

Go Big AND Go Home with Debbie George

David Crabill: Welcome to the Forrager Podcast, where I talk with cottage, food businesses, about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill and today I am talking with Debbie, George, but before we get started, I want to mention that the first ever national cottage food conference is, just three weeks from now, tickets are only \$20.

And I encourage you to check it out by going to cottagefoodconference.com. All right, with that out of the way, let's jump right into this episode. Debbie lives in Gilbert, Arizona, and she sells custom decorated cookies with her cottage food business, cookie mill. Debbie has only been running her business for just over a year, but she's already fulfilled some incredibly large orders and she sold over 10,000 cookies last year.

That's partly because she has done a good job, marketing her cookies to businesses, putting a strong focus on the B2B or business to business model. So I wanted to bring her on the show to hear how she did it. And with that, welcome to the show, Debbie. Nice to have you here.

Debbie George: [00:01:03] Thank you. I'm thrilled to be here.

David Crabill: [00:01:05] Debbie. Can you take us back to the beginning? I think you started in late 2019 or early 2020. Can you tell us how your business got started?

Debbie George: [00:01:14] Yes. At the end of December of 2019, I was in a transitional job that ended and I just decided. It was time to jump head in to cookie decorating business. I was in the middle of selling my house and decided it was a good time to pull some of the equity out of that sale and, and get going.

And that's what I did. And then January opened up my LLC.

David Crabill: [00:01:42] Now, why did you want to start a cookie business? Did you already have experience with cookies? I mean, you made it sound like it was almost like a natural decision for you to start a cookie business.

Debbie George: [00:01:54] Yeah. So what had happened was back in 2018, my daughter and I went to a cookie cookie decorating class and just fell in love with it actually revived my love for decorating desserts. And she had started right away decorating cookies and actually selling them. And I spent most of my time supporting her You know, thinking or helping her with products or helping her with equipment and just kind of supporting her as mothers do and all the while working my full-time job.

And just, I, I just kept dreaming about. Making cookies and every chance I got, I would make cookies. So it just started, you know, slowly but surely becoming a bigger thought and a bigger thought. And so when I had an opportunity, when this transitional job was gone, it just did feel like the natural next step for me.

David Crabill: [00:02:52] And you it reinvigorated your love for decorating desserts That indicates to me that this has been something you've done for a long time.

Debbie George: [00:03:01] So all throughout my kids' childhood, I always did their, their birthday cakes and cookies and any school event pastry um, never to this level, but it was always for fun. And I always. Took on pretty big challenges with their, with their cakes. So, yeah.

David Crabill: [00:03:22] That's not surprising to me just from seeing the stuff that you produced from the beginning. Cause I went back to the beginning of your Facebook page. That was only about. A year ago, but your stuff was very good from that point, you know? So I figured you probably had, uh, some skills already built up before you jumped in.

And how did you feel like your business was going to do? Did you know that it was going to do well when you started.

Debbie George: [00:03:51] I really had no idea. I was just so excited to give it a try. And it just so happened. That a really large event CookieCon was happening in February. So it really helped me jumpstart my business. At the very beginning, it just, everything was just timed perfectly.

David Crabill: [00:04:12] And CookieCon. And is that a national event that's close by to you?

Debbie George: [00:04:17] It is a national event. It's not close by. it seems like they choose a different location every year. And one of my famous and favorite cookie stories actually is evolved around CookieCon. May I, may I tell it to you now? Okay. So in October of 2019 is when they put up for sale the tickets for CookieCon that was going to be happening at the end of February of 2020.

And even though I set my alarm to Purchase the tickets right at the moment they went on sale. I didn't get home for about 45 minutes, almost an hour. And by the time I got online, all the tickets were sold out. So I was so disappointed, but I got on Facebook and I, I posted a few ads about you know, if anybody got any extra tickets to CookieCon I'm, I'm willing to pay extra.

I just missed them. And I really want one. And that had gone on for a couple of months and nobody was. Giving up any of their tickets. And so finally at the beginning of January, January 8th, actually my birthday, I decided I still didn't have any tickets to CookieCon, but I decided I'm, I'm going to go one way or another.

I'm going to get there. So I bought the plane ticket. I bought the hotel. This one happened to be in Kentucky. And I just, you know, sent it out to the universe again, if it's going to happen, it's going to happen. And wouldn't, you know, 36 hours before I boarded the plane to go to CookieCon somebody, my cookie angel, Marcia had contracted the flu and couldn't go.

So she asked me if I would buy her ticket. And of course, happily, I said, yes almost right before I, I, I got on the plane to go. So.

David Crabill: [00:06:02] Wow. That is remarkable. And you live in Arizona and you were going to fly to Kentucky without even a ticket in your hand.

Debbie George: [00:06:08] That's correct.

David Crabill: [00:06:10] I feel like if you have that kind of dedication, I can't imagine them turning you around door.

Debbie George: [00:06:17] Well, that's what I was hoping. And luckily it didn't come down to that, but it was, um, I learned so many things and met so many beautiful, wonderful people at CookieCon. It just was a dream come true to me. And so I came back and, and hit the floor running and uh, Two weeks later, the world's shut down

David Crabill: [00:06:37] Now a little bit about CookieCon is this it's a national event. Sounds very large. How many people go to this event.

Debbie George: [00:06:45] It seemed like there were just about a thousand people at this last event. And I think they're actually, or they were planning on doing two this year to make or last year to make it a little bit easier for people to get to and not have the problem that I did with sold out tickets. But they're still trying to navigate that with COVID.

I think.

David Crabill: [00:07:04] And this is an event that is just for like custom cookies. What's the purpose of it.

Debbie George: [00:07:10] It's for all cookiers, to get together and learn new techniques and join contests and kind of show off their wares and you know, learn about all the different products that there are for cookieing. From cookie cutters to stencils, to coloring, to, you know, big machines, to organizations that you can donate to.

I mean, it's, it's, it is a, a cookie convention. It's, it's huge and it's fantastic. And the people are just absolutely wonderful.

David Crabill: [00:07:44] So now you had just started your business, but you had some business experience under your belt by the time you went. it sounds like. So was there something that you took away from CookieCon that you implemented immediately when you got home?

Debbie George: [00:07:59] Oh, all of the above, I bought a 3d printer so that I could print my own cookie cutters here. And I went to different classes on, on how to airbrush and how to do roses and how to make different. Just all, all different kinds of techniques. Remember, I was only in business technically about a month, a little over a month before I went to CookieCon.

So all of my training before that had been, you know, just looking at YouTubes and my daughter, Jennifer helping me Teaching me how to, you know, the different terminology. So there was, it was almost overwhelming. It was from, you know, 7:00 AM until 10:00 PM for five nights in a row, constant, you know, back to back cookie classes and demonstrations.

So it was, it was phenomenal. I can't wait to go to the next one.

David Crabill: [00:08:52] It was a crash course to start your business it sounds like.

Debbie George: [00:08:56] Yes, exactly. That's exactly what it was.

David Crabill: [00:08:58] Here's an interesting question. Let's say you didn't go to CookieCon or let's just say you didn't have faith that the universe, you didn't put it out into the universe. You didn't have faith. You said I can't go. And you didn't go. Do you think that your business would have taken off the same

Debbie George: [00:09:16] I can't imagine that it would have no.

David Crabill: [00:09:20] and why? What would have been the difference?

Debbie George: [00:09:22] I think the spark, the passion, it just got me so excited. And, and I'm not the only one that it, you could, you could just feel the energy in the hallways at CookieCon and you know, I don't know how many people left CookieCon and, and jump-started a business. I know that there were a lot of people there that had already been doing cookies for years, if not decades.

But yeah, it just got me so excited and wanting to aspire to some of the people and cookies and techniques that I saw during CookieCon.

David Crabill: [00:09:58] Now you said that you had sold your house, right? And so you put some of that money into the business. Now, what, what did you, you already said you bought a 3d printer, but what was some of the equipment that you invested in right up front?

Debbie George: [00:10:12] So the 3d printer, the silhouette machine to cut stencils. I even purchased another printer. That's an edible printer, although. Full disclosure. I haven't used it yet. But it's here. It's ready. It's waiting for me for whenever I'm ready. And very soon after I got home from CookieCon, I purchased my first cookie oven.

I traded in my residential stove slash oven where you could only put in one tray at a time for an ad craft cookie oven, which I could do four trays at a time. And that was in March. So that was pretty soon after CookieCon. I also purchased several different stainless steel tables to organize my home.

it's not a normal home cottage environment. It really has kind of taken on, well taken over the house. I would say a lot of stainless steel workstations, a lot of Bakers racks and shelving. I have different production schedule, dry erase boards on the, on the walls, you know, just kind of lining the walls that I have around the main area of the house.

And a lot of storage things I went from Oh, just a couple of handfuls of. Cookie cutters to over 1700 right now. So they're all in their own little bins organized and labeled. And even I use an app for that to keep them organized. And it really helps a lot, but just so equipment, things like that.

David Crabill: [00:11:51] Yeah, I was going to ask about organization, cause I saw a picture of your setup on your Facebook page, I think. And I just it's just incredibly organized. You must be one of the most organized people that I've had on the podcast, it just is, it is not far removed from a commercial kitchen environment.

Let's put it that way. I did want to ask though, you know, you've, you've invested a lot into this business. Do you know about, like, if you totaled it all up, how much all of that equipment costs uh, when you got started, the, you said stainless steel tables and oven, the stainless steel baking racks, some printers.

Debbie George: [00:12:31] Well, and then since then, since the very beginning, I've also added another cookie oven. Just what two, three weeks ago. We purchased our first 20 quart uh, mixer and sheeter. So now I have a dough sheeter also. So all in all. Probably in the neighborhood of around \$20,000,

David Crabill: [00:12:55] Yeah, I can imagine, like what, what is the oven cost?

Debbie George: [00:13:00] The oven you can find for a little under a thousand dollars, the 20 quart mixer was more in the neighborhood of \$1500 to \$2000. By the time you get. The delivery and get it off. The truck

David Crabill: [00:13:19] Those stainless steel countertops and baking racks. Aren't cheap either. Huh?

Debbie George: [00:13:24] Yeah, those, you know, I, I tried to be a little frugal and I, and I got. What I think is, is a good deal. Those are anywhere from two to \$300. I bought the ones that have the shelving on 'em. And then I purchased a couple of smaller ones for the ovens and for the mixer that are, you know, just real small, but uh, you know, really just doing it piece by piece by piece and just getting what I need for the next.

Kind of thrust or push. I also forgot to tell you, I have a dehydrator too, for, for those larger orders that need to dry fairly quickly and an AV table. Cause I like things mobile. I like things with wheels on them. Cause there's quite a bit of moving around if you could imagine.

David Crabill: [00:14:14] You sound like you're, you're totally set up. You can do anything now. When you made the first investment in, you know, most, I feel like most people don't put that kind of. Investment of equipment into their business, right from the get go. And most people quite honestly don't need to. But when you did that, and I know you had the money to work with, did you have, have any validation at all to know that you would be able to pay yourself back?

Did you have a lot of sales at that point or were you just putting out into the universe, as you said.

Debbie George: [00:14:50] Yeah, I love doing that. And every single time I have said yes to the business, it's just come back immediately. Um, When I bought the first. Cookie oven. I was managing. Okay. With the oven that I had it, of course, was taking a little bit longer when I had larger orders. But the week that I had the oven ready to go, I got a call from a local church who wanted 700 cookies and there was no way I would have been able to do that.

Efficiently anyway, with a residential oven. So the same thing happened again in November when I got the other cookie oven, I got an order from a, from a healthcare company for 1400

cookies. I mean, it just it's validation all over the place. Every time I took a step forward saying, okay, I can do this.

It came, you know, like the Kevin Costner movie, if you build it, they will come.

David Crabill: [00:15:51] Have you had any former business experience like do you have any experience running a business before this.

Debbie George: [00:16:00] Not exactly. I have worked in a lot of businesses before I've worked in sales and I've worked in on a lot of or with, I should say a lot of manufacturing companies. So I've had the privilege of knowing a little bit about. The six Sigma and the, and the, especially in the automotive industry with the quality control and things of that nature.

So I have a little bit of that background. when my fourth child was born, I stayed home and ran a daycare from my house. So in that sense, I, I ran a business quote, unquote, but it wasn't quite like this. This is my first. Kind of stab at doing this. And I, I just made it a decision at the very beginning that I was just going to give it everything I had and keep learning what I needed to know as I went along.

And David, I promise you it wasn't organized and all smooth sailing. It was you know, sometimes stumbling upon my next. You know, epiphany of, Oh, you know, it really would have been helpful if I had had that here. And so I would take care of that for the next time. So

David Crabill: [00:17:09] Of course, it always looks from the outside looking in, it looks like you have it all together, but you've been in business, you know, it's, it's always, you're always failing and, You're constantly learning new things, you know? So uh, totally understand. Now we're still, before the whole pandemic hit, you know, you started in January.

What were some of the things that you did to try to kickstart your business or start marketing your business?

Debbie George: [00:17:39] So the very best thing that I did was in January. Right when I started focusing on this cookie business, I joined a BNI group and BNI stands for. Business networking international it's it happens to be the largest word of mouth referral organization. And the chapter that I joined here in Chandler, Arizona had 65 members.

And basically we got together every week and. Looked for business for each other and right away upon joining, it happened to be their fourth anniversary. So they were having a little birthday party and they ordered cookies. So you know, it was right away. I got the product out to 65 of what I call salespeople of mine.

Cause they're out, you know, in their day to day business looking, you know, for people that need. My services just like I'm looking for people that need theirs and it's a very powerful, reciprocal relationship selling relationship. So that really helped And then my daughter, Jennifer also helped me quite a bit with getting on Instagram and Facebook and all of those things that I had absolutely zero experience with.

She helped me create a form that people could actually order cookies on, or at least get in touch with me. All of that was extremely helpful and really what made my business tick for the first year.

David Crabill: [00:19:12] Now the business BNI business network international is that a free organization. Did you have to pay to join that?

Debbie George: [00:19:22] It is not free. there are dues, there are annual dues. And let me tell you the, that first order that I told you about for the birthday cookies for our group paid for. What I had paid in membership dues. So it was, it, it, hand over fist. I mean, it wasn't even, a question in my mind whether or not it was going to be.

Worth it. And, and also I did want to mention, since we're talking about BNI, if there are any cookiers or bakers listening that want to grow their business and want some help to get into a BNI chapter, I'd be more than happy to walk them through that. It's really super simple and they're all over the world.

David Crabill: [00:20:07] Just to give me a little idea, like how much were the dues or are the dues each year in your area

Debbie George: [00:20:13] Ooh. So I I'm, I'm noticing that I'm a little reluctant to talk about that because I don't even know if it's uh,

David Crabill: [00:20:25] are you concerned that it might not be published or something

Debbie George: [00:20:27] Yeah, I don't know, if it is published, I think that for the most part that it's not a sale, right. It's, it's an organization where if you want to grow your business and you. Are there for your community in wanting to help other people grow their business? It's not just about, you know, what you can take.

It's about really what you can give gives gain is one of our core values. And so it, you know, when you, when you talk about the whole organization of BNI, it's just not, Money doesn't come up as the first thing. So that's why I kind of am a little hesitant to advertise what the dues are for that purpose.

David Crabill: [00:21:07] Yeah, that makes sense. Um, And it sounds like it is an investment, but it's best to just reach out and. Um, Talk to the BNI chapter that someone is, is closest to. And it sounds like it's more than worth it

Debbie George: [00:21:23] oh hands down. Yeah, hands down. Because not only, not only do you meet every week and get to know, literally, in my case, it's 65 salespeople. They're 65 people every week that have you front of mind when they hear that people, you know, are having a party or having a celebration or need something that's COVID friendly or, you know, whatever it is.

But. Along with those weekly meetings. They are also, world-class continuing education webinars and meetings and podcasts that not just teach you about BNI and how to network and how to share business, but how to build your own business. Skills and techniques for

you to grow as a, not just as a Business owner, but as a human being, so it's just, it's a phenomenal organization.

I can't speak enough kudos of it. And the Phoenix area has up to 75 chapters. So there is definitely a chapter near anybody in, in the Arizona area, but you know, different sizes and shapes and colors, and it's just, it's, it's a wonderful organization

David Crabill: [00:22:40] It sounds like an amazing opportunity. And I actually have never heard of A cottage food business, joining a BNI group. So it just sounds like a wonderful opportunity that a lot of cottage food businesses are not taking advantage of as far as I'm aware. So thanks so much for sharing that. So now that if we're moving forward and you know, you get back from CookieCon two weeks later, the pandemic hits everything shuts down. Uh, What happened after that?

Debbie George: [00:23:07] Yeah. So there was actually a time, I would say between March 15th and the end of March, where I was just so confused. I was so excited about cookies. I thought, Oh, it's a perfect solution because they're all individually heat sealed and They're, COVID friendly. And everybody's going to love these instead of using cakes for their, you know, get togethers.

But nobody was having get togethers and worse. Everybody was complaining about gaining weight. And so I thought, Oh gosh, what am I going to do? I felt like, you know, it was such a trivial. You know, I'm trying to sell cookies and everybody else is trying to fend for their lives. So I was really, I kind of went into a little funk there for about, I would say two weeks.

And at the same time, I was trying to get ahold of my mom, who wasn't for whatever reason, calling me back right away. And I started thinking, you know, I really want to talk to her on a daily basis. So she actually agreed to be my accountability partner. And what that looked like was I would call her every day.

We would zoom every day and she would ask me what I was working on and you know, what I was doing to move my business forward. Even if it was. Designing you know, a cookie that I didn't even have an order for, but it just kept me in the groove in, you know, working motion and it kept me in touch with her.

So that was a godsend at the beginning of the pandemic. I don't know what I would've done without her. I probably would still be hiding under my covers. I think if it weren't for her.

David Crabill: [00:24:51] Well, you certainly came out of that in a big way. And I, I, I think you started getting some big orders. So did you, like, how did it all unfold? Through 2020.

Debbie George: [00:25:03] So I was still getting orders, you know, onesie twosies here and there throughout March and April and in may. Um, I think I mentioned a local church called and said that they were wanting to give a cookie to each one of their members that had donated. And so I was thrilled about it. I had never done an order that big, that one was for 700 cookies and.

I was thrilled about it. honestly, it was that order that helped me get some of the systems in place that I had. that one got me going through may and June and then, but you know, all the birthday parties and anniversaries and, and some employee recognition type orders came in.

And then. You know, as luck would have it. Another really big order came in to help me again, work on my systems and, yeah, so it, it just, it just kind of flowed it. I, I couldn't have asked for a better first year, it was slow when it needed to be slow. It was really busy when it needed to be busy.

And I, I learned so much.

David Crabill: [00:26:16] What's the largest cookie order that you've had so far,

Debbie George: [00:26:20] 1400. and they gave me about 10 days to prepare for it. They were really behind their, their original treat vendor. Something had happened to them and they weren't able to get what they were. Ordering in time. And so one of my local BNI chapter members was doing their mailings for them and heard that they were having a challenge with their treat person.

And he said, have you thought about custom cookies? I know a gal And they called me and, and the rest is history.

David Crabill: [00:26:59] When you're talking about producing hundreds of cookies, what is the process look like in your kitchen? Like how do you organize it all? What are the steps you take? What does that look like?

Debbie George: [00:27:09] So the very first thing I did was. Divide up the number of cookies that I needed to make per day, because I knew I wasn't going to be able to make all of the dough and bake all of the cookies. I just, I had one rack at the time and it was a small one. It wasn't even one of the large ones. So I knew I had to divide it up.

So I did some math and figured out how many different batches of dough I needed to make, how many cookies I needed to. Bake that day and how much frosting I needed to get them flooded and off the racks and into the packaging room so that I could start the next day. and that was the flow and it, it, you know, it, it broke it down into really.

Manageable pieces. It wasn't as overwhelming as I originally thought. So that's what I did. Yeah. Math first.

David Crabill: [00:28:08] And I saw that one of your posts, you said that you you're like, Oh, I have 30 deliveries today. 30 deliveries I mean, that's, that's a lot of deliveries.

Debbie George: [00:28:20] that was really fun. That was another BNI chapter that called they were having their two year anniversary and she didn't even have a logo. For their they hadn't even made a logo for their group yet. And so she and I got together and created a logo for a cookie. And then I made the cookies, put the logo on the cookies, boxed each one of them individually.

And then she paid me to go drop one off at each person's house. Right before the meeting, like I delivered them on a Sunday and the meeting was on Tuesday. So that was really super fun. I really love that part of it

David Crabill: [00:29:02] that Well there are a lot of different kinds of custom cookies out there, you know? And what would you say your favorite style or your, what, what do you focus on in terms of. I don't know what people are ordering or what you like to make.

Debbie George: [00:29:21] I really love the business logos. A lot of people won't touch them. And they certainly aren't touching them for hundreds at a time. So I do a five-star. Thank you, cookie. and a five-star Google review. Set. I love doing those because it just teaches people how to appreciate the people that are supporting their businesses grow. Um,

David Crabill: [00:29:49] I did. I did see a lot of cookies you had were gratitude focused.

Debbie George: [00:29:55] I love gratitude. I love showing my appreciation. I love teaching people how to appreciate others. it's a big part of who we are. As a matter of fact, the cookie mill logo. It has a mill and in the very center of the mill, it's a heart. And that's why. Cause I'm yeah.

David Crabill: [00:30:15] Now, what does it take to make a logo cookie? You said people aren't touching them. I know there's a lot of precision there and it's. Something that requires skill. So how did you develop those skills and how did you gain the confidence to tackle those.

Debbie George: [00:30:32] So I use a projector. It's not all by hand, just a full disclosure. It is all about the consistency. Everybody says it all the time and it's so true. You could have, you know, the perfect eye for the perfect design. And if your consistency is off in your icing, then your design will be off. And really it just takes practice. It really it, it takes a lot of practice.

David Crabill: [00:31:01] So for someone who's not familiar. You're basically projecting an image of the logo onto the cookie, but then your hand. Drawing it with the icing

Debbie George: [00:31:10] exactly. I have the printer that makes. The, that prints on the sugar paper. So I could feasibly take somebody's business card and just print it out on the sugar paper and put it on a cookie. I just, I, I don't prefer the quality of that. Look to, you know, each cookie by hand from a projected image. I just, I really love the crisp lines.

And, and my customers seem to prefer that also.

David Crabill: [00:31:44] I also saw an avatar cookie. What are those?

Debbie George: [00:31:50] So those are my least favorite full disclosure faces. Yeah. I need some more practice with faces. But there, I have a couple of customers that just love to appreciate their customers and in their minds, there is not a cookie design that I can't do. So they'll send me, Oh, I want a picture of this BMW. And I want this, this person's face coming out of the window and I want, you know, so I have some, some customers that definitely push me to the end of my limits every time and.

Yeah, I just need a little bit more practice on the faces,

David Crabill: [00:32:28] Well, I was honestly surprised that you were even doing them because obviously you're talking about some massive art skills in order to take somebody's face and try to emulate it onto a cookie. And I mean, I don't see many people doing that.

Debbie George: [00:32:45] was scary. It was scary. And, and, you know, if you'll notice in the pictures, they're a little bit farther away from the lens and a little bit fuzzy and, you know, so that

David Crabill: [00:32:56] Well, I didn't hyper analyze them. I think most people don't hyper analyze cookies and it looked good to me. So yeah.

Debbie George: [00:33:03] Thank

David Crabill: [00:33:05] Are there any other kinds of cookies that you sell or that are popular?

Debbie George: [00:33:10] A lot of people love the unicorns. The unicorns are super fun. They're super popular. They're also super hard. I call those my carpal tunnel specialties um, because the, the manes on the unicorns are very, very thick. And usually you are combining two or three or sometimes. Four colors in one bag in one tip, and it just takes an awful lot of effort to squeeze that out.

Um, And what I noticed was I was not charging enough for those at the beginning and people were ordering them left and right. So I did have to raise my price for those because they are so much more time consuming and difficult, but people love them.

David Crabill: [00:33:58] Well, what about uh, your other pricing? What, or, or for those too but what does your pricing look like for your cookies?

Debbie George: [00:34:05] So I typically say about a dollar, an inch per. The size of the cookie and then whatever decorating on top of that is extra. So I do have three different sort of tiers. I have a basic, a detailed and a premium. So it just really depends on how much detail you want on a cookie. A lot of people quite honestly call me and say, I don't want much.

I just, you know, I just want this and that. And the other thing, a lot of times, people don't really understand how much. Detail. It takes to, for instance, make a unicorn cookie. They just think, Oh, it's just a shape. And you know, there's just a couple of colors on it, but there's a lot that goes into it. And then there are some cookies, like the bee cookie um, or the beehive cookie that are just, I mean, in, in five seconds just about, you know, with stencils they're, they're done now.

It takes, the education and the classes and the expertise and purchasing the right stencils and the right airbrush guns and the right colors, all to come together to make it an easy cookie to decorate. Right. But it's still a very simple cookie. And so I don't mind charging a little bit less for, for cookies like that.

David Crabill: [00:35:24] so one of the upsides about custom decorated cookies is. Is that you can charge more for them, the pricing. And one of the downsides is of course it's very time intensive typically. So what is your timing look like? Like how many hours a day are you working on the business on average?

Debbie George: [00:35:45] Ooh, that's a great question, David, because, you know, with the more, you know, after 10,000 cookies, you do get a little bit quicker. What I noticed just this week is that I had six custom orders and they were all done from. Baking to decorating within two workdays with full nights of sleep. That was not the case during Valentine's week.

Last week, there were actually four days that I worked around the clock I had. Quick 90 minute naps each day. And the rest of the time I was literally working around the clock. There were a couple of snafus on a very, very, very busy large week. But it, it really depends on what's going on. There are some days when I'm not even.

Touching the oven or, or touching a cookie and I'm, I get to work on the business. I get to be designing. I get to be coming up with new realtor packs or I get to be, you know, thinking of the next best packaging for, for my customers. And then there are other days when I start at 7:00 AM and I'm, you know, pulling myself away at 10:00 PM.

Cause I know I need to get eight hours of sleep.

David Crabill: [00:36:58] Well, so Valentine's day. That sounds overwhelming. so what did you just accept too many orders or did you know you were able to fulfill those.

Debbie George: [00:37:11] So it was, it was one of those things where I cut the ordering off and my best friend of 35 years, of course called at the last minute after I had cut off ordering and said, I just need these 40 Valentines. And You know, I would do anything for her. So I said, yes. And I still probably think to this day, I still think that I would have been able to do those without too much of an issue, because I was really ahead of things get going into the holiday, but there was a problem with one of the very large orders.

And unfortunately I had to redo. 250 cookies in 12 hours. So when I was working on redoing those, all of the Valentine's got pushed back 12 hours. And so I, I am crazy about meeting my deadlines and it just killed me to think that I would have to call these people and say, just kidding.

I can't have your cookies done on Friday. It's going to be Saturday. And remember a lot of my customers are businesses, so They needed those cookies on Friday to hand out to their customers. They weren't going to be delivering on the weekend. They weren't personal Valentines. So it was just, I mean, I don't really want to call it a mistake.

Although I think that there were some things that could have been done, done to prevent it. I had no idea that it was going to happen, so I couldn't plan for it, but now I will,

David Crabill: [00:38:49] Yeah. So obviously you're doing very well with your business this year. I know you did really well in 2020, but you made 10,000 last year. Do you have any projections for this year?

Debbie George: [00:39:00] Well, I'm already on a run rate to double that I've already already the first month of the year. I already booked 2000 cookies. So it's, it's going well.

David Crabill: [00:39:10] No. Yeah. That's crazy. Congrats. And it just sounds like business is taking off in a big way. Um, And you had mentioned the, like the realtor packs and I saw those on your Facebook page, how much are you creating cookies that are specifically geared towards realtors or, or the business people in your BNI group?

Debbie George: [00:39:35] Uh, Very much. So some people might might've called that pivoting last year, where it was getting away from the, the moms and the dads and the grandparents ordering cookies for birthday parties and anniversaries. I really spend a lot of time making cookies for businesses and whatever it is they need.

So specifically for realtors, they do, you know, they keep their, their businesses front of mind with their clients by dropping by on. Different occasions sometimes holidays to just say, you know, we're here, please think of us when you need a realtor. And when you do that every month, first of all, you need something cost-effective but you also need something cute.

You need something, you know, that only really a cute decorated sugar cookie can provide. And it just so happens that I also love the packaging aspect of it. It's not just the cute cookie, but it's the cute, you know, the, the, the St Patty's day pot of gold or the Valentine box of chocolates, that's actually a cookie or, you know, the Easter bunny basket with peeps in it, you know, or what, whatever it is.

They really appreciate. Somebody doing the work for them. And I happen to love that kind of work. So that's kind of been my push this year. I'm actually going to be doing a, um, direct mailer to find more realtors and spread the word about these little pop by gifts.

David Crabill: [00:41:07] Regarding your packaging. You said you love the packaging. Where have you been finding packaging? Buying packaging?

Debbie George: [00:41:17] Well, I can't tell you all my secrets. Can I,

David Crabill: [00:41:21] Well, that's why you're on podcast, right?

Debbie George: [00:41:24] I. Love shopping. I shop at Amazon. I shop at BRP boxes. I shop at clear bags. I go to the dollar store sometimes even target has some really cute things that are in the, in the budget for the onesie twosie packs. Oriental trading company has some really cute ideas for bulk ordering. Walmart surprises me every once in a while. Um,

David Crabill: [00:41:51] So it sounds like it's all over the place.

Debbie George: [00:41:53] it's all over the place. It's better if I can do it online and they deliver it to me, that's the best, but that doesn't always happen.

David Crabill: [00:42:00] And what about your ingredients?

Debbie George: [00:42:02] Same thing. I am too small for the big guys to deliver to me and I'm at a home. And a lot of the times they say I have to be in a commercial kitchen in order

for them to deliver. So I'm still going out and purchasing what I need. I find some great deals on some of the products at smart and final.

I buy some of my products through Walmart, some through Amazon, a lot of the cookies have different products that they sell that I buy for instance dream meringue so I buy those things online.

David Crabill: [00:42:38] Hey, next time the wholesalers tell you that you need to be in a commercial kitchen to deliver, you know, you just take a picture of your kitchen and send it them. And.

Debbie George: [00:42:50] You know what it is? I told them, I said, what have, what have I. What if my run rate is to purchase, you know, thousands of dollars a month, does that change anything? And they said, it's really not about the dollars and cents. It's really more of how the truck is going to get to your door because they don't um, you know, they won't take it off the truck and walk it up to my door.

They'll expect me to open up a gate, you know uh, a Bay in the back. That was the big thing.

David Crabill: [00:43:18] Yeah, it on your driveway.

Debbie George: [00:43:20] Yeah, Yeah, just, I'll just open the garage door. You just throw it out of the truck.

David Crabill: [00:43:25] And do you ship your cookies? I know that Arizona allows in-state shipping.

Debbie George: [00:43:32] I will occasionally ship something for a gift for somebody. If the customer lives here in Arizona and purchase it, you know, is a regular customer of mine and, and purchase cookies from me.

So what I found is I package them you um, I package them, back to back. Icing side out and then I bubble wrap them. So if it's a dozen, I basically have six packs of bubble wrapped cookies. And in the summertime I'm actually putting in a sweat proof ice pack. So the box has to be just a tad bit bigger.

And so you have to put a tad bit more filling in there. It's a little bit more expensive all the way around, but what I find is with two-day delivery, they get there without being melted.

David Crabill: [00:44:22] Now you talked about your daughter, helping you with the social media aspect of business, the technology. What did you learn in that process?

Debbie George: [00:44:34] Let's see. So she set up my Instagram at the beginning, she taught me how to create a Google form. That I post through link tree. And that way people can just click on that and order, and they don't have to pick up the phone and call me. That's really helpful. Um,

David Crabill: [00:44:54] You know, I actually noticed the Google forms on Link tree and. I was going to say, like, you've done so well with your business. And I think a lot of people get

caught up and they think I need to have this website. That's got this ordering system in place and ready to go. And clearly you've done pretty well with just a basic Google form.

Debbie George: [00:45:15] Yup. Yup. As a matter of fact, I do have a website, but it's a landing page. It is really just a digital business card. There's no, you can't really, besides going to link tree, there's nothing for you to do there. You can, you can get my phone number. You can see what, what map of the Valley you know, the, the, the bakery is in.

You can see some pictures and that's pretty much it there's no, no bells and whistles on that one.

David Crabill: [00:45:41] In terms of your, you're obviously learning a lot while you're making huge orders, but you seem like someone who would always want to keep learning and improve your skills. So what are you currently doing or what have you been doing in the last few months to keep expanding your skillset? Are you in online classes or what resources are you using to learn more?

Debbie George: [00:46:07] There are several cookie clubs that I am a member of that I learned about through when I was at CookieCon they are Facebook related. Some of them meet every week. Some of them don't meet at all, but they have all of their content on their website. And you have full access to all of the archives.

Um, uh, I'll tell you something, in the cookie community, people, just everybody. Most everybody is so generous with their time, with their knowledge. They just they're very friendly. So anytime you have a question, I remember I was doing a chocolate chip cookie and milk one time and I was, I was confused about the chocolate chip. Like, should I, should I do it this way? Should I do it that way? Or, you know, what looks more realistic? What, what, you know, what's the quickest way to do this? And I posted, you know, I don't know, let's just say seven o'clock I posted a question, you know, how do you do this?

Or what would you do? And within 30 minutes I had. Probably a hundred comments on, you know, what the best way to tackle this chocolate chip would be. So it's just, they're so friendly and they're so, so helpful. Most, most everybody is. There are also a plethora of YouTube videos. I actually register for classes very regularly. I will pay, you know, anywhere from \$30 to I've paid \$80 for a class to learn how to do different techniques on cookies. And some of them have taught me things that I'll never use on a cookie, but just, you know, having that in my toolbox is, is really important. And I am a lifelong learner. I, I try to learn something every single day.

David Crabill: [00:47:57] Do you remember like the names of some of those clubs or memberships or courses that you've been a part of?

Debbie George: [00:48:04] the first one that probably helped me the most at the beginning was the colorful cookie club with Nancy Westfall. She has uh, A um, Facebook live on Thursday nights and she's geared more towards the learning, how to do stencils and 3d printing.

But she provides all kinds of free resources on her. Page and on her website and just has pretty much given her life to helping cookiers. And she's, she's just been wonderful. Arty McGoo Um, is another one that I joined last year. She doesn't have a weekly thing like Nancy, but she has a lot of very organized I'll call them classes or themes that you can peruse through the archives and find just about whatever you're looking for. Lots of great techniques. Um, mostly in Facebook, you can really look for a lot of these in Facebook and then some of them have annual memberships that you can sign up for.

David Crabill: [00:49:07] Well, I'll ask you for some links and I'll put those into the. The show notes for this episode so that people can find any resources that you've used and regarding the 3d printing stuff. what is that and how does that work? And have you done very much of it in your business?

Debbie George: [00:49:24] Oh, it is the best thing since sliced bread. Let me tell you the machine itself was I have the ender pro and it was, I want to say somewhere in the neighborhood of \$350, I think, or 400 with the upgrade. And basically you can design the cookie cutter. With apps on your computer, and then you send the files to the printer and you determine, you know, how high you want them, how thick you want them, you know, you, you determine all of the parameters and you literally push print on the printer and it prints your cookie cutter. So the 1700 plus cookie cutters that I have, I don't think I can really guess, but there are probably hundreds of them that have been made on this printer or my daughter's printer. She's the, she's the guru at that right now.

David Crabill: [00:50:28] yeah. Well, it's, it's kind of amazing where your business has taken you in just a year.

Debbie George: [00:50:34] well, I've been known to kind of go all in and, and I would tell myself if I fail, I want to make sure that I've tried everything. You know, I don't want to just fail without, you know, leaving this stone unturned or something like that. So I really do give it my all and. A friend of mine told me, you know, when somebody calls you and says, can you do this?

The answer is always, yes, you can figure it out later. But the answer is always, yes.

David Crabill: [00:51:02] That's funny that you say that because I've heard a lot of inspirational speakers and business people say the opposite that you always have the ability to say, no, I feel like a lot of people over-commit, They don't want to say no. Right? So sometimes people will over commit and then they find that they can't keep up with it all. But it sounds like it's worked really well for you.

Debbie George: [00:51:25] Well, actually that is exactly what happened last week. I said yes, too many times. And it was a problem, but let me tell you something I've been in business now for a year, and that was the first time it was a problem. So, and I've gained so much from all the other times. I said, yes, I mean a regular cookie, or that does a, a dozen here. a dozen there. Or, you know, even six dozen here, six dozen there to get a cookie order for 1700. I mean, that's, that's just crazy. Right? and now, you know, when people call and

order,, 12 dozen, I don't even blink, you know, when do you need those oh tomorrow? As a matter of fact, Nikola called and ordered for one of their events.

They ordered on Monday night, they ordered 500 logo cookies for Thursday morning meeting. And I got eight hours of sleep each night. it was not a problem, You know, smaller cookiers that don't have that on their radar would say, are you kidding? There's no way I could do that So, I love it.

David Crabill: [00:52:27] Yeah, well I can see it's, you know, you've invested in the equipment and you've invested in your own processes. And so, yeah, it's, it's cool to see how it's all come to fruition.

Debbie George: [00:52:39] Yeah. I can't wait to see what this year brings.

David Crabill: [00:52:43] Well thank you so much, Debbie, for jumping on the podcast. Was there anything that we didn't cover that you'd like to talk about?

Debbie George: [00:52:53] Oh, gosh. Um, I just am very grateful to have not only the opportunity to be here and talk to you about this, David, thank you so much for inviting me. I love my life. I love my cookie life. I love being able to create smiles for people and I wouldn't be doing this without. The very generous help of my family and BNI and all of my customers.

So I'm just really grateful to be here and able to do this. So thank you so much for having a platform to let me talk about it.

David Crabill: [00:53:28] Well, it's been my pleasure to have you on. And if people are interested in reaching out, I know you said you'd be happy to help people get into a BNI group or something like that. How can people reach out to you?

Debbie George: [00:53:44] So there are several ways. My website is cookiemill.com and then my Instagram page is [cookiemill_az](https://www.instagram.com/cookiemill_az) and they can pick up the phone and call me. My phone number is (480) 745-6050.

David Crabill: [00:54:08] Well, thank you very much for. Sharing and I I felt like you shared a lot about how to network a business and, and, and do a very good job in that regard. So, yeah. Thanks so much for jumping on today. Debbie, it's been a pleasure.

Debbie George: [00:54:23] Thank you. Pleasure's all mine, David.

David Crabill: [00:54:26] That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. My big takeaway from this episode is that when you constantly look for opportunities to network with other people and put yourself out there, amazing things can happen.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/30/

And remember to register for the first ever national cottage food conference. That's happening three weeks from now April 6th through 9th. Tickets only cost \$20. And I think it's going to be a lot of fun. Check it out at cottagefoodconference.com.

And if you enjoyed this episode, please head over to Apple Podcasts and leave me a review. A review is the best way to support the show and it will help others find it as well.

I'd also really appreciate if you could share this show with any bakers or home cooks that you know, who might be interested in it.

And finally. If you are thinking about selling your own homemade food, check out my free mini course, where I walk you through the steps that you need to take to get a cottage food business off the ground to get the course, go to cottagefoodcourse.com.

Thanks for listening. And I'll see you in the next episode.