

Business of thanking customers offers sweet reward

By PHIL B. CABLER
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The smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies permeates the door outside Cookie Advantage.

Though not in the cookie business, nor do they sell to bakeries or restaurants, Duane and Kim Carns' company provides a thank you follow-up service to local businesses. They mail out decorative tins

full of chocolate chip cookies for clients.

This year the company will bake more than 460,000 chocolate chip cookies with sales projected at \$4 million.

Customers include companies needing a way to say "thank you."

"As a successful sales person, I discovered companies needed an effective way to say "thank you" to their customers, Duane said.

Searching the options in the marketplace, he

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Duane Carns

— Co-owner, Cookie Advantage

stumbled on the idea of sending cookies of appreciation as gifts for customer patronage.

"When you look at all

the things that are tugging at customers, take for instance the Internet, it leaves businesses trying to figure out how to keep doing business in Tulsa, Oklahoma," Duane said.

The day of giving people form letters and saying they are appreciated is taboo, he said. People know they are just a another number in the printer.

"But if they receive a tin of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies along with a personal thank you card, they are going to know that you took the extra step and you care," Duane said. "When the customer is ready to buy another car, house, need a doctor or whatever, it may be they will come back to you," he said.

Carns also discovered the transaction is much smoother if clients are a repeat or referral customer.

Many businesses spend all their advertising budget on the cold market, he said, when they need to be supporting

people doing business with them.

Although there were several other companies that provided like service shipping product across country, they lacked the quality freshness that could be offered locally.

The Carns have six other locations, each doing business in their own particular state.

Along with the cookies, companies send customized thank you notes and often provide response cards for their customers to rate their company on its service.

"We attach the customer's return address to the box and not Cookie Advantage. Our name is on the bottom of the tin. We are required by the health department to say where the cookies come from and their ingredients," Kim said. "Everything about our packaging is advertising for our customers, because we know if we do a good job for them they are going to keep doing business for us."

The success rate has been very good, Duane said. Most surveys typically receive a response rate between 1 and 3 percent.

"Our customers get anywhere between 70 and 80 percent of their cards back," he said. This is very valuable information.



Phil B. Cabler photo

SWEET THANK YOU —Duane and Kim Carns, above, show off their chocolate chip thank you. Jim Norton Toyota has been using the service since Cookie Advantage opened in 1998.