

# Entrepreneur casts her line into the global marketplace

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BY [Tamarind Phinisee](#)

Titima Chantabhakdi Schwaerzel says she plans to expand her contemporary clothing line as a way to increase sales while at the same time contributing to a more stable economy for the women in villages in her native land of Thailand.

Her clothing line, Sassy Thai, is sold through her locally based exporting company called The Best of Thailand.

The Sassy Thai clothing line is best known for its jean outfits that are embroidered, have beaded appliqués, are painted or contain lacework. The line also includes silk clothing, crocheted tops, Thai-style sandals and jewelry to complement the jeans and jackets.

The Sassy Thai jeans, for example, are sold wholesale for between \$49 to \$139 and retail anywhere from \$79 to \$350.

"It depends on how the stores mark up the pricing," she says.

Today, the clothing line is sold at resorts and through other venues in the United States, Europe and South Africa and is currently retailed at more than 300 upscale boutiques.

In fact, some of Schwaerzel's clothing was worn by 2006 Miss Texas winner, Shilah Phillips, in the Miss America Homecoming held in Oklahoma earlier this year. The homecoming celebrated the return of the 2007 Miss America pageant winner, Lauren Nelson, to her home state. Phillips was the first runner-up and preliminary talent winner in the 2007 Miss America pageant.

The Sassy Thai clothing can be purchased in San Antonio at the Silver Spur, Texas Lady Boutique and Bubbles in the Tub stores and in New Braunfels at the Gruene With Envy store.

Don Ferguson, owner of locally based retailer Silver Spur, says customers are generally drawn to Schwaerzel's clothing line because of its one-of-a-kind appeal.

"Her line is very unique and the clothing is very well made. Everybody who comes here loves her clothing," Ferguson says.

In 2006, in the second year of production, sales for the clothing line exceeded \$1.6 million.

Her goal, Schwaerzel says, is to increase sales by 30 percent every year for the next few years.

Schwaerzel says she plans to do this by adding more clothing products like evening dresses and tops for special occasions under the Sassy Thai label and by continuing to operate as efficiently as possible.

Main objective

The success of her clothing line business, Schwaerzel says, is important because it provides steady work and fair wages to different groups throughout Thailand.

Schwaerzel works with a network of more than 1,000 individual handcrafters in Thailand. The garments are then assembled at a central location in Thailand before being sent to the United States for retail distribution.

Schwaerzel says because of this, the company's profit margin is small. Thai workers are paid per item made, she says. Their wages account for between 60 percent and 70 percent of the cost of producing the garments.

While Schwaerzel is trying to help smaller groups of workers in her native country, she says she also wants to work with some experienced mid-sized companies in Thailand to gain more knowledge about manufacturing and to be able to train the smaller groups she works with.

"Those companies usually don't do hand work, but they can produce a nice cut of tops and dresses, and we take them to villages to add hand-beading, embroidery etc.," she explains. "Since I'm Thai and they believe in my company's objectives, they are willing to help me with either small or large production."

Thai workers are paid either right before or right after finishing the products. In addition, the cost of materials, manufacturing and importing must be paid upfront by Schwaerzel.

She says The Best of Thailand is supported by resources and expertise from two other companies owned by herself, her husband, Roy, and a third partner, Terry Weakly.

These companies are nuMedia, a Web hosting, development and programming company; and a travel/tourism agency called Texas Tourism -- which markets San Antonio tourism packages.

A third company owned by Schwaerzel and her husband -- a computer consulting firm called WorldPost Technologies -- also lends money to The Best of Thailand on a short-term basis when needed.

She adds that she may look to the Thai government for additional financial support so that she "can extend our growth and help more groups" in Thailand.

Right path

The Best of Thailand, which was launched in 2003, started out by importing and selling accessories like jewelry, bookmarks and belts made by Schwaerzel's sister Grace Leelamane.

"We sell them to U.S. low- to medium- price boutiques that bought them from the shows and through the Web site," she says. "Only me and a secretary were doing the packing, shipping and customer service."

Schwaerzel says the company posted annual sales of about \$30,000 for the first and second year of operation -- just enough to pay her sister, show fees and operating costs.

"The margin was like \$2 to \$5 a piece, and we had to sell a lot of pieces to make money," she recalls. " ... I realized that to help poorer people, I had to go to a higher-end market and market to people who had more money and appreciated handwork."

This couldn't be done, she says, without the right connections and the right product. Schwaerzel says she noticed that boutique owners were able to relate to the audience she needed to attract.

"That's how I started the clothing line, to capture a higher-end market," she says.

Schwaerzel launched the clothing line Sassy Thai in 2005, debuting her clothing at trade shows in Las Vegas, Dallas and Atlanta.

Schwaerzel says her long-term goal is to increase notoriety of Thai brands as well as help other groups in Thailand that need help marketing their own products.