

# How To Scale A Food Business with Annette Conrad

**David Crabill:** Welcome to the Forrager podcast, where I talk with cottage food entrepreneurs about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill. And today I'm talking with Annette Conrad. Annette lives in Mequon, Wisconsin, and has run her thriving custom decorated cookie business from her home for the last 17 years.

And trust me when I say it, this is not your average custom decorated cookie business. Annette kind of stumbled into cookie decorating in the beginning, but once she put herself out there more and more orders kept rolling in. And after a couple of years, she decided to build a commercial kitchen on her property.

Today she still operates from that kitchen, but she now has a team of people who help her and she has made cookies for dozens of brands, including Amazon, Google, Dropbox, Pinterest, and Dell. Just to name a few. You would not believe the size of orders that Annette currently handles. Sometimes she and her two employees will make up to 2000 custom cookies in a single day. Now that all sounds incredible and crazy, but the real question is how did she get to this point? And what can we learn from Annette?

In this episode, I decided not to focus so much on the technical aspects of her business. We didn't really talk about how to make cookies or pricing or things like that. Instead, I asked Annette about her business decisions, how she markets herself, how does she network herself?

How does she think about her business? And she certainly delivered, she shared so many golden nuggets of wisdom from her 17 years of experience. And by the end of this episode, I think it'll be pretty easy to see why she's been so successful. All right.

With that, let's jump right into this. Welcome to the show. Annette. Nice to have you here.

[00:01:50] **Annette Conrad:** Thank you so much, David, I've been looking so forward to our conversation. So thank you for having me.

[00:01:55] **David Crabill:** Well, Annette, I know it was a long time ago that you started this business. Can you take me back to how it all got started?

[00:02:02] **Annette Conrad:** yes, let's back it up because yes, it's been a long journey, but just for those that would like to kinda understand my journey. I started in the events planning industry.

So I'm proud to say that I worked for Marquette university here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for just about 24 years. So I have a love for that industry. And I was very fortunate to work with a group of four coordinators where we took care of all the space reservations for campus. And we helped to plan from start to finish the student organizational university and off campus events.

so. I found an opportunity with some of the events that we worked with, some of nonprofits that we worked with specifically children's hospital Um, The Briggs run walk was my first opportunity that I started dabbling into the world of cookie decorating.

And so I had offered to create these beautiful cookie boxes to really sell. So all the proceeds went to the organization and I was one of the planners for that event. And so what happened is after doing that for a couple of years, word started to spread, and I think people kind of took notice on the cookies that we're making.

And so then I started to get approached by others, not just family and friends, but others around campus and off campus. They started asking a little bit about the cookies that I was making, so I had the opportunity to bring in some of my cookie designs to some of the events on campus. So that's kind of really how it started.

[00:03:29] **David Crabill:** So this is back what 2005 about?

[00:03:32] **Annette Conrad:** You know, it is. Yeah. So I started working with university a long, long time ago. Like I said, I was there for 24 years. Loved every minute of it. I would still be there if my business just didn't, you know, just explode. But yeah, 2005 is really when I created my LLC 2007 is where I started to prep my commercial kitchen.

And it took about, about a year for me to get everything in order before I applied for my license. So I do have a food processing license through the state of Wisconsin, and that all came together in 2008. So my company Edible Impressions has been state license city license since 2008.

[00:04:10] **David Crabill:** to clarify, you actually built that commercial kitchen into your home.

[00:04:15] **Annette Conrad:** Yeah, well, and I can explain it's a really, I wanna say it's unique. It was back then unique and it is becoming more and more popular. My commercial kitchen is actually attached to a residence. However, it is a completely separate kitchen. I do not work out of my home kitchen. This is a dedicated commercial grade kitchen attached to my home with a separate entrance, which really, is a wonderful setup.

Let me just say it is not a storefront. Everything we do is custom design. And so it had worked out really well when we first put our application, cause there are some communities in some areas that kind of frown upon having businesses out of a residence. But I think we were approved because we weren't offering any kind of storefront.

We didn't have traffic coming to our, home in a sense, but it is completely separate.

[00:05:02] **David Crabill:** So back then there were no cottage food laws in Wisconsin to adhere to, and probably was technically illegal, but you were just selling. From your house for what? Two to three years before you actually got everything licensed and set up, correct?

[00:05:17] **Annette Conrad:** Right. But however, you know, we did do our homework. And so when I was looking into starting to offer my cookie creations and to people, I didn't know. And I remember the day exactly when I was approached to do a special event. So it was not going be for family or friends or a friend of a friend. And I thought, you know what?

I really, even though it's a very low risk product when you're talking about sugar cookies with Royal icing. But I wanted to do it. Right. So pretty much immediately I contacted my insurance company and we picked up liability insurance. At the time we did have the permission to be able to make a baked good from your home.

So, we went the cautious route. And fortunately, we didn't have any incidences since then.

[00:06:03] **David Crabill:** So obviously you were working at this event, planning job for a long time. You started making cookies for the events. I mean, what was the impetus for that? Like, why cookies? Like, did you always have an interest in baking or decorating or where did this come from?

[00:06:19] **Annette Conrad:** Yeah, isn't that funny? My mom always shakes her head when she just sees what I have created and she never would've guessed it, taking you back real quick. I was the tomboy in high school. I was in the sports, you know, I wasn't really creative, I guess I was creative, but it just not in that way.

And I think really what happened is when I had my kids, I've got two boys now and they're of course, men they're in their twenties, but I know something sparked in me when I had my kids. I just, I became more creative. I went through the stamping and I did scrapbooking. I did made jewelry for a while. And so I was doing these home parties and I was making profit.

but for whatever reason, when I started decorating cookies with my sister Sylvia, who's one of my most seasoned decorators and she works with me now and it's just fantastic. It just stuck.

And then I just realized that I've got something here because people started calling me. It was so funny. They would call me in the middle of the day at my full-time job and ask me for cookies and not just anybody calling me other departments on campus were calling me. So I got a little awkward because I felt like my side gig was my two worlds were colliding, but no, I was not, you know, I'm not that typical.

Oh, I used to bake when I was 10 with my mom and, you know, and all that. I never ever thought, as late as I started that I would be a baker. it's just kind of fun to see how it's evolved.

[00:07:38] **David Crabill:** So when you started your business, would you say that it grew, like, it grow organically or did your business start to take off really quickly?

[00:07:46] **Annette Conrad:** Yeah, I would say very much organically. I dabbled a little bit with paid ads. I'm just not a believer in needing to spend a lot of money on advertising. So to say, and I know that there's team advertising and there's, you know, team no advertising, but feel like I'm the advertising. I think I put a lot of focus on creating systems and workflow processes to be able to offer exceptional service.

And I think that by doing that, by putting your customers first, making sure that you make it easy for them to order, make it easy for them for reorder. I know exactly where my clients are coming from. My ideal clients are event

coordinators, experiential companies. Executive assistants, CEOs I've been there.

I know how much is on their plates. And so where I'm going here with this is that I think when you offer a super high quality product presentation and of course taste paired with exceptional responsive service, you don't need to do paid ads because word of mouth will get you there. I mean, I have so many people that have come to me year after year after year. And whenever I see a new order coming in and I do ask on the form, you know, how did you hear about us? I would say, I'm not exaggerating eight times out of 10 there's somebody's name there. Someone referred them to me. So I think there's a lot of power in word of mouth in organic reach and just being, you know, responsive.

[00:09:12] **David Crabill:** Well, I know that you have dabbled in paid ads and You've done more PR than probably anybody. I mean, it's just kinda amazing. We're gonna get into that, but I saw one of the first things you did was put a paid ad into a wedding magazine. I don't know if you did other magazines, but would you say, I guess, based on what you're saying that did that not go so well?

[00:09:35] **Annette Conrad:** Oh, I'm so glad you brought that up. I almost forgot about that. I remember that that was years and years ago. And you know why I put that in there because I felt like I had to have some type of printed piece and it was really nice and it is really nice to refer back to that piece because it does offer you a bit of credibility.

It gives you exposure, but did I get my return? I would say no. , I mean, I've actually done wedding shows where I've spent hundreds and hundreds of dollars on these shows and I stopped doing them. only because I wasn't getting the return. I got a better return doing experiences like this, reaching out to people one on one, sharing my story doing my Facebook group.

I mean, it's amazing. And, and actually the shows that I did, here's, it's something that I tell people, if you are gonna be going into shows. Make sure you not only take care of your attendees, but make sure you take care and introduce yourself to the vendors. Most of my business that came out of those wedding shows that I did were the fellow vendors that were there.

so it's really interesting. and I'm not to say that I'm not saying like paid ads is not worth it, but you need to figure out, you know, what is your unique offering? Where are your people hanging out? So for me, my ideal clients are not hanging out at shows. They're not reading magazines necessarily.

you know, they're on LinkedIn, they they're reading, they're engaging, they're doing webinars, they're, doing networking things. So that's where I kind of put my time and my money, if you will. but you know, to go on Facebook and pay for a sponsored, we just, just didn't get the return.

I just felt like I was going. The casino So that's just, again, it's from my perspective and my experience, everybody has a different experience.

[00:11:13] **David Crabill:** I'd say. People find that paid ads are not really the right fit for this kind of business. Um, But you're so unique because obviously custom decorated cookies are just naturally fit into being an event type of product. You know, they're, whether it's weddings or whether it's corporate events. Generally speaking, you're making custom decorated cookies for events, but few people like have the extensive background in event planning and coordinating before jumping into their cookie decorating business. So how do you feel like your experience and your knowledge and familiarity with the event planning space affected how you built this business?

[00:11:53] **Annette Conrad:** Definitely. And I think that that's something that someone can definitely learn. but yeah, my experience in event planning, as I briefly touched on earlier, is that I understand where those folks are coming from. So I can kind of speak their language.

Number one, I know that they have a lot on their plates. They're extremely busy. I know they need to report back to either a director or they might need to report back to a committee of planners and ultimately they may have a customer. So there might be layers of. Approvals in that. And so I get really excited when I talk to those folks, because like I said, I know where they're at.

I know what they're thinking. I can speak their language. I can reassure them that I understand that it needs to be high quality. The presentation needs to work. It needs to be on time so I can ease their mind about being on time and also the follow through. So there's all those pieces. Like when you think about how do you plan for an event?

I kind of think about all those things. I put myself in my event planner's shoes. And then after that I put myself in the guest shoes. So how do I want that presentation to look? And I know in one of my other interviews, they said, boy, you're asking a lot of questions. Like do people, these are cookies.

Why are you asking all these questions? But I think that's what differentiates. And I think it surprises people and I don't, ask them questions that are not

applicable. the more information you share with me, the better I can propose. A presentation that will be the best for you.

I've had people come to me and say, they want clear you favor bags and they want a ribbon and a tag to find out that they're actually going to a trade show. So before I hang up with them, before they realize that my price per favor bag with a ribbon and a tag is too much, I can kind of sense it.

I can hear it in their voice. I can, kind of sense that may not be the right presentation. So before I get off the phone with them, I say, well, do you also know that we offer platter presentation, size cookies. This is how they're presented. And so all of a sudden you know, I'm paying attention, I'm listening to what they're telling me so that I can quickly offer something else.

And I think that comes with you know, the experience of being a planner, because you need to be quick on your feet. You need to have a response. It needs to be realistic, but the bottom line is these folks just wanna get things crossed off their list. and if you make it easy for them, It's going to be a yes.

[00:14:07] **David Crabill:** The problem, obviously, with the pandemic hitting, like you have such an event focused business and obviously events went away during the pandemic. So how did you deal with that?

[00:14:21] **Annette Conrad:** yeah, I think in the last couple of years, It kind of forces to stop and reflect a little bit. And I'm actually pretty grateful. We are one of those businesses that came out ahead after that incredibly challenging time. And so what happened is prior to the pandemic, I was teaching and I was doing classes, but there were more freeform classes, large groups.

I was doing smaller, intimate teaching of decorating classes. And of course still providing all those custom design cookies. And we were doing corporate special events. But what happened is we lost all our business, six weeks of business crickets, because essentially at that time, my business was special events in person teaching all the corporate events that I had were talking hundreds and thousands of cookies went away.

And so very quickly I had to think about, okay, what can we do? And so. I started to think about the cookie decorating kits. The cookie decorating kits was something that I had done very, very early on, stopped doing them because at the time when I was doing them as a hobby, it wasn't for my ideal client.

Well, I brought it back and I said, look, so our corporate folks, everybody's going home, everybody's working remotely. Why don't we offer virtual cooking, decorating experiences? So that's where we really got our head above water.

And now I haven't looked back. at the time we were doing everything and everything we were doing and we still do dabble if you will. But now I'm really zoning in on not only my ideal client, but we were zoning in, on our best sellers. So cookie decorating kits, corporate logos, gift tins, platter presentations.

And virtual experiences. And so by doing that, we are working less we are more efficient. Our price points are higher and we're getting larger volume. So if your audience does not take one thing from this podcast, episode is please narrow down your offerings. Please don't feel like you need to be everything to everybody.

Because for years I did that and I was working hard. My team was working hard. We had lots of late nights, lots of late weekends, long weekends, and you don't have to do that. So you're gonna do yourself a big favor. If you take some time and figure out what differentiates you from other decorators, figure out what it is you really like to do.

Like what lights you up, what kind of cookie designs don't make it complicated. The more complicated those designs are, the longer it's gonna take, the more equipment you're gonna need, the more supplies you're gonna need. And then the likelihood is you may not be able to train someone else to do that. So, if you can imagine, now I have a team and I can teach anybody to put cookie decorating kits together.

They can cut bake, make sprinkles, put the frosting packets package. There are orders that I never touch as the owner of my business. I'm the virtual experience facilitator, which I love. And that's where I thrive. you know, that's my area of expertise, but I've been able to let go because now I have a product and an offering that I know my clients need and want it solves a problem for them.

And anyone else can do it just because it says handmade does not need to be with your personal hands. you know, other people can do it for you. You just have to train them and you just need to, narrow down.

[00:17:41] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I did notice that you definitely built up a team. it looked like you've actually had a lot of help from your family. Is that correct? Like when did it, they start helping out with their business.

[00:17:52] **Annette Conrad:** Yes. And I'm so glad you brought that up because we are a woman owned. So I personally own the business, but we are family operated. And so if I could just take a really quick moment. My husband, who is a commercial photographer, who owns his own company is my operations director. My two sons are involved in a part-time basis, one in the marketing realm, and who's kind of my big picture.

I love that he kind of foresees things coming and then my other son helps operationally on a part-time basis. And then my sister, as I mentioned, Sylvia Schwartz is one of my season decorators. I've got a wonderful decorator, very talented Jasmine Hannaman. And then I do bring on a few folks seasonally.

So as the business picks up, I will bring people in, for instance, last October through December I think I brought on four additional folks to help. We had a very large gingerbread kit order to get out and then I have my nieces and nephews, I believe it or not.

We are very, very family run. And then I actually, this last year, which was really exciting for me, and I'm actually in the works on collaborating with an assistant professor at Carroll college, hopefully to bring on an MBA student, to come up with a marketing plan for our company. So, you know, something that is just, we're just dabbling into.

But this past year I had a high school student. Who did an internship with me? So it was a paid internship, but she also got credit. So really, really wonderful. but I love that we are family operated and a lot of my clients love that. They look for family run and women-owned businesses, which is really refreshing.

but I could not do what I do without my family and my baking associates. They're fantastic.

[00:19:29] **David Crabill:** I think you might have forgotten maybe one of the most important people in there. You didn't mention your mom.

[00:19:36] **Annette Conrad:** Oh, my gosh. I know my mom. Well, you know what? I was waiting to the end to bring um, her to your attention. My mom is my biggest cheerleader, so thank you. But she is amazing and it breaks my heart because she's not able to come physically to my shop anymore, but behind the scenes, she is on it.

She's helping me with ribbons and bags and tags. And honestly, she is one of my biggest supporters. She has actually been the one who has been pushing me

to start teaching. so I have to give her so much credit and so much love. She's just an amazing woman. And needless I say that she's in her mid eighties.

but she is absolutely 100% part of my team and so much more

[00:20:23] **David Crabill:** What if someone's listening and they're like, that's amazing. Awesome. Great for you, Annette. I don't have that kind of family, you know, I don't have anybody who's gonna, jump in and help me, at a moment's notice. Like, how do you feel like you would have progressed with your business?

Do you think it would've been different if you didn't have the family support?

[00:20:41] **Annette Conrad:** Yeah. So if I didn't have my family support, I think what you wanna keep in mind is that there are so many people out there that are. Interested, first of all, I think it takes a little bit of time and maybe a little bit of searching, but believe me, there are like-minded people out there that have interest in helping that are interested in that industry that maybe wanna learn.

I'll give you a really good example. One of my seasoned decorators, Jasmine, who is a non-family member of my team, she came aboard, she was looking for some extra hours. She has two small children, and she was very, very good at baking. She never decorated a cookie before that I'm aware of. And I'd asked her early on, I'm like, are you interested in learning?

Maybe like turning this into something and for a long time, she's like, no, no, no, no. Well, let me tell you now I've been mentoring her and she's now doing. Cookies on the side and is building up her clientele. So I think what you can do is if your family's not supportive or if your family is just not interested or not available, I think, try to find those people who want to do what you're doing, and don't be worried about bringing those people in.

Don't be afraid to teach them what you did and how you did it, because it is a win, win. because that person's gonna get better, they're gonna get stronger. And there's so much business out there. You know, you have to keep in mind that cookies or any baked good is perishable it's consumable.

And there are so many people in this world that want what you create. And so I think there's plenty of business out there. So don't be worried or think that there's not enough people out there. There's plenty of people looking for work,

especially now. And that don't be worried that you're gonna share your trade secrets that, oh my gosh, they're gonna run with it.

Don't worry about that. And if they do so, be it, you don't have to worry about it, cause you're gonna have your unique differentiator that is gonna make you different that no one else can do what you do. So I'm never shy about that, about, you know, worrying about that because there's enough business out there.

[00:22:36] **David Crabill:** How did you know when it was right time to hire somebody or find help?

[00:22:42] **Annette Conrad:** Well, first of all, I wish I would've brought folks on much earlier than I did because there were a lot of late nights and a lot of long weekends. And even when it was just my sister and I decorating, her and I both had a lot of late nights and a lot of long weekends, and I resisted. I really did because I had the mindset of I have to do everything myself.

I mean, you could ask her, oh my gosh, I can't believe how stubborn I was. I was the only one that could outline cookies. I was the only one that could make the frosting. I was the only one that could make the consistency because I was the only one that could do it right. Well, let me tell you, David, when it came time to needing to let go because the volume was there.

Oh, my gosh, it was wonderful. And now I am like a delegating queen. I am so good at delegating now. It still is a little sometimes hard because sometimes I feel like, oh, I could do that faster. Or I would do it a little bit differently, but you know what? You have to let go. If you don't let go and invite people in to help you, you're never gonna grow.

And what happened is now when I'm able to kind of let go a little bit, I can actually do the things that I super, really love. Like this, like this kind of conversation.

[00:23:51] **David Crabill:** Yeah. So, I mean, clearly produced a lot of cookies over the years. Incredible number. I, I saw a post, like I think it was back in 2014. You said you hit a record. You had done a hundred hundred dozen cookies in a single day. Is that, is that accurate?

[00:24:07] **Annette Conrad:** Um I think the max in a single day and I mean, we're probably talking logo cookies, so it's not like we're individually hand frosting with three different colors. I think we did more like, Probably about

almost 2000 cookies can be done in a day at this point, pretty easily with my team.

The two or three of us. And we don't do that every day. You know, we kind of divide and conquer. | Yeah, we've done a lot of cookies. A lot of cookies. I mean the numbers wouldn't I, I can't even say them out loud sometimes because won't even believe me, but it's true.

When I said the gingerbread kits from last year, when I brought in four additional people. We did 3,384 gingerbread kits. There were 13 cookie pieces in that decorating kit. And there were four frosting colors, three packets of sprinkles, three decorating bags, three rubber bands. I'm doing this all from memory here. there was frosting in there, of course. So you can imagine the thousands of cookies that one order alone was.

that were shipped out, actually not shipped out. we rented a truck and we drove them to Michigan because we wanted to make sure they all got there fully intact.

Then they were put in another box to be shipped out nationwide. And then we did two virtual experiences for those folks. It was so fun, but yeah, quite the job that was all hands on deck. I think that from start to finish, it took us like seven weeks for that job.

[00:25:25] **David Crabill:** Wow, that is crazy.

I wanted to ask you, like when you built the commercial kitchen in your home, did you feel like you needed that in order to handle the demand? Or were you just trying to make yourself more legal? Like, can you take me through the trajectory of your business over the first few years?

[00:25:42] **Annette Conrad:** Oh, sure. Yeah. The first sign of, okay, we need to move this operation. I remember it very clearly when my children were quite small, I remember because my entire home kitchen was completely covered with table cloths, with cookies on every shelf.

We had three or four, six foot tables in the kitchen. And I remember the day when my kids were walking around with their dinner plate going, mom, where should I eat? There's cookies everywhere. So that was the moment where I was like, all right, we need to move this operation somewhere. And you know, fortunately the space that I had already had running water and it had the potential for electricity.

It had a separate entrance. So it was really, almost like it was made for it. so we didn't have to go looking for a space or had to rent a kitchen. But it took me. I took my time. I didn't jump into it because I wanted to make sure it was something that I wanted to do. I was worried that if I took my hobby to a business, was I still going to enjoy it?

Did I have time? And my kids were little. There was no way I was gonna leave my full-time job at that point. Because I had all the full benefits and such. Because honestly, when I was doing it as a hobby, even when I started bringing some extra cash, I never thought that it would be my family's livelihood.

And it's just been so fun, seeing how it has evolved.

[00:26:54] **David Crabill:** So, how did you do that? I mean, you had a full-time job, you had young kids and you were, you know, rapidly growing business on the side, building out a commercial kitchen, like how did you find the time to make that happen?

[00:27:09] **Annette Conrad:** Yes. So I guess I'm an early riser and I stay up late, but I tell you David looking back and my sister and my mom, when we sit, on a Sunday and we're having coffee and we see where the business is now we all shake our head. And, you know, just for the record, they're both enablers because they probably could have said enough is enough in that, you know, enough of these late nights, but they just come on over and help me.

So it's kind of funny looking back, but, you know, I think it's partly my drive. I thrive on being busy. I'm very much committed and dedicated when I get my mind on something. I just go for it. I love to keep busy. I love the sense of accomplishment that I have. and you know, with the cookies and what I do, it's just so rewarding to see that it's so much more than just a cookie.

that interaction I have with my client. And then when we actually come up with the design and the packaging, and then it gets shipped or it gets delivered and then they receive it and then they send me pictures of them in action. And then when I do that post follow up and they tell me how amazing they were, that makes it all the worthwhile.

but yeah, it was a lot of work. And I do regret a little bit because there were family functions and there was times not spent with my kids. And so if I could go back, so again, for those folks, just considering, if you have small kids, please just don't be in a hurry. The cookie business will be there for you when you're ready.

so when I look at Jasmine, she's doing it really well and she's doing it right. She straight out said, you know what? My kids are young. I wanna wait till they're in school. And now a couple of years later now they're in school full time. And so now she's realizing she has a little bit more time to dedicate to the business, but she took it slow.

[00:28:50] **David Crabill:** So I noticed that, you know, you had mentioned. Obviously focused on event planners. But you also clearly had a very strong focus from the beginning on corporate cookies, logo cookies. Was that intentional focus of yours or was that just something that, you know, came your way based on your experience?

[00:29:12] **Annette Conrad:** I think it was a little bit of both. And I think right now in the last number of years, we've been strategic, we've been focusing on that. Any kind of reach out that I do has been specifically to those clients. And so not to say that I am not open because again, my business was built on the more personal celebration orders, the weddings, the bridal showers, the baby showers.

We still do that, but I need to be, and I am more selective on when I do those and how many I do and I've set minimums for those I have to, because I can't be everything to everybody anymore because the corporate orders, when you get into that business is going to be higher volume and it's going to be more often and it still can be a complex, but there's that fine balance of offering a beautiful decorated cookie, cause it's not only logos, but it's also hand decorated too but also being realistic that you know, they're not always looking for that intricate design.

So we still do hand decorated orders. So the hand frosted orders for our corporate clients paired with often with the logo cookies. Now the logo cookies are gonna be a much faster, you know, we use the, we don't have an Eddie machine where we spray, you know, we're painting, we're actually using sugar sheets and then we're rolling with sugar borders.

You probably saw that on the website. But when we do, for instance it's not uncommon that we will do a pillow box presentation, which is two logo cookies, and one hand frosted cookie in all individually heat sealed in a Dropbox with branding on it. That's being shipped out to individuals while I'm very careful about that hand decorated frosted cookie based on the volume.

it doesn't need to be. And I think this is where people need to realize. You have this passion, right? But you also have this gift your gift needs to pay for your

passion. . So, in other words, you might love doing those hand painted cookies that take you hours on hours and hours, and they look beautiful, but your gift is to get those cookies done and, bring in that money so that you can have fun with your passion.

So a really good example is I've just rediscovered the art of painting cookies that is not going to be my revenue generating product or presentation. I very, very rarely will paint on a single cookie for a corporate event because it is too time consuming. So we are very careful on the designs and the packaging.

And again, because I'm not the only one decorating anymore, I have wonderful people that can decorate, but especially in the early years I did all those cookies.

Like those are all my cookies. Like nobody was helping me for years. Well, what I don't wanna do is say, okay, we're gonna do this design. And all of a sudden I have someone else doing it. It looks completely different. So you've gotta be very careful about, you know, are you going to be the one decorating or are you gonna be having someone else do it?

And if someone else does it, is it going to look like what you just proposed to your client? So that's why it's very, very important that I talk to my team. I'll say, look, we've got this opportunity. Can we do it? Can you do this? Do we wanna take this on? I'm not solely making those decisions on those larger events.

I wanna make sure that my team is on board.

[00:32:21] **David Crabill:** So also in getting into corporate orders, would you say that, you know, they were less price sensitive and you could charge a higher price for your cookies?

[00:32:28] **Annette Conrad:** For sure. Yes. The wonderful part of corporate business is that they do have a budget and oftentimes it's not personal. Well, it's not personal. , it's a little bit easier sell. I don't like to use the word sell, but you know, offering presentation and pricing is sometimes easier. It's nice because sometimes they will tell you what their budget is, whether it's price per person, or they have something allotted for a project, which then allows me as the creative to go back and say, okay, this is what they have.

This is all the, the specifications of the project and what they're doing, then I can come back and offer them something. and sometimes we say, no, I mean, there are many corporate jobs that come our way. Are under our price point.

Well, under our price point and it is very tempting and that's another message is don't get pulled into that.

I pride myself in my company on being very fair and consistent So what you don't wanna do is give, one person, one price and another person in this price, just because it was like, Ooh, I want that, you know, there's something said about doing an introductory price.

If you want to establish a relationship with someone, or if you think more business is gonna come your way, but we don't offer discounts. we know our large volume discount pricing starts at \$250, \$500 or more. So, you know, we've got our set pricings, but again, we've, we use variable pricing, which allows us to have a little flexibility so that we can take the variables of that order, the quantity, the quantity of designs, the size, the packaging, the.

The delivery method, the decorating technique. So I don't bother my client with all those variables, but in my mind, I'm figuring out, okay, how easy is this gonna be to get done? Can I buy the supplies on bulk pricing versus ala carte? So once I kind of get a handle on all those variables, then I can offer the best price.

And I feel good about that because I'm pricing it based on their needs. And it's always worked well for me to be able to gradually increase over the years. But you don't wanna get yourself locked in on a flat rate pricing, cause that can actually cost you too.

[00:34:34] **David Crabill:** So I know you've worked with a ton of different businesses and brands. What are some of the most notable brands you've worked with so far?

[00:34:43] **Annette Conrad:** Amazon Google Pinterest, Dropbox, Taste made a lot of financial institutions, universities, law firms, tech companies, Dell technologies. Oh my gosh. I didn't even have a list in front of me, but the list goes on. I mean so many different companies and you know, one of the questions I always ask is how did you find us?

This is incredible. And they say, Google, we searched you, you came up top of the list. I have a huge following from California, Texas, New York, Michigan. It's just so odd. It's not odd, but I think, the reason why we're getting such good exposure. The website has been around for many, many years.

It's kept up to date, we take advantage of those SEOs. So search engine optimization, I spend a lot of time making sure that, that information's up to date and accurate. I try to find opportunities, all the organizations that I either donate to or collaborate with.

I link back to their organization labeling to me, so that helps bring us to the top. But I think just because we've been around a long time reviews are a big thing. So I think that these, recognizable companies are finding us because of all of those things. And also because we just do really good work.

I think, the companies are just looking for a one stop shop and that's what we offer. We make it very clear. When you hit to our website, this is what we do. This is who we do it for. And this is how easy it is to work with us. So I think that, word spreads like that.

[00:36:10] **David Crabill:** That's fascinating that people are finding you through Google because you started this website so long ago. I mean, I know you, do a lot to maintain it and that's essential. But a lot of people starting today could create a website, maintain it and everything.

They wouldn't be able to tame the same search engine rank that you have. So, it's great for you. And I've had other guests on the podcast, they started over a decade ago and they swear by SEO, but I'm not seeing people these days that are really, doing well on the SEO front and the website front. So. Is there any advice that you have for somebody who's starting out today, like you can't, you know, tap into that, decade plus of search engine rank in order to get in front of businesses and get those contacts, get those leads.

[00:36:54] **Annette Conrad:** Yes. So I would highly recommend LinkedIn. So LinkedIn is one of the platforms that I will spend, and it's gonna sound really strange, but I go on LinkedIn twice a week for 15 minutes. It doesn't sound like a long time, but there's reasons why I've kind of minimized that time because much like reels or TikTok for other people, LinkedIn is where I can get lost.

But LinkedIn is a great place because that's where your corporate folks are hanging out. They're not talking about their vacations, they're not talking about what they ate. They're talking about business and they're talking about finding solutions for the problems that they have. And so when I'm on there, I'm very strategic.

I'm not just reading articles and liking things. I am looking for companies that may find value in what I'm offering. But most importantly, what I'm doing is

when I have a leader, when I have someone who reaches out to me, I go follow them on LinkedIn. I follow the company on LinkedIn. So then I can find other companies like them.

So there is opportunities on LinkedIn. Again, I don't pay for LinkedIn advertising, but if you're on there, The biggest thing you can do is when you put in your headline, rather than put your, which is right underneath your name, so you wanna put a picture of yourself so people can see your face, but under the headline, what has worked really well for me is I took off owner Edible Impressions, and I exchanged that for, and you can go look at it.

It says, showcase your brand with custom design cookies and virtual experiences. So now whenever I comment on something that shows up right underneath my name, so then people will see that they get curious, then they click on it and then they discover my business. So I would say if you are heading towards a corporate world for your cookie designs or whatever, baked good or handcrafted item that you're doing LinkedIn, I have an Instagram account.

I spend no time on Instagram. I created it. I was on there every day, thinking I had to post and what am I gonna post today? I got, pulled into. Oh, I need to post every day on Instagram. I don't think I've gotten any clients, any of my big clients from Instagram. so my people are on LinkedIn and then don't undervalue your family and friends make up some postcards, do old school, give out some postcards and business cards, your family and friends, challenge them to give them out.

And then you never know who their friends know, who their friends of friends know. Their neighbors. There are a lot of companies that I work with now that are my neighbors . And so like for years, I never even knew I had this business and now I have my neighbors coming to me all the time for the company orders.

And then finally, here's a nice little strategy, one really quick, when you do give out a cookie order hand out a postcard with your information, but here's the thing. When you give it to that client, don't give them one, give them two or three, cause they're gonna keep one themselves.

They're gonna hand out the other two. So there's little things that you can do to kind of help spread the word.

[00:39:44] **David Crabill:** It's interesting that, you haven't found a lot of success on Instagram, not so much that you haven't, but because at least on the

Facebook side of things, it seems like you put quite a bit of time and effort into social media. I mean, you have over 6,000 followers on Facebook and it just seems like you post a lot on social media.

[00:40:05] **Annette Conrad:** Well, and it's funny if you look at, when I posted that I post very occasionally on my Edible Impressions page. I've been posting more in my Facebook group, which is Cookie Decorating Hobby to Business 101. but it's really interesting. I used to post every day And not to say that I'm not on there, but think about it. I've been in business for 17 years and I only have 6,000 followers. I mean, that's not that many for the longest time I was at three. I was at four. I mean, I never even focused on that number.

In fact, before you said that I didn't even know how many followers I had because to me that number doesn't mean much. I mean, I got lots of likes and comments and things, but they were never my customers. But LinkedIn is where I, find that people reach out to me

[00:40:48] **David Crabill:** well, you have so much PR exposure. Like I kind of thought that you probably got, you know, some of that recognition people found you on social media, but sounds like that's not the case. So let's just go through a few of these um, I saw in, the Boston store flyer, you actually had your cookies as like, you know, they they're showcasing different kitchen equipment. And your cookies are in there, like they're model cookies, basically. Like how did you get that?

[00:41:16] **Annette Conrad:** Yes. Oh my gosh. This is like going down memory lane. I totally forgot about those. although this past week I just made a fall assortment for Kohl's corporate for their advertising you know, it's just, I think, indirect introductions.

So my husband being a commercial photographer he actually contracted work with Coles. So that's how I got that gig. Boston store again, a client found me and we established a relationship. They used to do these fashion shows. So I was making cookies for them for a couple months. those, they came to me, but there's sometimes where I reach out to others. So it just depends.

[00:41:50] **David Crabill:** You've also been on TV, your cookies have at least, you know, they've at this local TV show that you have some kind of relationship with.

[00:42:00] **Annette Conrad:** Yes. Uh, David from dynamic events, he is amazing. He is an influencer here in Milwaukee and he does destination

weddings, very premier wedding planner. And again, establish a relationship. While I worked at Marquette university, so I get involved. I network, I was involved with the national association of caterers and events.

And I met him at one of the functions. We hit it off and so most recently I helped him with some wedding favors for the hotel for one of his brides. and actually he pulled me in, on one of those uh, wedding shows that I did a couple years. So again, I love meeting people, establishing a relationship and then just trying things, you know, if I'll try it and see how it goes.

But yeah, we're, friends and he's on this spot on the local news and I get super excited when he calls and says, Hey, Annette, I need some cookies for my show. I'm like, absolutely. , again, I think, you know, he sees me as a go-to person. He knows he can rely on me. He knows I'm gonna get it done. He knows they're gonna be beautiful. So you know, just make it easy for people.

[00:43:03] **David Crabill:** I, I wanted to cover one more thing here. I see you got, you've been listed best for events in spruce eats. How did you get that?

[00:43:11] **Annette Conrad:** Yes. In fact, you know what? they tracked me down. I didn't even know that they selected me for that or my business for that. I think somebody sent me the link and said, did you see this? And I said, Nope. So I think, you know, I take that with a grain of salt because obviously the person who wrote that article, I don't think maybe ate one of my cookies, maybe tasted them.

But I think some of those articles are written by journalists that go surf the web, you know, and I think they do their research and they do some comparison, but, did I have a conversation with them? No, . And I can tell you no, because they didn't have my pricing right. in their article, but Hey, I'll take the title if you wanna call me best for events.

And I think we are the best for events, so I didn't argue. But yeah, that one, they just selected which I was honored because if you look at the people that I was, represented next to, I mean, those are some of my mentors, those are some of my idols, my in the cookie industry. So I was really, really thrilled.

I mean, to be next to Julia Usher and Arty McGoo, I'm like, really? So that was awesome. That was really, really sweet.

[00:44:15] **David Crabill:** I also notice that you've like sponsored events. Like you actually put probably money, I guess, or donation into sponsoring getting your, your logo or your name in things. Is that true?

[00:44:25] **Annette Conrad:** It is. So being a small business, and I think, as soon as you get exposure, you start to get emails and you start to get phone calls. Sometimes you even get knocks on your doors and people asking for you to sponsor, to, pay for a table for this, or would you donate cookies to this? It became a little bit too much.

So when it says sponsorship, it's more an in kind donation. Where I'm donating the cookies or I'm purchasing a table at the event. um, most recently with the leukemia lymphoma society, That one was really exciting. Edible Impressions donated just over \$1,200 after a 10 week fundraising campaign.

sold cookie decorating kits and I did three complimentary virtual experiences. So I, I love that, but I do have to kind of be careful not to get too involved because I have to keep in mind, I am running a business.

I am not a charitable organization, but I do those just because it just fills our hearts here. So whenever we can help out, we like to do

[00:45:21] **David Crabill:** Let's talk about the virtual decorating kits, you know, those virtual events. Can you explain a little bit about like how they work?

[00:45:28] **Annette Conrad:** Basically it's about a 45 minutes to 60 minute experience where I take them through cookie decorating and again, understanding my audience. I always kind of like to understand, you know, why are they gathering? Are they celebrating a milestone?

Is it the end of the quarter? Are they just needing some social time? And I, get that the cookies are just the vessel. They're not always all interested in decorating and how, how it works, but. I keep it super basic. But it's really fun and engaging, and I've done them for as small as two people to 2000 people. the 2001 and the, the several hundred or more is not my favorite because I could normally, I can't see anybody

so I really do prefer much more the, the more smaller intimate ones. So I would say between 25 and 50 is my, my preferred group size. but yeah, they've been fantastic

[00:46:15] **David Crabill:** It's so fascinating because I mean, really, as you explain it and realizing this is just an online cookie decorating class for a specific number of people, but you're not branding it that way. You're branding it as like, this is a virtual experience. This is a virtual event.

[00:46:32] **Annette Conrad:** exactly. And actually this year because there are some of my repeat clients. In fact, I just had a conversation with one who's like, Annette, we had so much fun last year, but we don't wanna do it again. They don't wanna do the same thing, which I totally get, but I said, well, look, okay, your employees love the kits so much.

Let's skip the virtual part of it. You can still send them the kit. We'll send them a different theme, but the message is going to change. So now it is, and I can offer, now I'm doing, pre-recordings. A 15 to 20 minute here's what's in your box. Here's how you trim the bags I'll show them how to do one cookie and then they can just decorate on their own.

So it's not like giving them a completely different product. It's just, the presentation is different It's all in the presentation

[00:47:19] **David Crabill:** Yeah. So, earlier in the episode, you mentioned that you've learned how to say no, like you say no to a lot of orders. So like how have you learned how to say no in your business over time?

[00:47:29] **Annette Conrad:** Yeah. I mean, it's hard. You don't wanna say no. And you know, again, coming from the background of being in the events, coordination industry, where you want the answer to be, yes. know, you don't wanna say no or at least be able to offer something else. So you know, it, it does happen where people come to you, but you've gotta be the expert.

You've gotta be confident in what you make, what you're producing, how it's going to look. And so you have to be very careful for someone not to derail you off of that. Okay. So, you know, if they come to you and it's something that you've never done before, or maybe you have done and it didn't go so well , or it's just not something that you're, jazzed about.

That's not gonna lay you up that, you know, oh, it sounds really good, but you're gonna be, frustrated later, those are the kind of jobs where I'm like, it's just not something that we're able to do. I'm very professional, very eloquent on how I will respond to that person.

You know, there's nothing wrong with just letting them know that you just, you don't have to always explain. You can just let them know that you don't have time in your production calendar. Or you could just be transparent and just say, you know, we've got a lot of pride in our cookie presentations and that's not a presentation that we have found that has worked well.

So, you know, if they wanna put a certain design or a shape, like if they wanna ship a particular shape and you're telling them. It's not going to make it. It has a high risk of breaking, but they push you to say, well, that's okay. We don't care. We'll take the risk. That's when I put my foot down and I say, we really don't want to do that.

We have you know, a near zero breakage record and we're not willing to give up that high standard of being those expert shippers as one example. So, I mean, I had a large, large job and I was like, okay guys, we can do this. We can do this. We have a lot of advanced notice and we can do this. I mean, it was gonna be a lot of cookies and they were in the decision making mode and I followed up with them and we were already prepping and deciding, like purchasing supplies and things.

And the closer I got to it, I was like, I just started to feel a little uneasy. I was feeling a little uneasy because even though it was gonna be an awesome job and it would've like, it would've been great, but what my husband brought to my attention, which I realized, but I didn't wanna like really go there.

He's like, When you say yes to this one, you're gonna be saying no to all of our existing clients. And that was gonna be the reality is I would've had to say no to so many of our repeat clients. And did I wanna do that for something that was gonna be really hard? And it was gonna be a lot of late nights and it was gonna be renting a space and it was gonna be all these things.

So I was so glad that I kind of put it in perspective with the feedback from my family saying, you know what? I called that client. I pulled myself out of the bit. and that was the smartest thing I could have done because two days later I got another gig from one of my repeat clients was a pretty decent gig.

And I was like, oh my gosh, I would've had to say no to them. So, you know, you do have to say no sometimes and go with your gut. I mean, your gut is nine times out of 10, gonna steer you the right way.

[00:50:30] **David Crabill:** You're one of the only uh, people I know that has been brave enough to face the shipping of custom decorated cookies. And I

know you've done it a lot. You ship nationwide now you've got your commercial facility, obviously. Um, What have you learned? Like how do you, get them to where they need to be in the heat of the summer or, you know, without breaking?

[00:50:51] **Annette Conrad:** Yes. I'm so glad you brought that up because I do offer, I do have a free uh, PDF guide that your listeners are more than welcome to. It's my five tips on how to ship with confidence and zero breakage. So I do consider us expert shippers. We've been shipping since the day we got that state license and we do take a lot of care.

Number one, you wanna make sure that you don't ship fragile shapes. If you think it's going to break, it will break. just start right there. If you think it's gonna break, it probably will break. So we're always shipping in a box in a box. You know, we we've kind of figured out how many cookies go in a box depending on the size and whether or not they have a tag or ribbon.

And you know, there's a way that you package the box. And we use ups. I really do like working with them. They've been very kind and they've been very reliable. So yeah, if, folks wanna take a look at that, they're more than welcome, but it is a bit of trial and error, but even looking back, we've had very, very few incidences of broken cookies.

We don't ship extras because we think any of them are gonna break. In fact, I had one gal say, how many extras do you ship? And I was like, wait, we don't ship extras. You know, and I'll send extra cookies. We always make like, for an order of a hundred cookies, we'll make two extra cookies. If they look good, if they're in good shape, then we'll send them along as little freebies.

But the amount that they tell us to ship is the amount we're shipping. We're not anticipating that they're going to break. So you may call that a little risky, but we are so confident that those are gonna make it because of the way we package them. So you shouldn't be afraid. But the other thing is you have, you know, your recipe.

I think it really comes down to the cookie. How thick is your cookie? How sturdy is your cookie? We're fortunate that our signature sugar cookie is soft, but it's sturdy. It's not brittle. It doesn't break very easily. We use Royal icing, so that protects the cookie. We do a three eight inch thickness.

So if that will help folks to know what our thickness of our cookies are. But again, it all comes down to how are you packaging those cookies. and then also

just considering the timeline, where are they going? How many you know, determining if ground services best or if they should be overnighted or today.

So we're always in constant contact with our. the big question. Do you include shipping in your price? No, absolutely not. And that's, I know there's all, team includes your shipping and there's team, supplemental for shipping, but we've done very well with having shipping, being supplemental to the cost of the cookie presentations.

[00:53:17] **David Crabill:** So it would definitely include a link to that in the show notes. So people can access that PDF guide and um, you know, that's, that's a whole another side of your business. I mean, you have this thriving cookie business, you would think. Would be enough, but no, you've that somehow decided to add to your plate, this whole like coaching course, like you have this Facebook group with over like 3000 people in it. So like, can you share a little bit about that business and, and what you're doing to help other entrepreneurs.

[00:53:47] **Annette Conrad:** Yeah, I'm really excited. it's kind of like my hobby or let's say side gig that I would love to turn into yet another business. And again, I've just been doing a lot of reflection lately about that. We've been very fortunate here and I do have this evolving, growing business and I've always loved teaching and that's what I did at the university.

I was in charge of the scheduling system and it was my job to teach people how to use it. And so I, love to share. I love to, and now that I've been on the virtual experiences, I've become extremely comfortable.

I've always been comfortable speaking, but on camera. And so I started doing these free master classes and I continued to do them every Wednesday on Fridays. And I had this Facebook group that I started during the pandemic and it was fun cause I wanted to fill my time and then we got busy. And so then it was crickets.

And about maybe six months ago, I decided to revive it. And now that I'm consistent every Wednesday and every Friday, I'm online, I'm offering free content. Just, I'm just sharing what I know to help people kind of get to the next level. It has grown very quickly, And my ultimate goal is to be able to write a course, like a digital course, to be able to help people take their hobby to.

Not just a business, but a profitable business. so it's very much the start. Um, annetteconrad.com I just launched my personal website. It is just supplement to

the Facebook group. So I welcome you to go take a peek there and we're just talking all things for the love of cookie decorating. And then if you pick up a couple golden nuggets here, every other Wednesday, I do decorating in the opposite.

Wednesday. I talk about business. its been really fun. That group

[00:55:28] **David Crabill:** is called cookie decorating hobby to business 1 0 1. So you're definitely dealing with beginners. I'd imagine. So when somebody comes in, I don't know, what are some mistakes that you see people making when they're starting out? What are some of the advice you give to people who are just getting started?

[00:55:45] **Annette Conrad:** Yes. So my advice would be, You know, you're on your own journey. Don't speed through it, just because you see other people speeding through it.

Take your time and just know that there's always gonna be someone behind you. There's gonna be someone right along with you, and there's always gonna be somebody ahead of you. So you really have to like stay in your own lane. I really would say that I think a mistake that folks do, not a mistake, but I would say if you want to avoid a mistake, I urge you to don't be everything to everybody, figure out what you really like to do. Do it really well. And then get yourself organized. Communication, communication is gonna be key. If you put your client first in all of your systems and processes, you are gonna have a thriving business and you will succeed.

[00:56:29] **David Crabill:** So Annette, you know, you've been doing this for a long time now and you know, your business is thriving, like never before. How do you stay excited about it? how do you keep that excitement? And why are you so passionate about running this business?

[00:56:44] **Annette Conrad:** I think I just really love it because, you know, I feel like I started this from nothing and to see it continuously evolve, you know, when people ask me about what I do and how I get started, and they're just really amazed. They're like not even amazed, but they're just really interested. I didn't think that you'll be so interested, but if the product itself and the experiences are just so cool and they're forever evolving and I mean, who doesn't like cookies, right. And they're beautiful and they're fun and they make people smile. And so I think that's what really keeps it really fun for me. And I think, again, it's just part of my personality. a lot of entrepreneurs have that, you know, your brain never stays idle.

I'm constantly thinking of new things and I have new ideas for things. And part of my challenge is just kind of like, honing in on those and not trying to do everything as I just said, try to, you know, don't be everything to everybody, but I think I keep interested and I get excited about it because there's still so much to learn.

And don't be intimidated. Don't see, oh, look at all these people, know that most of those people are gonna give up. and they're not gonna continue. So there's gonna be that elite group of people that are gonna take it.

Cause it's hard. It's not easy. And I think I just like a challenge. I think that's why I like it because it is forever challenging me to run this business. you know, if you're committed and you're dedicated, I mean, you too could do it. I promise you.

[00:58:07] **David Crabill:** Well Annette thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing so many golden nuggets in there. Um, if people want to learn more about, you learn more about your coaching business, learn about your cookie business, like where can they find you or how can they reach out?

[00:58:22] **Annette Conrad:** So yes, if you would like to connect with me on LinkedIn, you can search for me under Annette Conrad, and then annetteconrad.com is where you can either join my mailing list or join my free Facebook group called Cookie Decorating Hobby to Business 101. And then I do have that free digital download. So it's Five Tips to Shipping with Confidence with Zero Breakage. And then finally I do encourage you check out my website, edibleimpressions.net if you would like to see, what my team and I offer our clients. So we'll give you a little sneak preview there, and if you have any questions, I do welcome you to, DM me.

[00:58:55] **David Crabill:** All right. Thank you so much, Annette, for coming on the show today. Thank you so much. I really appreciate your time.

That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. As Annette mentioned, she now teaches other entrepreneurs about building a cookie business. And as part of that, she has created her super helpful guide for shipping cookies. So I've linked to that in the show notes and I encourage you to check that out.

For more information about this episode, go to [forrager.com/podcast/71](https://forrager.com/podcast/71)

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