

Nicholas Lodge

“My Professional Business Journey”

In my career of 42 years I have had several brands and companies. Starting in the UK with “House of Sugarcraft” where we designed and launched the first FMM plastic cutters in a pale peach color, and a line dusting powders. All under the “House of Sugarcraft” brand. The company colors were pink, grey and white with a bakery window awning style logo. All very fitting at the time, which was decided upon between the business partner and myself. This line did well with distribution around the world.

After several years with “House of Sugarcraft” I made the decision to permanently relocate and move to Atlanta, Georgia USA. This decision was over thirty years ago. At that time, I found it difficult to continue with a UK based and operated business. I never felt the collection or logo said, “Nicholas Lodge.” Of course, I was very young at the time. I was only 23 when I helped start “House of Sugarcraft” and if I knew then what I know now 35 years later, things would of course been quite different!

Next came “International Sugar Art Collection” (ISAC) started with Scott Ewing my partner. We were the first USA distributors of FMM, Patchwork Cutters, Holly Products, CelCakes and more.

We sold many collections of cake decorating related products, mostly from the UK. The collection related to the different companies’ products, all under one umbrella. At the time we were the first to carry all the main UK companies products in the USA, all available from one source. We started ISAC in collaboration with a retail cake decorating store and school called “Confectionary Yours,” located in Marietta, Georgia, close to Atlanta. I had been working with “Confectionary Yours” for a year before Scott and I started ISAC. Here we sold products both retail and wholesale through this operation and hosted classes there too. It was our base of operations and somewhere to store, pack and ship from, as well as teach classes, but without all of the responsibilities of having our own space. We paid a percentage of sales from the products and classes to the owners. This was a steppingstone in our business plan and something many people do in our industry, like host your classes or sell cakes through an already established business. The established business is responsible for the rent, payroll, insurance, security, upkeep and maintenance, etc.

Soon, we outgrew this arrangement and we rented a small apartment for the business. The kitchen was used for prepping for classes in making flower / gum paste, covering cake dummies and more. What would have been the living room was where erected shelving and we stored all of our inventory of products. The bedroom was storage space for all my teaching supplies. I would spend time there preparing for teaching trips all over the world, exhibitions and cake shows. We decided that we did not want the business to take over our house and keep it separate, which would prevent us from ever being able to escape from the “business.” The only part we had at home was the office that the formal dining room was converted into. This is where we would receive the orders, by telephone and at time, mostly via the fax machine. (LOL) Remember this was about 28 years ago, prior to the Internet, web sites online ordering, etc.

Scott would receive the orders from overnight and the morning and then make the five-minute drive to the apartment where he would pull the order, box it up and then take the completed orders to the post office or UPS station. During this time period we were actively looking for commercial space that was close by to lease.

After much searching, we began working with a commercial realtor (well worth it!) and found a 1,500 square foot space to move the business into. We were able to give up the apartment and regained our dining room and finally had everything under one roof! It was so exciting but also so scary at the same time, as it was now our responsibility to take care of many things including staff. Staff was and still is the largest business expense and often...the biggest headache of any small business! We have been very lucky with all of our amazing "Team ISAC" that we have brought onboard with us.

With ISAC we started small. When the opportunity presented itself eighteen months later, we took over another adjoining suite. Then another suite and another suite until we had over 7,000 square feet of space. This consisted of a total of four suites that featured a huge product retail gallery, my NL studio classroom, a second studio/classroom for hosting guest instructors, offices, photo studio, student's lunchroom, kitchen and warehouse. Plus 4 themed toilets/restrooms

Our lease was up in the spring of 2020. Due to the current world-wide health crisis we made the very difficult decision to eliminate some of the retail, office and warehouse space and downsize our operation a bit, which is proving to have been a very wise decision!

A business model should be a direct reflection of yourself or your business. I believe ours is just that! Each area within our building has a theme. The student lunchroom features an Italian theme with a Tuscan bakery themed toilet/restroom.

My NL branded themed classroom joins up with a English garden retail gallery and a cupcake and gingerbread themed toilets. Finally Studio B was decorated with fun, bright citrus shades of oranges and yellows with a French chocolate themed toilet. . (We have the most photographed restrooms! I come across photos of our restroom all the time while doing Google searches.) The reason for all of this work, effort and expense is to create a warm, friendly and inviting space were our student and customers feel relaxed and happy to be here.

Over the years, especially before we opened our present location, I traveled and conducted classes all over the world. But sadly, most cake decorating supply stores and classrooms were very boring spaces, most being painted in a pale blue color. I do not understand why, as it felt like to me that I was in a hospital waiting room. This is a space intended to learn creative sugar arts in. So, when we opened our own space, we set out to make it different in so many ways! For example, from the minute the student arrives. until they depart, everything is provided for them. Morning muffins, breads, orange juice, hot tea, coffee, unlimited iced tea, coffee, bottled water, and soft drinks throughout the day. A lovely lunch with homemade bread made by Scott

every day. And at 3:00 each afternoon, a tea break with warm out of the oven homemade cookies.

In the classroom students are provided with every single item needed to participate in the class is provide for them to use. It is these personal touches that put us at the top of a ultimate classroom experience. An experience that students from all over the world, from six continents, have enjoyed! (We are still waiting for a student to arrive from Antarctica!)

In 2017 we started to see a decline in walk-in customers, sadly due to Internet companies like Amazon. We found that many of our customers had started ordering cake boards, drums and boxes for the convenience of having it delivered direct to their home of business. Also, there is a global decline in students who desire to attend hands-on class sessions. For this reason, we decided to downsize our space. Starting in 2019 and completed in the spring of 2020. We now have half the space, but also half the rent and have made the space more efficient. My original classroom held 20 students and at one time all hands-on classes were full with a waiting list. The reality of today's classes is a smaller number of students. Now my teaching classroom comfortably accommodates 12 students. And is it generally believed in the crafting industry that 12 the new normal!

A business is constantly evolving and changing and must in order to survive. Now we realize most students want virtual classes. This makes me sad as I miss the contact and personal attention that I can give to each student. You can't learn everything online. Sadly, skills like piping, you can show, but can't teach, as I spend time with each student holding their hands, so they understand the pressure and angle that is needed to use, for superior results!

I hope one day soon students will appreciate the importance of a hands-on class experience and will return to the classroom, regardless of what it is they are attempting to learn. Be it cake decorating, sewing, cooking or furniture upholstery. For it is in the classroom where one can truly learn and hone their craft from the leaders and experts in their chosen fields.