

# Shades of success

The creators of Yolo Colorhouse's line of eco-friendly paints just want to create, so they've added a business-savvy executive to their team



**ABOVE |** Christine Wilborn paints poster samples Thursday at Yolo Colorhouse. The strips will be cut into smaller pieces so customers can look at them up close, or take them off-site to see how they fit in homes or offices.

**RIGHT |** Yolo's paints are made free of the volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, found in competing brands. Essentially, all solvents found in paint or caulk other than water are classified as VOCs.

Photos by MICHAEL RUBENSTEIN/THE OREGONIAN

**Online:** To read a Yolo profile that ran last year in the Homes & Gardens section, go to [oregonlive.com/more/oregonian](http://oregonlive.com/more/oregonian)

By BRIDGET A. OTTO  
THE OREGONIAN

Delivery trucks rumble by the Yolo Colorhouse studio on Portland's Southeast Water Avenue. A block over, a freight train rumbles through the light industrial district, its horn nearly drowning out the voices of Virginia Young and Janie Lowe talking about the future of their 18-month-old company.

Speaking over the din, Lowe says, "We feel like we've taken it as far as it can go." That's quite a ways, as it turns out.

The company, a joint venture with Rodda Paint Co., sold more than 20,000 gallons last year of specialized interior paints — produced without volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, the smelly ingredients that evaporate into the air as most paint dries. Year-to-date numbers for 2006 show a likely 100 percent growth in sales from that level, Young says.

But Lowe and Young would rather concentrate on the creative side than the business side of things for their eco-friendly company. As the company has grown larger and more demanding, that has become increasingly difficult.

So to help them grow their company into a national brand, the pair hired Deb Sepich, who co-founded



Young



Lowe



Sepich

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# Yolo:

## New president will help brand expand in U.S.

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Dolphin Software in Portland and most recently was director of executive programs at George Fox University. She came on in mid-June as their president and general manager.

"She's someone who can help us run the business," Young says. "It's scary to go big. We want to maintain our grass-roots values. That is huge for us."

Young, who likens the past year and a half to getting her MBA, says she and Lowe were spending all of their time working on day-to-day business and knew they had to plan ahead to stay ahead. "We react a lot. That's what we've been doing for the last 18 months," she says.

Having a general manager/president on board will allow Young and Lowe to "be intentional about what we are doing," Young says. "We want to create our own path instead of reacting to the path that the world is giving us."

First, they plan to get a new product line off the ground.

In September, they hope to launch Little Yolo, a line of zero-VOC paints for the baby nursery market. After all, Lowe asks, what's more important than creating a safe environment for life's newcomers?

The line's Sprout Collection consists of six colors. Labeled Sprout 1-6, the colors are all softened renditions of classic baby colors with the gender specific

boundaries of blue for boys, pink for girls gently muted.

While waiting to get Little Yolo to market, Young, Lowe and Seppich are refining their plan to take Yolo Colorhouse national. They have their first East Coast dealer, in Virginia, and the paperwork is nearly complete on another dealer in New York. These dealers will join the roster of 31 dealers in Arizona, California, Colorado, Utah and Washington.

One of their first concerns about this growth, however, is how to ship paint so far. Vehicle exhaust creates VOCs, too.

"It negates the no-VOCs," says Lowe, "because we're putting VOCs in the air to get the paint there."

"We're trying to figure that out," Young says.

As they look to expand their dealership network, they look at where their online customers are.

"It's crazy," Young says. "I can't believe people order paint off the Web, but they do." And pay extra for shipping.

### Cold, hard cash

Their next biggest hurdle is cold, hard cash — which, Young says, they now fully grasp.

When Young and Lowe started their business, it was all them. And a small business loan.

They had contacted Todd Braden, vice president of marketing for Rodda, which has been formulating low-VOC paints since 1995. He was intrigued by their idea to create a zero-VOC paint.

Eliminating VOCs changes the makeup of paint and how paint performs, but Rodda had been successful with its low-VOC line, called Horizon. Why not push for zero VOCs?

Braden paired Young and Lowe with Rodda's color experts and, together, their idea became reality.

They debuted their palette of 40 colors, the Earth's Color Collection, at the Portland Home & Garden Show last year and nothing's been the same since.

Including their understanding of business.

"I didn't understand that concept of 'Oh, We need money,'" Young says, laughing out loud. "I fully understand it now. It's so expensive to grow. . . . The cash flow concept? We fully understand that now."

Last year, the two went to Angel Oregon, the Oregon Entrepreneur Forum's annual conference that connects investors with early-stage entrepreneurs.

"It was interesting," Young says. At that time, she says, she couldn't even imagine standing up and pitching her company to a roomful of investors. But now, she says they're ready.

"We need investors and we understand what that means."

But Young is quick to point out that they are looking for investors who really understand the green concept. And, in the end, they want partners that understand the need to educate consumers about air quality as well as the need to run a business well.

"Educating people is a huge ambition for us in our marketing," Young says.

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