

## ***This zooz site is buns-on***



Jane Somerville has created a Web portal where Montreal's independent furniture retailers like Celadon Collection can showcase their collections online.

Photograph by : JOHN MAHONEY, THE GAZETTE

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In an unmarked loft four floors above the hippest strip of St. Laurent Blvd., artisan Erik Desprez creates beautiful furniture from gargantuan cuts of salvaged wood.

While his work is well known among connoisseurs and collectors - his pieces grace the Hotel St. Paul and Cirque du Soleil headquarters among other venues, reaching the broader public remains a challenge.

"I have my own web site," he said during a recent interview. "The problem is always the same: Maintaining the site and keeping it up to date is a time-consuming job."

Enter Jane Somerville and [zoozmontreal.com](http://zoozmontreal.com), the website she created to help independent furniture retailers showcase their products. Equally important, [zoozmontreal.com](http://zoozmontreal.com) is also a consumer-friendly tool to help harried home decorators zero in on a particular piece by item, room, style or a store's geographical location.

Somerville, a McGill University MBA and stay-at home mother of three, developed the idea after experiencing her own frustrations trying to find interesting, comfortable furniture for the family home.

"I saw a huge hole in the marketplace. Because of the way we live our lives, people with young families don't have time and they certainly don't have time to drive from store to store comparing sofas," Somerville said.

What started as a casual search for a local web resource eventually morphed into a start-up business. She began cold-calling many of the more than 200 independent furniture

retailers across the island. Somerville persuaded 30 of them to take a chance on her. Zoozmontreal.com went online in July. She now gets more than 100,000 individual hits a month.

Zooz is not a transactional site. You can check colours and dimensions on line and link to a store's website. To purchase an item you still have to visit the store. That's fine with Somerville's clients, who say that furniture shopping is a hands-on, or buns-on, experience. You can't tell whether a wing chair is comfortable unless you sit in it.

Zoozmontreal.com launched with 300 products, including Desprez's imposing pieces fashioned from century-old beams. He got his first bite in August when a New York designer contacted him after spotting his work on zoozmontreal.com.

The furniture maker is now crafting two double bed frames for one of the designer's U.S. clients, a five-figure commission. Next came orders for two dining room tables.

Another retailer, Roy Caro, a partner in Celadon Collection, said he was struck by Somerville's polite persistence.

"She wasn't discouraged when I said no the first time," Caro said. "She called back with more information and different ideas until I said yes. You have to admire that and that she believes so passionately in the idea."

His store, at the foot of Peel St., is well-known among design professionals. He doesn't need help selling exquisite imports to a discerning high-end clientele. The store has recently tripled in size to 9,000 square feet and with that expansion comes more popularly priced furnishings. Caro hopes listing on zoozmontreal will broaden his pool of buyers, especially now that he has exclusive rights to the popularly priced Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams furniture line.

"Knowingly or not, (Somerville) has zeroed in on a growing Internet trend, the local search," said Ken Evoy, an Internet entrepreneur whose sitesell.com helps small and home-based businesses harness the power of the Net as a sales tool.

"Local business people are the last great wave to come aboard, so the people who find a way to aggregate small interesting niche retailers have a chance to do well."

He cautioned that Yahoo! and Google are both devoting more attention to that part of the market.

Their breakthrough might be a few years away, but it is coming.

Somerville has a background in high-tech and e-commerce. She worked for the TD Bank and was involved in the launch of its web banking operations.

She later worked for Alis Technologies, a company that helps businesses internationalize their software so that it functions in different languages. She used her MBA training to prepare a solid business plan and then brainstormed with former Alis colleagues as she fine-tuned her site.

"A lot of these smaller retailers don't have the resources to advertise. Buying an ad in a glossy design magazine would attract the right eyes, but the shelf life isn't very long. An ad in a newspaper attracts more eyes, but you won't necessarily reach the specific clientele you want. The Yellow Pages give people your name, address and phone number."

She did an analysis of ad rates for various Montreal media, a useful tool when she went knocking on doors.

"My strategy was to position the pricing so that even smaller retailers can get into it," Somerville said. "We put them in the mix."

Retailers sign one-year contracts and pay about \$80 a month to list with her. Somerville gives them a password and the tools to easily update their images and product information. She also provides them with statistical information about how many hits their products get and which product categories are most popular.

She plans to expand the site by offering content like articles on decorating trends, new products and perhaps an ask-the-expert feature.

Eventually, she hopes to take the zooz brand - a word she chose because it is short, works backwards and forwards and in both languages - across Canada, with sites in Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver.

Again, Evoy thinks that is the right way to go. In his experience, too many e-retailers focus exclusively on building the best search engine at the expense of content building.

"It's about providing people with useful content so that you become the first place they look. You've got to make people like you and make the experience a lot of fun. That's the key to building a great Internet site."

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On the web: [www.zoozmontreal.com](http://www.zoozmontreal.com) [www.sitesell.com](http://www.sitesell.com)

<http://www.canada.com/montrealgazette/news/business/story.html?id=5f705641-612f-40d9-b7ac-c8938c8e60c3&k=38348>