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Angela Joy Coppola, founder,
Sacred Silks catalog

DIVINE

Inspiration
Inside a catalog startup

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DIVINE

INSIDE A CATALOG STARTUP

BY DENNY HATCH

It's a rare catalog that is so deeply personal—and deeply felt—as Sacred Silks, the creation of Californian Angela Joy Coppola. Her product: reproductions on silk of stained glass windows and other designs from sacred sites around the world.

The Beginnings

Born to a Jewish mother and an Italian father, Coppola had two uncles in the garment business who manufactured high-end women's coats and suits and a third uncle who sold fabric. As a girl, she spent hours watching the designers at work, the cutters, the fitters and the models.

At age 17, she was the best-dressed secretary in the purchasing department at Revlon, making \$73 a week and wearing \$500 suits and dresses—all given to her at cost by her uncles.

At age 21, she went to work for Fabergé as assistant director of advertising and promotion and was put in charge of buying all print production—from brochures to shipping boxes. In a succession of promotions, Coppola went on to become a brand manager, director of marketing for the Xanadu Division and, finally, at the ripe old age of 28, creative director.

Two years later, she moved to San Francisco where she was hired as vice president and creative director for Holiday Magic, a company

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INSPIR

cover story

Catalog entrepreneur
Angela Joy Coppola,
founder, Sacred Silks
Photo by: Melissa Jacobs



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that sold health and beauty aids direct to consumers.

On Her Own

Figuring she had learned everything needed to run a business, Coppola started her own skincare company, Secrets of the Earth.

"At big corporations, other people ran the business and coped with the finances," she says. "I got my MBA at Secrets of Earth. I learned how *not* to run a company." She adds ruefully, "It didn't make it."

After taking a year off, Coppola decided the best kind of business was one with no inventory. So she started an advertising agency and quickly landed a number of big-name accounts including Levi's, Jordache men's swimwear, and Celine and Galanos perfumes. After 16 years, she had socked away a stash of cash.

"Working under constant deadlines in a business where other people, such as clients, make decisions and change everything was debilitating," she says. "I was burned out, so I simply closed up shop and spent the next five years getting to know myself and trying to figure out what to do with the rest of my life."

Divine Serendipity

At a social gathering in San Francisco, the wife of the dean of Grace Cathedral asked Coppola to volunteer some time to help generate revenue for the church gift shop. Since she lived two blocks from the cathedral, she agreed and thought no more about it.

Late one evening, Coppola was walking by Grace Cathedral and glanced up. One of the stained glass windows was lighted from behind, the colors glittering like jewels against the inky night sky. It suddenly hit her that the window would make a fabulous silk square.

"It was a little voice deep within me," she says. "I wasn't thinking about starting a new business. I had not even been to the gift shop to see what they were selling. I feel I was divinely inspired. It was the first of a series of small miracles in my life."

The next day she called the dean's wife who loved the idea at once. Coppola called a contact, someone whom she knew had made a silk for the city of San Francisco. The photograph was taken and as she was watching the strike-off—the first raw silk print of the design—that same little voice told her she could do the same thing for sacred sites of all religions around the world. She crafted a business plan and booked a trip to Europe to look at stained glass windows and artworks.

One window she wanted to include in the burgeoning collection was the Southern Rose Window of Notre Dame de Paris. Designed in 1260, and known for the radiant pink and crimson tones developed in Paris' famous glass workshops, the window depicts Christ of the Apocalypse, the Twelve Apostles, 24 Martyrs and Martyr Virgins with angels completing the design's outer edge. Coppola called the French consulate in San Francisco, the French embassy in Washington, even the French government in

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France and got a runaround. France was only interested in promoting French products abroad, not the other way around, she was told.

"But Notre Dame makes money on it from sales in the cathedral," she explained, "and gets a royalty on every scarf sold. Can't you help me?"

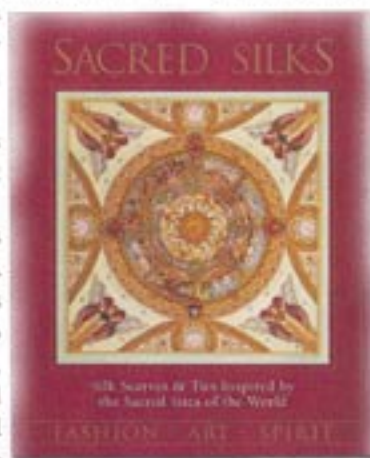
"Pas du tout," was the response. "Not at all."

Coppola recounts her next moves: A couple of weeks before she was to leave on the trip, she got an e-mail from an old friend who was coming to

the living room was one empty seat, which she took. A woman turned to her and said, "You should be talking to Alvin."

Seems that Alvin had spent five years living in Como, Italy, and was good friends with a retired silk designer who agreed to see Coppola. He wound up designing her first nine silks.

When she got to London, Coppola went to see the merchandiser at Westminster Abby. "What you propose will never work here," he told her. "We sell trinkets to tourists. Go to St.



Sacred Silks sells silk scarves whose designs were inspired by stained glass windows from religious sites around the world. Each spread of the 32-page catalog includes: a photograph and detailed history of the religious site; information about the glass artist (when known); and a spectacular reproduction of the silk item.

town, a man she had not seen in three years. It turned out his godmother worked in the mayor's office in Paris. Two days later Coppola was in touch with the right person at Notre Dame.

"A week before I was leaving, I was invited to a party in my apartment building. I was too busy getting ready for the trip, but something told me to go. I went and saw some people, had a bite to eat and started to leave."

But the little voice inside of her told her to go back into the party. In

Paul's. They have great mosaics on the ceiling that would be perfect for what you have in mind."

Coppola arrived at St. Paul's five minutes before closing. She met the buyer and breathlessly explained her proposition. He said to come back at 10 a.m. the following day. She did; he signed up.

On a second trip around the world, Coppola signed the contracts and gave orders to her suppliers in Korea, Japan and China. Her business was on its way.

The Catalog

Open the catalog today, and you find a full-page, personal welcome letter and photograph of Coppola, while on the facing page is the contents of the catalog with 15 full-color,

IDEAS IN ACTION

Angela Joy Coppola, founder of Sacred Silks catalog, started her title with a great idea and some solid experience in the fashion and advertising industries. She offers some tips for other catalog entrepreneurs.

In the Beginning

■ **Be open to inspiration.** Coppola came up with the idea for her catalog by sheer happenstance. But she was open to the possibilities those ideas generated.

■ **Be persistent.** Undaunted by the initial rejections she received from some officials at religious sites, Coppola eventually won over enough to get her catalog company rolling.

Once You Start Mailing

■ **Listen to customers.** At first Coppola thought her buyers would want to wear the scarves. But she soon learned that many like to display them, as well. So she expanded her product line to include framed silk squares as wall hangings, pillows and other home decor items.

■ **Test your ideas.** Some of Coppola's innovative ideas have reaped rewards in both brand-building and customer satisfaction. For example, Sacred Silks mails catalogs in an envelope rather than just ink-jetting addresses. Silks are gift-boxed at no extra charge, and the story of their design is included on each box. And the customer's credit card is not charged until time of shipment.

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3" square reproductions of the patterns from such sites as Notre-Dame de Paris, Chartres; St. John the Divine in New York; St. Paul's in London; The Rev. Robert Shuller's Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, CA; First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, IL; and Trinity Church, Boston.

Each spread of the 32-page catalog includes a photograph and detailed history of the religious site and, where known, the artist; a spectacular reproduction of the silk item; and one or more models wearing it as a decorative scarf around the neck or head, as a shawl, a hair tie and, in the case of Washington National Cathedral's Rose Window, as an elegant, eye-popping sleeveless blouse and as an overskirt. All copy is in an easy-to-read serif font on white background.

The silks are equivalent in quality to those of Ferragamo that run around \$200. Price points range from \$40 to \$110, depending on the number of colors. "For example, the Notre Dame Rose Window is 18 colors," Coppola explains. "That's 18 times through the press by one person. On the other hand, our signature 'Sacred Circle' is just two colors, as is the Crystal Cathedral Angel Square Scarf."

Coppola initially conceived the business as one that offered scarves and an occasional man's necktie with matching pocket square. But as the customer base grew, she discovered that some of her buyers preferred not to wear the silks, but rather display them framed as works of art, make cushions from them or use them as coverings for tables or private home altars. So she offers the silk squares framed and a Notre-Dame de Paris Rose Window pillow with neckties, wall hangings and bed throws being produced for the upcoming holiday edition. Based on customer feedback, the subtitle of her catalog is changing from "Silk Scarves & Ties Inspired by the Sacred Sites of the World" to "Sacred Art to Live With and Wear."

When she started out, her business plan called for marketing in the

world of women's accessories, a \$650-million industry. Experience opened another area, the \$5 billion a year inspirational giftware market, and the \$16 billion home accessories market.

Another aspect of the catalog worth studying is the order form—a masterpiece of design—that allows for merchandise to be shipped to three different addresses (personalized gift cards can be enclosed). The catalog's back cover depicts a smiling model wearing the Notre-Dame de Paris silk as a scarf and breaks down the various silks into their denominations: Anglican, Catholic, Episcopal, Jewish Reformed, Universal, Presbyterian, Protestant Non-Denominational and Protestant.

One rule the catalog breaks: It's mailed in an envelope. "I get 20 to 30 catalogs a day sometimes, and I want ours to stand out," Coppola says. "I tested with and without an envelope, and the envelope won."

Her three best-selling SKUs: Notre-Dame de Paris, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Dove window from the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, IL, and Creation of the Birds from St. Paul's Cathedral.

At the bottom of every page is the catalog's toll-free number and on most spreads, the URL (www.sacredsilks.com). The first edition was written and designed by Crowfoot Design. Subsequent books have been written by Linda Aldridge of Axion, and they're printed by Times Litho of Forest Grove, OR.

In addition to acquiring new customers via regular channels, Coppola does a great deal of publicity and public relations, resulting in feature stories in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Lexington Herald-Leader* and *Inspirational Giftware* published by Christian Reading.

A wholesale catalog is produced with a separate price list for the retail and catalog trade. Among her retail clients: Bloomingdales, gift shops at the various sites and religious bookstores. A 10-percent royalty goes to the sacred site that inspired the design.

Sacred Silks spawned a second business. In the course of Coppola's travels, she met a man who creates specialty items for entertainers—T-shirts, caps and mugs—and who wanted to expand his franchise. The result is a Barry Manilow scarf to be sold as part of his world tour.

In addition, a charity in Oakland that helps disabled adults signed up for a private edition, with the design created by one of the organization's clients.

www.sacredsilks.com

A visit to the Sacred Silks Web site is a fascinating experience. A great deal of additional information is available, and yet, being on the Web, it doesn't take away selling space (or cost money) in the paper catalog. For example, you'll find a brief history of silk, photographs of two bedrooms decorated with Sacred Silks products and complete information on how you can commission a silk accessory of your own.

Amazingly, Coppola has achieved success with just three other employees. Recently, she made a connection with a venture capitalist, so she is poised to expand for this coming holiday season. The Sacred Silks revenue breakdown across the various media is as follows:

- private-label sales, 34.3 percent;
- religious bookstores, 30.2 percent;
- catalog, 18 percent;
- wholesale (department and secular stores), 12.2 percent; and
- Web, 6.9 percent.

Coppola expects the ratios to change as she invests more in acquiring catalog and Web customers with her newfound venture capital. The lesson here for catalogers is to figure out how to hedge your bets by expanding your reach into other media and markets. The only potential income she has purposely passed up: Her list is not on the market for rental.

As a catalog entrepreneur, Angela Joy Coppola has touched all bases—and touched many hearts. Her goal is to have every religion in the world represented in her collection. One can only wish her Godspeed. ♦