



At left, My Wonderful Life founders Nancy Bush (left) and Sue Kruskopf saw website traffic rise by 1,000 percent after pitching their business on “Shark Tank.” Appearances on Food Network’s “Cupcake Wars,” meanwhile, helped Cupcake bakery deal with construction-related woes (pictured: Manager Berit Mattson).

NANCY KUEHN | MINNEAPOLIS/ST. PAUL BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Love it or leave it, it's hard to deny the popularity of reality TV. For some Twin Cities business owners, reality shows have offered a chance to garner invaluable media exposure and a rare opportunity to stand on a national platform. The *Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal* talked to three small-business owners who participated in reality shows to learn about their experiences.

My Wonderful Life, Minneapolis

Sue Kruskopf and Nancy Bush make a living by preparing for death.

Compelling? Definitely. Strange? Perhaps. It was the unusual business concept of My Wonderful Life that caught the attention of some sharks.

On Jan. 20, the Minneapolis company appeared on the season premiere of ABC's "Shark Tank," a reality show in which entrepreneurs get to present their business plans to investors, dubbed "sharks," in hopes of scoring startup money.

The idea for My Wonderful Life, which allows its clients to, essentially, plan their entire funeral, came to Kruskopf "after having been to too many bad funerals and thinking, 'I don't want my funeral to be like this.'"

By registering on the company's free website, those who want to prepare for their deaths can write their obituaries, leave letters for loved ones, upload photos and share stories and memories.

Of the 10,000 business people who applied to be on "Shark Tank," 80 were chosen. Only 50 companies, however, made it on air.

Although Kruskopf and Bush did not strike a deal with any of the show's investors — Barbara Corcoran, Daymond John, Kevin O'Leary, Mark Cuban and Robert Herjavec — a significant boost in business ensued. Immediately after the airing, traffic on My Wonderful Life's website increased by 1,000 percent, and today remains consistently higher than before they appeared on the show.

In the end, Bush said they were pleased with the exposure they got from the experience.

"We're going to change the funeral industry," Kruskopf said. "There is a sea change of how we deal with

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Cupcake owner Kevin VanDeraa last week won \$10,000 in a "Cupcake Wars" competition.



Appearances boost visibility, but sales aren't guaranteed

death. Everybody is just much more open and talkative about it."

Cupcake, Minneapolis

For Cupcake in Minneapolis, participating on the Food Network's "Cupcake Wars" was a saving grace. The first time Cupcake President Kevin VanDeraa and his baking assistant Alicia Hinze appeared on the show, it was a sweltering Minnesota summer and University Avenue was swarming with light rail construction.

"It was so hot and our air conditioner was broken," VanDeraa said. "With all of those negatives, we had a little bit of a boost in business. I think if the show hadn't aired, it would've been a devastating month for the business."

"Cupcake Wars" pits four bakers from across the

country against each other in a timed, three-round competition. The participants are judged on taste, presentation and creativity, with the winning team taking home \$10,000 and getting the opportunity to serve their treats at a major event.

"It's kind of like this crazy, wild ride," VanDeraa said. "It was so intense, but it was a great experience."

Although they didn't win the first time they appeared on the show, the baking duo had much more luck this past Sunday, when VanDeraa and Hinze appeared once again on a segment that revolved around cupcakes based on the Nickelodeon TV show "Yo Gabba Gabba."

VanDeraa's desserts — which included a blueberry cheesecake cupcake with googly eyes on top — took the top prize, and were chosen to be showcased at a VIP party for the "Yo Gabba Gabba! Live" stage show.

Winning Cause, Minneapolis

Steve Wasnick, the founder of Winning Cause, applied to be a part of a business competition after seeing the application on MSNBC's website.

The show, a Sprint-sponsored Web series called "Second Chance," promised four teams the chance to learn from angel investors and a shot at the \$150,000 grand prize.

With nothing to lose, the Twin Cities entrepreneur decided to apply.

Before appearing on the show, Wasnick had been working with a business partner, kicking around the idea for a nonprofit auction website to help organizations raise money for their cause.

"We realized there was a niche that needed to be filled," Wasnick said. "We were really battling the idea back and forth in our office and finding out if we could actually make a business of it, and then the contest came along."

After subsequent preliminary rounds, the Winning Cause team — then known as MillCityAuctions.com — was chosen for the competition.

Winning Cause made it to the final round, where Wasnick and his business partner were awarded second place and \$25,000. The business was given an additional \$25,000 for garnering the most "people's choice" votes.

To date, Winning Cause has provided free auction services to about 50 nonprofit organizations across the country, but Wasnick does not think the show caused an increase in business.

"The show itself didn't [help]," Wasnick said. "It was the experience. We learned to capitalize on current and upcoming technology that enabled us to adopt a free model for our primary clients. That's the biggest thing."

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