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FEATURE



Who Doesn't Love STICKERS?

BY GOLI MOHAMMADI

Three decades of rainbows, teddy bears, and a little red heart.

Touring Mrs. Grossman's sticker factory in Petaluma, Calif., is like getting the golden ticket to Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. The 110,000-square-foot building is home to a host of busy machines, a crew of friendly folks, and more stickers than you've ever seen under one roof. Smiles abound. It helps when your job is making teddy bears and rainbows and you work for a company of true crafter integrity.

Like many a great invention, Mrs. Grossman's stickers started as the result of a fortunate accident and the zeal to come up with something new. In 1979, Mrs. Grossman's Paper Company (MGPC) was run from the dining room table of Andrea Grossman, at the time a freelance graphic designer. She specialized in stationery, wrapping paper, bags, and notes bearing old woodcut images from seed catalogs.

One of her clients, Pine Street Papery in Sausalito, wanted little red heart "seals" for Valentine's Day embellishments. At the time, no such thing was made locally, so Grossman took it upon herself to cut a perfect, fat heart out of black silhouette paper and send it off to a local label maker.

When her order arrived, the stickers had mistakenly been printed on rolls instead of the sheets Grossman had expected. Despite their unconventionality, the rolls were beautiful, and she displayed them at the paper shop with a yardstick and a pair of scissors, for sale individually or by the yard, like ribbon. Customers immediately embraced the little stickers, and the shop sold 4,000 the first week.

Seizing this unexpected opportunity, Grossman quickly made nine more designs — duck, goose, bear, kiss, rainbow, star, pig, lightning bolt, and

clouds — and thus was born the concept of Stickers by the Yard. Grossman debuted her stickers at a national stationery show and could barely keep up with the orders. There was nothing on the market like these cheery, decorative decals, and folks just couldn't get enough.

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"Taking one off the backing and putting it on paper is a mini act of creating," says Grossman, explaining people's attraction to the stickers.

In less than two years, Mrs. Grossman's went from having two employees to 50. "Stickermania" was in full swing, and Grossman was credited by *People* magazine as sparking the trend. Kids were actively collecting and trading stickers and displaying them in photo albums. There were sticker conventions, sticker stores, even a magazine called *Stickers*. By 1983, Mrs. Grossman's stickers were sold in at least 15 different countries.

Then, without warning, in the fall of 1984, the fad suddenly faded. Kids were no longer interested in collecting stickers. They had moved on. The chain stores closed, the magazine folded, and retailers wondered what to do with their overflow inventory.



Photography by Branca Nitzsche

QUEEN OF HEARTS: Andrea Grossman stands surrounded by Stickers by the Yard at Mrs. Grossman's headquarters.



30 Years of Stickers

1979 Red Heart

Grossman's first sticker and the company logo.

1981 Giant Bear

First oversized sticker. Everyone loves it!

1984 Opalescent Bubbles

First stickers printed on opalescent stock.

1987 Children Simple, lively silhouettes.

1991 Photographic Heart Flowers

First photographic sticker.

1993 Hugs and Kisses

First holographic sticker.

1994 Trim-A-Tree First design-your-own sticker.

1997 Design Lines Borders were the scrapbookers' dream.

1997 Classic Black Alphabet

Bestselling alphabet pack.

1999 Brocade Heart

Grossman's one-of-a-kind Laserweb machine produced this delicate, laser-cut sticker.

2000 Christmas Tree

First hot-foil-stamped sticker.

Sticker orders dwindled dramatically.

Grossman was most concerned about her employees. "I've always felt like I work for my people, not that they work for me," she says. Though they had to downsize and cut back, the team stood behind the products and managed to pull through. Grossman retained her diehard optimism and encouraged her staff to "be happy in bad times."

Just as interest in stickers dwindled, interest in scrapbooking started growing, and Grossman's designs filled the demand in this new medium. MGPC's designers created new lines of stickers intended for the niche, such as graphic, geometric shapes and letters. By 1995, the company was back in the swing of things, moving into a bigger space that still serves as company headquarters.

Grossman notes that what began as simply putting together a photo album evolved into a more elaborate craft requiring embellishments, and though she's in the business of making scrapbooking wares, she encourages scrapbookers to bring back simplicity, handwriting, and personalization.

Today, MGPC has just under 100 employees and is committed to making a minimal impact on the environment. Thanks to concerted efforts like using environmentally friendly inks and papers, recycling 185 tons of waste paper each year, and building their own in-house wastewater treatment facility, MGPC recently became a certified green business by the Sonoma Green Business Program. The company also won Pacific Gas & Electric's Innovative Leadership Award for energy conservation.

Another important business philosophy for MGPC is to make a positive impact on the community. For its contributions to children in hospitals (well over 20 million stickers donated to ailing kids), the company received the Child Life Council's

Spirit of Giving Award. Toward its commitment to celebrating the talents of developmentally disabled adults, MGPC employs a number of people with disabilities in its assembly department.

After nearly three decades steering the sticker ship, Grossman recently stepped down and passed the torch to her son Jason, who was one of her first employees and has been with the company for 20 years. Jason started a successful subsidiary of MGPC in 1998 named Paragon Label, utilizing MGPC's in-house printing plant to produce artful bottle labels for winemakers such as B.R. Cohn and Don Sebastiani & Sons.

"I've always felt like I work for my people, not that they work for me."

With her newfound freedom, Grossman hopes to get back to designing stickers as well as pursuing other passions, like improving the lives of prison inmates. She's collaborating on building a meditation and prayer space with fruit trees in a women's prison.

Kitty McDermott-Okamura, owner of Pine Street Papery, where the stickers were first sold, reflects on years of doing business with Grossman. "It's been a sheer pleasure," she says.

And what advice does Andrea Grossman offer crafters striving to make a living from their passions? "Clean up your act. Make sure you have a quality product to offer." ✕

Goli Mohammadi is associate managing editor of CRAFT. Her favorite sticker of all time, the big sparkly snowflake, is made by Mrs. Grossman's.



2001 Spring Garden
Grossman handpicked and styled each flower and blade of grass for this very difficult-to-print sticker.

2002 Fireworks These hot-foil-stamped stickers have been the #1 bestseller for more than seven years.



2002 Vellum Water Lilies
Introduced stickers printed on vellum.

2003 Vellum Color Blocks
Introduced vellum journaling panels.

2004 Scrap Metal Blocks
A new printing technique replicates a patina of aged metal.



2005 Sheer Color Citrus
First sticker printed on a clear surface.

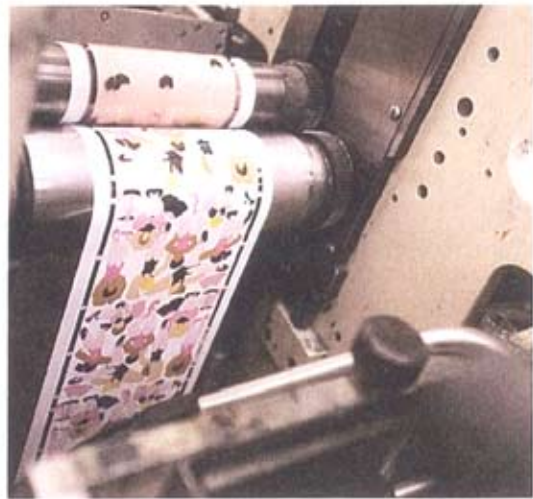
2006 Cosmos First giant photographic stickers.

2006 Paper Dolls First repositionable stickers.

2006 Pen and Ink Dogs
Quick sketches in black ink on a transparent stock.

2007 Cutie Cupcakes
Animated inanimate objects.

2008 Charm City Cakes
Celebrity chef's cakes inspire sticker designs.



STICKY BUSINESS: (Clockwise from top left) The Mark Andy LP5000 printing press; rows of foils used to hot-foil-stamp sparkly stickers; the sheeter, which cuts stickers on a roll into sheets; rolls of scrapbook blocks ready to go.