

## **START UP**

Philadelphia Business Journal -- November 18-24, 2005



**Name of company:**  
Harmony Clean, Inc.

**Owners' names:**  
Debi Sarandrea & Vicki Brown

**Location:** 573 N. Main Street  
Doylestown PA 18901  
([www.harmonyclean.com](http://www.harmonyclean.com))

**Description of company, including its target market:** Harmony Clean is an environmentally-friendly house cleaning company serving the Central Bucks and Eastern Montgomery Counties. We promote environmental awareness by using only non-toxic, earth-friendly cleaning products for the protection of our clients' and staffs' health, and the earth. Our target market is mostly dual-income families that don't have time to clean, are concerned with their health and the environment, or would rather spend their time doing something else. We clean everything from apartments and condos to 5,000 square foot homes and everything in between. Most of our clients have us clean their homes once a week or once every other week.

**Is the location important to company's success?** Location has been an important factor in Harmony Clean's success. The suburban demographic includes a large number of people who are concerned with the environmental and toxic effects of cleaning chemicals, and their watersheds and environment.

**Age of company:** 2 years

**No. of employees:** 18

**Owners' education:**

**Debi Sarandrea:** Bachelors in Business, Villanova University

**Vicki Brown:** Associates in Graphic Design, Philadelphia Institute of Art

**Prior experience:**

**Debi says,** "I was co-publisher of a newsletter called, "Healthy News for Healthy People." This was a fun and upbeat publication and it promoted readers to take responsibility for their own health and provided natural-food recipes, exercise tips, nature breaks, preventative health care advice and book reviews. Shortly thereafter, my husband Bruce launched a computer consulting company with two partners out of our home in Warrington, PA. I started lending a hand at nights with their books and within a year, they moved to an office, hired two engineers and started manufacturing custom integrated circuits. My evening work turned into managing a staff of 32, opening a branch office in the U.K., and handling off-shore and local manufacturing operations. After 10 years, the business was sold and Bruce & I took a long break on our sailboat in the Bahamas while we mapped out the future, which eventually led to starting Harmony Clean.

**Vicki says,** "While in my teens, I was a sought-after theatrical lighting expert in local and regional theatres. My creative talents led me to Art School where I specialized in Graphic Design. I worked my way through college by helping run our father's fastener business and then took on the position full-time after graduation. I put my art career on hold and helped grow the family business for 15 years. After getting married and becoming a mother of two, I went back to my artistic roots and became an art teacher at a Montessori School. The coordinating schedule of my teaching job with our

children's holidays and summers off was a perfect match while both of our children were young. Keeping up with work, kids sports, volunteer activities, my husband's weekend construction jobs and running a household gave me first-hand knowledge of how important and helpful it is to have a house-cleaning service for assistance. When Debi suggested we go in to business together, I was ready for a change and up to the challenge of starting from scratch.

**What made you decide to start your own business?** After researching some of the existing franchise options, we didn't need to buy a "business in a box" and could do it on our own. Going into business as sisters gave us the security of knowing we could depend on each other and that we shared the same hard-working work ethics. It struck us that if we did it on our own, rather than buying a franchise, we would be free to use healthier products. We liked the idea of providing jobs for people and not asking them to breathe toxic fumes all day while working. With so much concern about our local watersheds and water quality, not to mention the rise in childhood allergies and chemical sensitivities, the community response has been incredible.

**How high was your anxiety after you made the decision to start your own company?**

After we made the decision to start our own company, anxiety was low and excitement was high. Looking back, we realize we had "blindness" on to some degree, so there was not a lot of anxiety. We knew we had a great idea and neither of us was afraid to get our hands dirty. We were encouraged by friends and, friends-of-friends, who allowed us to use their homes as proving grounds for our products and methods. It was a win-win situation. They got a clean house and we added to our experience with no pressure.

**What were your first sources of funding?** We used our own savings.

**Give an example of how your network of people, including friends, family and acquaintances influence your decision and launch:** Vicki and I have many role models who inspired us starting with both parents who ran their own businesses.

**Who or what is your competition?** In terms of providing non-toxic, earth-friendly cleaning through an insured and bonded company, we have no competition. There are some "independents" cleaning homes using natural products, however, they are working for cash under the table without providing any liability or workers compensation insurance.

**What lessons have you learned about controlling costs and deciding in which areas to invest resources?** We did a lot of research and trial and error with which products to use. We recently won the "Best of Bucks/Mont for House Cleaning" and have a banner hanging out front of the building, which has also helped make the phone ring. Other print advertising took a while to provide a return as people began noticing the ads and our little cars driving all over town.

**Was there one moment of relief, when you thought, "Yes! This will work!"** We felt that way very early on when we moved out of Vicki's house and into a real office in Doylestown. We plugged in the phones and suddenly they started to ring.

**How big would you like to get?** Since day one, friends and associates have asked if we are going to franchise the business. We do see a huge trend toward the use of natural products and organic foods.

**Any words of wisdom?** Be prepared for long hours. Be prepared to make mistakes, and allow others to make mistakes; sometimes it's the only way to learn. Increase your advertising budget if possible since it may be trial and error in some cases. Have something different, something important to say. Engage a competent public relations firm. Don't let tough days get you down. Believe in your dream. ■■