

MAVERICKS IN THE MARKET

by Jeff McKinney

Throwing the perfect get-together involves far more than mailing out the invitations. You've also got to choose the location, menu, drinks, and décor, and, of course, execute the right invitation. America's fondness for throwing parties and the many steps involved in making sure that the party is perfect has created a lucrative business opportunity and Michele Adams and Gia Russo of MiGi are fast rising stars of this party-planning enterprise.

Adams and Russo met while working at *Martha Stewart Living*. Among her various roles with the company, Adams was responsible for developing products for the *Martha By Mail* catalog (no longer in print), which featured high-end products under the Martha Stewart brand. Russo began working on stories for the magazine and eventually she and Adams were developing product and working on stories together. In addition to working on style, entertaining, and wedding stories, Adams' degree in landscape architecture came into play as one of the garden editors for the magazine.

Adams was working in the garden department when Martha Stewart was creating a line of garden tools and products for Kmart, which Adams was asked to design. Designing this line meant recreating tools from Stewart's personal collection while introducing signature Martha Stewart elements such as color and materials. "Obviously Martha has pret-

MiGi

ty specific ideas of what she likes," says Adams, "so there were a lot of meetings, including going out to her home and poking through her collection of vintage tools and items collected in her travels around the world."

Adams and Russo left Martha Stewart within months of each

other and returned to their home state of California. The duo continued its successful working relationship on the West Coast by launching a company, MiGi. Shortly after, "The MiGi Girls" were approached by Chronicle Books to author two books, *Wedding Showers* and *Baby Showers*. Adams and Russo used the two titles to make a name for themselves and followed with their third book, *At Home With Friends: Spontaneous Celebrations For Any Occasion*.

At Home With Friends, a how-to guide for throwing successful get-togethers at home, reached a much broader audience than the first two and with accolades such as inclusion on Oprah's Book List, the book would become Adams and Russo's big break. The book is about simple casual entertaining for everyday life, which was a departure from the more formal entertaining stories they had been working on while at

Martha Stewart Living. "We love the Martha world," says Adams. "It's very inspirational and beautiful to look at, but we wanted to give normal, everyday people ideas and inspiration that were more approachable."



items from The Betesh Group's Sweet line



Michele Adams and Gi Russo

At MiGi, Adams and Russo leverage their editorial experience to

develop collections of consumer products. As the designers of the nursery stories featured in *Pregnancy Magazine*, Adams and Russo scoured the market looking for baby products that feature great design elements. What they found was that the majority of these products were limited to high-end retailers and generally very expensive, while good design at mass was few and far between. According to Adams, the baby product market, especially at mass, is too character-driven and a bit dated. MiGi wants to introduce great design at the right price point to this category and they relied on their editorial experience to help shape the development of two baby lines.

MiGi's first line of high-design baby products was Sweet. This line of room décor is inspired by 1960s and 1970s vintage designs that Adams and Russo grew up with and felt that other young moms would also relate to. It's a mix of vintage design with a modern MiGi twist that introduces bright shades of red and pink to a crisp white for a look that is both nostalgic and neat. Working with licensee Baby Boom, a division of The Betesh Group, the Sweet line includes infant bedding, blankets, and room décor. MiGi also has a boys' line, Splash, which features a modern sophisticated look that's still fun and features a vibrant color palette of blues, brown, and white.

Sweet is currently available through Target with prominent

display on Target.com. Additional retailers, including JCPenney, are in the works.

MiGi's target audience is 25–45 years old and the company focuses on the largest stages this group goes through including marriage, a first home, and starting a family. For the home, MiGi has a license with Li & Fung to create housewares, tableware, wall décor, dinnerware, and other products geared toward entertaining. The homeware line is set to debut in February with a launch on Amazon.com.



items from the Li & Fung lines

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MiGi's approach to designing consumer products relies on the founders' editorial experience and expertise. The duo is in a unique position

as style setters and authors to seek out holes in the marketplace and then create products that fill those gaps. The Sweet and Splash lines are the perfect complement to baby showers, while the Li & Fung housewares will help readers of *At Home With Friends* set the stage for the perfect get-together.

Up next is a project currently in development with AOL, where MiGi acts as entertaining experts. Due in the first quarter of 2007, MiGi will develop video content for AOL's new Living section that will focus on 26 different parties, which the MiGi Girls will explain how to pull off.

Although its popularity may ebb and flow, entertaining at home has been and will remain a favorite pastime. There will always be a need for creative people to introduce new ideas into party planning, and companies, like MiGi, that can leverage their experience to develop those ideas can plan the perfect future.