in seasonal goods and business accessories.

She was living in New York at the time, but chose to start her company in Rhode Island because of the state's reputation in the jewelry and accessory industry. The company started with five employees and a handful of clients, including Wal-Mart, which at the time had 270 stores, mostly in the Deep South.

A traditional Christmas bell ornament produced by Duchin remains Wal-Mart's top-seller, even as the Arkansas-based chain has grown to thousands of stores.

"Wal-Mart has been a factor in our growth," Smalletz said. "Wal-Mart has provided Gloria Duchin with the opportunity to grow into the number-one company in the metal-ornaments market."

Smalletz and her husband, Ted, came to work for her mother in 1989. Smalletz reorganized the sales department and improved product packaging, displays and sales. Her mother is semi-retired now, but remains chief executive officer. Ted is chief financial officer.

Smalletz also began tailoring product lines to Duchin's retail customers, such as CVS Corp., a practice that continues today. The company also produces generic lines, which are sold at a number of chains.

While it produces millions of ornaments for mass marketers, Duchin also creates limited edition lines for organizations such as the Preservation Society of Newport County. The company also supports the National Make-A-Wish



JOURNAL PHOTO / KRIS CRAIG

One of the speciality produced by East Providence's Gloria Duchin Inc. is a this placecard holder designed for the Newport Preservation Society.

Foundation, the American Heart Association and other nonprofits.

Duchin is able to keep abreast of the changing marketplace with sales-tracking software that gives the company precise data about what products are selling and who is buying them.

"We are a much more efficient company than we were 5 to 10 years ago," she said.

She also travels the globe to discern fashion trends that the company's designers can work

into its product lines.

In the company's headquarters, at 201 Narragansett Park Drive, displays and marketing storyboards show off the latest lines. The company sets out the information for customers in a 90-page trend book and CD-ROM.

Since 2001, Duchin has been minting collections that "capture sentiment," she said, such as "Family Hearts." The group of heart-shaped ornaments includes brief notes of affection

akin to Hallmark greeting cards for mothers, fathers and other family members.

There are also lines of patriotic ornaments, including ones with military branch logos.

Duchin also broke the traditional red-and-green Christmas color model this year, choosing turquoise for some lines.

"How many retailers have turquoise or aqua packaging... but it checked out," with increased sales, Smalletz said.

Once the lines are set, it's time to sell them to retailers. That includes traveling this month to such hot spots as Eau Claire, Wisc., and Minneapolis, Minn.

"I get to the glamour spots this time of year," she said, with a self-deprecating chuckle.

Traveling also gives her a chance to see the competition up close. A trip to China last year helped her discern what the Asian country does well and the niche Duchin can exploit — bringing fashion-oriented design to mid-priced ornaments and keepsakes.

"What I felt was more important was learning what they couldn't do," she said. "If you're automated, you can be competitive with China."

Retail consolidation, such as Sears-Kmart and Federated-May chains is pressuring manufacturers, she said. At the same time, online retailing is opening more wallets on Web sites such as eBay.

"Shopping patterns have changed," she said as more shopping is done online.

The growing Latino population and the increasing number of practicing Christians are creating demands for new products as well, she said.

"In designing new products, that's opportunity," she said.

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