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HOME

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Brighten Up Those Office Shelves

With Its Colorful Products, Russell+Hazel Aims to Make Sure Paper Is Always in Style

By **THOMAS HERRNSTEIN**
Washington Post Staff Writer

When Chris Flanigan was growing up, her family celebrated the start of school as if it were Christmas. "My grandparents would send a brightly wrapped package of school supplies to us each fall from their general store in Scotland, E.," she says. "I loved it."

That began Flanigan's personal relationship with paper. Years later, when she went to work as an architect and was engaged by the architect, contractor and fabricator in the office supply closet, she made her own. Then she did her own for her daughter.

Each time, she would buy what she could to school with a strong, bright, vinyl binder. Flanigan made one out of heavy graph-book board. She covered the spine in bright red-orange fabric, attached a five-ring binder to the inside cover and wrapped a big rubber band around the inside thing to hold "under explosion."

When daughter began attending her daughter's elementary school, Flanigan knew she was onto something.

Today, she is the founder and owner of a successful high-end stationery and office supply business based in Minnesota. The products are designed to be fun and functional — "add life to your work," according to Flanigan. She named the company after her own grandparents, Russell and Hazel.

Started as an e-commerce site in 2003, Russell+Hazel has a flagship store in Minneapolis, and its online store can be found at www.russellandhazel.com, nearest retailer the Corner Store, in the Mexican Market neighborhood and its specialty bookstores worldwide. Last year, the company did almost \$2 million in sales, a remarkable showing for a paper-based business in a sluggish economy and a market beset by Amazon and Blackberry.

But there are not just ordinary office supplies.

The company's name, which takes on notebooks, pens, binders and storage containers have made it a household name in America. The products have appeared in "The Devil Wears Prada" and the latest Indiana Jones movie, to name two. This summer, Russell+Hazel was listed as a top supplier shop in one of Manhattan's luxury department stores, Barneys.

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department stores, Home Depot.

The small online shop, aimed to tempt school-office shoppers, includes a "teacher kit," where customers can get help putting their organizational supplies together, and a "writing desk" for shoppers to try out their picks before making a purchase. Orders start at \$14, eight-month subscriptions at \$12.

Flanigan and her designers look to fashion new items and the home-office industry for guidance when choosing the brand's color and patterns based on their own collection's colors, line group, and storage, like the red and blue that inspired the vibrant and stylish Fall products line to be designed on a desk to attract about 100.

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Russell+Hazel, a high-end office supply outfitter based in Minneapolis, offers binders in solid colors as well as patterns.

per projects and in traditional items work within or around this system.

What is your favorite?

The microbook. I use one per week, and I use them by week. I carry a whole month's worth in one micro-book. When the month is over, I organize them in my desk, where I keep the whole year for easy reference. They are great when you're on the go, because you don't have to carry a whole binder.

Do you prefer paper?

I do for my record-keeping and personal data-keeping, and I still like notes that way. I will say that I don't know what I'd do without my BlackBerrys, but... I can't imagine ever going completely electronic. I think I'd pass.

How do you come up with new ideas?

We look at what people will be using that much more, and bring to market that. We add a lot of paper and paper to small things. We take the ideas we see on the runway, and in the stores of the moment. ... I see one way that look good dressed in one of

those colors, but they can spend \$16 on a binder and have to work it without making a huge financial investment. This fall, the new colors will be Arctic and Manhattan.

What does the future hold for Russell+Hazel?

Russell's was so exciting opening a store within a store and using other people's real estate. We're very excited to start working with that same spirit in different locations and see ourselves in talks with iconic book-store retailers. Fred Segal in Los Angeles, Moko in Kansas City and FolliFollie in London. We want to start buying office products one a Saturday afternoon purchase with pencils or pens, instead of a draggery purchase made when work. The thought is Can Post it later be big glass?

When are you going to open a store in D.C.?

If we had more capital, we would love to... To love to be in D.C. or Ann Arbor, Mich. ... areas that have a lot of energy. I do see the excitement and joy when people walk into a store. I mean, girls, we are more productive when we are engaged.



Somehow inspire colors in R+H's products.