



Cathy Siskind-Kelly
Co-owner, Black Fly Beverage Company Inc.

What is the name of your business?
Black Fly Beverage Company Inc.

Describe what do you do?
Co-Founder of Black Fly: Ontario's first Micro-Distillery. We make ultra premium all Canadian non-traditional Vodka Coolers with real juices, 7% vodka. We also make vodka infused SPIKED ICE a Ready-to-Freeze product new to the Canadian market. I wear a variety of hats including overseeing sales, marketing, communications, contract negotiations, product development and work with all involved government bodies (LCBO, AGCO).

How long have you been in business?
2 years

What did you do before opening this business?
Founded and operated London Homes, a Developer and General Contractor of Single Family Residential Homes.

Why did you start this business?

My husband Rob and I saw a niche in the beverage alcohol business for a quality, locally made non-sweet vodka cooler, at a time when the Cooler business had seen 300% growth in two years. We wanted to create a brand that Ontarians and Canadians could call their own, that drew upon identifiably Canadian imagery (hmm can't forget those blackflies), and used pure Canadian non-sweet berry juices: cranberry & wild blueberry juice and in our new flavour black currant and wild blueberry juice. We had lots of ideas about unique packaging – custom designed, non-breakable and resealable bottles. We felt strongly about London as an ideal city to open Ontario's first micro-distillery, and worked hard for 18 months with government to ensure we could open in the heart of downtown.

What has been the best thing about your business?

The incredible support we've experienced in London and throughout Ontario, that has propelled Black Fly (against all odds as the only small producer in our category) from having one flavour sold in 6 LCBO stores two years ago, to now having three products in over 450 LCBO stores today. So much of our growth has been generated by word of mouth, by people taking Black Fly in all directions, by local pubs, venues, golf courses & LCBO's bringing in a local product and by people being moved to buy Canadian. Among the many wonderful things about our business – this sense of shared excitement & local pride in our hometown brand has been one of the best.

What has been the most disappointing?

The impact on our family life that everyone who has started a business likely knows firsthand.

How has operating this business affected your family life?

We try to be at every sports game, school event and be home for every meal. Sometimes work gets in the way. Fortunately for Rob and I family life comes first, so we work a lot of late nights catching up. To me a new business has been like a new baby – lots of work, little sleep but rewarding.

What is the one thing you would do differently in your business if you had it to do again?

Start our business one year later, when all three of our children were in school full time.

What is the best advice you can give for other women thinking of starting their own business?

Expect everything to cost more that you anticipate. Have a Plan B. Remain positive and maintain a positive attitude in the face of all challenges and obstacles. Realize that every time a problem seems like it will be the doom of your business, it's just another bump in the road that can be overcome. Utilize your resources. Accept all offers for help and information, and references. People are amazingly supportive of entrepreneurs and when asked, are usually willing to share their knowledge. There are always people with expert knowledge and experience that can teach you valuable lessons.

What are your plans for the future?

Well, Black Fly grew last year by 400% and at the onset of our busiest season it seems that 2007 will be just as wonderful a year. Black Fly has migrated to Nova Scotia this season, and opportunities both nationally and internationally present themselves regularly. Our plans are to expand wisely with our existing products, introduce new spirit products to the market and continue to grow and innovate.