

Maker of purse hooks is reeling in customers

by Keith Darce

PURSE HOOKS - Glass and clay domes adorn purse hooks sold by PurseHook.Net, begun by contractor Rich Shamlian. CNS Photo by Nelvin Cepeda. **FISH HOOKS** - Rich Shamlian runs PurseHook.Net out of his garage, which houses his fishing hook collection. CNS Photo by Nelvin Cepeda. Rich Shamlian knows hooks.

The San Diego angler has dozens of them in the small, low-slung garage behind his cottage. Large thick hooks for catching sharks in the ocean. Short, stubby ones for hooking live bait. Circular ones for catch-and-release fishing.

But it's another kind of hook that has Shamlian dreaming of riches.

He makes purse hooks, delicately curved pieces of steel alloy that hang from tables and counters at one end and hold handbags on the other. The hooks keep purses within reach while protecting them from dirty surfaces, an important consideration when toting a high-priced designer handbag.

The hooks are manufactured in Canada, and Shamlian adds decorative glass and clay domes made by San Diego artists. He assembles and packages the hooks in the house and stores them in neat stacks on metal shelves in his garage, alongside his fishing equipment.

Less than a year after launching the business, PurseHook.Net, Shamlian has placed his products in 60 shops from San Diego to Fresno, Calif. And the company's Web site has generated orders from other parts of the country.

The venture represents an unexpected turn for the 51-year-old New Jersey native and general contractor, who spent much of his life building restaurants in Southern California and houses in Montana.

Shamlian has exchanged dusty work sites and meetings with subcontractors for glitzy retail trade shows and sales trips to frilly boutiques.

"I'm used to dealing with dirty guys all the time, and here I'm dealing with beautiful women," he said. "It's amazing. It's fun. I'm truly loving it."

The business is particularly baffling to some of his buddies in the construction industry. "I say that I'm dealing with purse hooks, and they think I've fallen off the deep end," Shamlian said.

He estimates that he has sold more than 10,000 hooks, and says the business will generate \$1 million in revenue in its first year. The hooks are priced from \$22 to \$40.

The most expensive hooks are adorned with colorful, animal-themed hardclay domes or multilayered glass decorations. Shamlian gives many of the hooks exotic-sounding names such as Lightning Sky and Hidden Treasure.

Gayleen Nichols, owner of Bubbles ... a Unique Boutique, said she has sold more than 50 of Shamlian's purse hooks in the last few months, mostly to women who stumbled upon them while browsing the shop in San Diego's trendy Gaslamp Quarter.

"I'm very much a girlie-girl's store, so (the hooks) are a natural fit," she said.

The devices also appeal to women who worry about placing expensive purses on dirty tables, counters and floors, Nichols said.

There's actually some science backing those concerns. Researchers at the University of Arizona who studied items found in women's offices found that purses were among the worst collectors of potentially harmful bacteria.

Recognizing his limitations in the world of fashion accessories, Shamlian wasted no time recruiting the women in his life into his new business.

Working out of their home, he and his wife, Jeanette, assemble and package the hooks while daughters Nichole, 27, and Natascha, 25, oversee sales activities. Shamlian's two sisters, who live in Southern California, pitch in as sales representatives.

This isn't the first time Shamlian teamed with his wife in a lucrative venture.

Jeanette has worked for years as the bookkeeper for Shamlian's construction company, RSC General Contracting. And the couple were winners on "The Newlywed Game" television show in 1980 shortly after they married, taking home baby furniture, baby clothes, a set of encyclopedias and a washer and dryer.

Shamlian said he started PurseHook.Net with his \$2,000 investment. The business also has an angel investor, whom Shamlian declined to identify.

Shamlian's daughter Nichole unwittingly provided the inspiration for the business 2 1/2 years ago when she stumbled upon an old purse hook while rummaging through items at a garage sale.

She didn't know what it was, but she liked its decorative design and bought it. A friend later identified the item as an accessory that first became fashionable with women in the 1940s.

The hook eventually found its way into Shamlian's garage where it sat for some time amid his fishing gear, a refrigerator stocked with beer and a wall collage of snapshots of himself and his daughters showing off their trophy catches from fishing trips.

Shamlian noticed how much sturdier his shark fishing hooks were in comparison to the flimsy purse hook purchased by his daughter, and he started imagining ways to improve the design.

"It took a few years before I said to my wife, 'We need to do something with this thing,'" he said.

The clincher came in February while Shamlian and his wife were dining at a cafe near the coast.

"I pulled (the purse hook) out to use, and the girl next to me said, 'What's that?'" Jeanette Shamlian recalled. "We looked around, and all the young women had pocketbooks. Rich turned to me and said, 'Jeanette, this is our next million dollars.'"

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