



NICHE LEADER

# Merrypak

*'we care and it shows'*

The up-market end of packaging was unclaimed territory in South Africa until **Madeline Pate** saw an opportunity and set about creating niche leadership. **Colin Chinery** talks to the remarkable woman behind the success of Merrypak.

“You have to keep at it every day - you can't let your guard down.” Madeline Pate is talking about the exacting values that have taken her Western Cape business, Merrypak and Print into a lead position in the South African packaging sector.

“We are often asked what makes Merrypak so special? The simple response is ‘passion’ and a belief that customers are looking for a perfect product complimented by exemplary service.”

Based at Maitland, Cape Town, Merrypak designs, produces and sells carrier bags, boxes, packaging supplies, scrap booking and card-making products, craft supplies, wedding and party products and stationery. It is the largest selection in the Cape and very probably the country.

Merrypak carrier bags and packaging can be personalized, and paper carrier bags, boxes, wraps - and anything printed on paper or board - custom-made. There is no minimum order and short runs are a specialty.

## TOTAL RELIABILITY

Consultants provide assistance to anyone unable to visit its premises and goods are sent daily to destinations all over Southern Africa. Expert and honest advice are among Merrypak's core values. So too, best value for money and total reliability.

“It's about understanding the customer needs,” says Madeline, “and the customer need is for reliability. I always tell my staff – which has grown from five to 170 - ‘We make other people look good.’”

Merrypak began as a small commercial printing works in 1985, supplying an efficient printing service to small businesses and competing in a diverse market of large and small printers.

“We knew from the outset that we needed to offer something more than a good product. Customers' trust and respect were earned by simply listening, returning phone calls and

providing feedback.” Success followed, and along with it international awards

But by 1992 the sudden collapse of a major customer caused Madeline and husband Mike to diversify into the production of packaging – carrier bags, boxes and allied items. “I was going to do something that no one else was doing – the up market end of packaging. Nobody in South Africa then was making hand-made carrier bags. This was the first time they had been seen, and we did this with increasing success.”

Merrypak began positioning its product as a marketing tool, giving carrier bags an entirely new application. The response was overwhelming and in a short period larger premises were needed to meet the demand for customised products.

In 1995 the idea of a ‘Factory Shop’ was born and to house it 36 sq.m set aside in the middle of the factory. Fifteen years later the designated retailing space has grown to 1000 sq.m. “Each enlargement has been the direct result of requests from our customers for a wider range of allied products in addition to our original core products.”

## RETAILING WONDERLAND

Madeline's younger daughter Julie was involved at an early age, and when the business had established itself, her husband Mervyn joined the team, looking after and enlarging the premises, acquiring additional machinery and the performance and welfare for the growing staff compliment.





“Julie is truly gifted in product procurement for the large retail shop and has turned the small Factory Shop into a wonderland. She also looks after the marketing of the business and communicates with the public with the bright and informative news letter ‘Merry Mail.’

“We are a team of like minded dedicated people. Julie has started a policy of employing handicapped people who can be employed in some of the more routine packing procedures. She was also the inspiration for the free gym which we installed for the staff. They are entitled to have two sessions a week during working hours and it’s a great source of excitement for three quarters of the staff who use it regularly.”

Madeline Pate’s drive, creativity and enthusiasm seem inexhaustible. She has in herself become a brand, a very sharp knife in a distinctive box, and she will be 73 in December.

“I’m very fortunate. My second career started when I was 40 and I didn’t know I would have good health – and I have exceptionally good health. I put in a ten hour day every single day and it doesn’t faze me. And the most important thing that I would never have known is that I have an exceptional memory. If you’ve got all this there’s nothing to stop you is there?”

## ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

Aged 18 she left South Africa to work for Associated Television in London, composing adverts for the TV ‘breaks.’ She returned two years later but it was to be another nineteen years before television followed her to open in South Africa. She married, raised three children and didn’t resume a career until she was nearly 40. In this period she became a national sales director, and got divorced. “I knew I had to look after my future and myself and no one was going to do it for me. So yes an entrepreneurial spirit, but necessity is the description in my vocabulary.”

Madeline re-married, and with her second husband Mike, who had a printing background, looked to start a business – “something small because we couldn’t afford much.” They called it Merrypak - ‘Merry’ is the first part of Madeline’s nickname (she was born on a Christmas Day) “and as it turned out everybody thinks it’s the most appropriately named company ever.

“I have ended up as a packaging guru. I have experience, a certain entrepreneurial flair and a certain amount of creativity, and I’m able to bring these all together and help my

clients find the most appropriate solution to their packaging. Many packaging companies don't have that combination of capabilities."

## QUALITY EXPECTED AND DELIVERED

Long known as 'The House of Packaging', Merrypak is introducing another brand designation - 'Merrypak: We Care and it Shows.'

"We show it in every way we can; the way we answer the telephone, respond to e-mails, the fact that no one will wait for a quote more than 12 hours, keeping in touch, and our customers informed during production and despatch. It's these types of customer relationship elements of our behaviour which people notice. They expect quality and it is quality when it arrives. These are values that will stay for ever."

A successful business, says Madeline, will always have competitors. "They will set out to do what we have done and of course this has happened. What we have had to do is to smarten up. Market leaders have to do this otherwise they will die.

"What we have done over the years is to move away from the retail application of paper carrier bags in particular, and into the marketing and support of a brand. It might be a launch, an anniversary or a trade show. That's where we started to position ourselves, and in this field we have no competitors of any significance because we make sure we never let a customer down.

"We've never missed an event or a delivery, never delivered goods that are sub-standard in any way. And when you build a reputation with that level of reliability you succeed."

Green is signalling Merrypak's advance too, with the increasing production of cardboard version of popular products in demand. "The whole thing of eco-friendly has really fallen right into our laps. Plastic is almost like a swear word now."

And Merrypak is open to business from Britain. "We are ready for this growth, ready for the customised side of our packaging on a larger scale. So if there are potential

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## RECESSION A NO-GO TERM

In a recession market leaders must continue marketing, and with the pressure for faster turn round, Merrypak has responded has reacted by cutting typical lead times down from four or six weeks to closer to three. "Our experience and expertise has enabled us to fine-tune our production methods."

But for Madeline Pate, recession is a no-go term. "I don't even mention the 'R' word because we never experienced it. We have not retrenched one person and our turnover didn't even stagnate. We are still having the same increase month on month year on year that we have had throughout the growth of this business. I feel it's more to do with the human behaviour than even the product itself. At any rate we must be doing something right." **END**