

# Brother International Corporation

## Stay-at-home Mom Begins High Flying Business With Brother

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at your side



In mid-2008, stay-at-home mom Laura Lea Effenhauser walked into Sew Contempo, a local sewing machine dealer in the Clear Lake/NASA area of suburban Houston, looking for a basic sewing machine so she could make pillowcases for her young son's bedroom. Not only did she find a machine, but she also found the PR-620 from Brother International Corporation which led to a new career path: creating customized embroidered apparel for unique groups and organizations.

Now, about a year and a half later, Effenhauser's part-time business, Embroidery by Laura Lea, is consistently profitable and she's well into her journey toward job independence. Her embroidery has journeyed pretty far, too. She's had embroidered goods go into space and up Mt. Everest!

Effenhauser had no background in embroidery before starting her business. And although she did learn to use a sewing machine when she was 10, she says she'd hardly call herself a seamstress. Expecting her second child, she decided to put those rudimentary skills to work making items for her firstborn son's "big-boy room," using an older machine borrowed from her mother. When the older machine stopped working, she went to Sew Contempo, a Clear Lake/NASA dealership owned by Terri Ann Garvey, for a replacement.

Some accidental eavesdropping actually tipped her off as to how machine embroidery could become a business. A helpful salesperson from Sew Contempo was getting ready to give Effenhauser a demonstration of the Duetta™ 6000D when another customer interrupted to ask a question about the cap frame accessory to the nearby PR-620 embroidery machine. Effenhauser was interested, so she urged the salesperson to help that customer before launching into the demo. That's when she overheard the woman talking about her business and the potential and professional results of the PR-620.

"When her story unfolded, it was *identical* to my story," Effenhauser said. "This other customer also had two small children, was a stay-at-home mom, and wanted a little something to do on the side. She had started an embroidery business catering to recreational softball teams, and had more business than she could handle. In fact, she was getting ready to add another PR-620," she explained.

The two women exchanged information and later talked more in depth about starting an embroidery business. Effenhauser did go home with a Duetta™ 6000D that day, but she also went home with bigger mission: to research and write a business plan for starting her own embroidery business.

A month later, she attended a Start Your Own Embroidery Business seminar presented by Ed Skulski from Brother International Corporation and hosted by Sew Contempo. It was at that event that she bought her own PR-620.

Although Effenhauser had planned to sell embroidered pet collars on the internet, she rapidly found out that flexibility and, more importantly, *proximity* are often key ingredients in small-business success.



Effenhauser's sewing room.

Her first big break came from her NASA connections. Her husband, Rainer, works there, and before her older son was born, Effenhauser also worked as a NASA astronaut trainer. The greater NASA workforce is actually made up of different project teams or organizations, all of which are accustomed to having their own unique logos stitched on patches and apparel. "Every time a new project team forms, the new team or group creates a logo and orders customized apparel," Effenhauser explains. In the past, most of this embroidery had come from a mail-order clothing catalog company, but now it comes from Embroidery by Laura Lea.

Just after Effenhauser took delivery of her new PR-620 machine, a group her husband works with had a new logo designed. He e-mailed it to her. She found an online digitizer offering a free digitizing trial, got the logo back in two days, stitched it and sent it to the manager of the group.

"He was just floored that within a week he could see in his hand an embroidered patch that he designed. And it just showed up magically in his hand," Effenhauser says. "He ordered the first set of 4 shirts, and it took off from there, and I mean explosively!"

Since that first order, Embroidery by Laura Lea has only sewn for NASA groups. Since she has resumed working there part-time, she often hand-delivers orders straight to a customer's desk. The business has grown solely by word-of-mouth. Her only advertising is her website, [www.embroiderybylauralea.com](http://www.embroiderybylauralea.com).

Unique orders sometimes pose interesting delivery scenarios. For example, she embroidered chef's hats that were to be worn by two American astronauts and one Russian cosmonaut during a "cooking-in-space" presentation conducted via video feed from the International Space Station (ISS). Because the crew members were already in orbit at the ISS, the hats had to be sent to Florida weeks ahead of the next space shuttle launch so they could be packed into the cargo. Once they arrived in space, they had to be floated out (with other cargo, of course) onto the ISS itself.

Effenhauser confesses that the creative aspect of embroidery is not what intrigues her. It's the technology, especially the "bells and whistles" of the Brother machines that actually perform. She thinks the PR-620 has strong value, with its useful, dependable technology at a reasonable

price. She has invested in her business by purchasing accessories for her PR-620 such as the cap frame, fast frame, machine stand and Brother PE-DESIGN<sup>®</sup> digitizing software that she uses to digitize logos. These have helped Effenhauser embroider on shirt sleeves and backs, as well as caps and chef hats with precision.

"I love machinery," she says. "That was the first thing that turned me on. It was the cool, gee-whiz factor that you can push a button and do this."

Another aspect of the embroidery business that she loves is the wide-open market. She doesn't think she just got lucky with a good niche for embroidery, nor does she consider herself an uber-salesperson. Regardless of the struggling economy, the business is definitely out there, and in her opinion, market saturation is very unlikely. In fact, she shared her experiences with other small-business hopefuls during her Start Your Own Embroidery Business seminar hosted by Sew Contempo.

"I have a great relationship with my local Brother dealer, if I ever have any issues or questions I just call them and they are always there to help. That's one of the many reasons I stuck with Brother—because of my dealer and the excellent technical support they provide," she explained.



Laura Lea Effenhauser & Ed Skulski.



Start Your Own Embroidery Business Seminar at Sew Contempo.