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DOW Industrial	S&P 500	BOND 30 1/4-year treasury	BILL 1-year T-bill	DOLLAR In Yen
5,520.54	645.67	7.05%	5.80%	110.35
-83.11	-10.39	-0.02	-0.02	+0.05

The Star-Ledger

BUSINESS

FRIDAY, JULY 12, 1996

Card designers return to basic niche marketing

Competition holds no fear for entrepreneurs

By IRIS TAYLOR

Greeting cards are like old church hymns: You can jazz them up and change the words around, but it's the same old melody, according to Margaret E. Erving, co-founder of Jon-Mar Creations Inc. in Willingboro.

That's why she and her husband John didn't get nervous about starting a home-based greeting card business in a fiercely competitive industry dominated by giants Hallmark Cards Inc., American Greetings Corp. and Gibson Greetings Inc. A lot of small players litter the \$6.3 billion market, too.

Every day, entrepreneurs like the Ervings ignore the odds and open businesses in market areas where stiff competition sharply narrows their chance of success. Why do they do it?

The Ervings say they're confident their line will sell despite the stiff competition because it's basic and timeless, targeted to "regular people" in a strong niche market — the African-American community.

"We knew there were other companies providing products for this niche market, but we felt with our backgrounds, and from our research, we could provide a product that could muscle in on some of our competitors," said John. "I'm not afraid of putting my product up against someone else's. In this market, it's the end user that makes the determination whether you'll be successful or not."

Jennifer Singer of Kinnelon is learning a thing or two about start-



Photo by Jack S. Kanthal

John and Margaret Erving of JonMar creations design greeting cards from their home in Willingboro.

ing business in a highly competitive industry, too. She's been trying for nearly a year to get her column about Generation X — and more recently a cartoon with partner

Ann Haaland about home-based businesses — syndicated nationally.

"No one else is doing it, so why not me?" Jennifer asked. "Was I ready for the competition and

rejection letters? I'm used to riding the emotional roller coaster of being on my own."

Singer puts rejection letters from newspapers, magazines and syndicates into a file marked "Same to You." "It helps ease the pain of rejection," she said. "Every once in a while, I feel like giving up, but I don't. I know I have a unique way of writing about Generation X, which is still a hot market. I also know there's no cartoon about people who work from home, which is a rapidly growing market."

"This is America," said Rachel Bolton, spokeswoman for the \$3.4 billion Hallmark Cards. There were lots of greeting card companies when Joyce C. Hall traveled to Kansas City from his native Nebraska in 1910 with nothing but his high school diploma and a dream.

Now look at Hallmark — and its trendy "Shoebox" line of cards. Shoebox is just 10 years old, "but it is now the second most recognized brand behind Hallmark," said Bolton. "There's a fondness in our hearts for the American way."

If entrepreneurs insist on going into a competitive area, they should "find some niche that the dominating companies aren't offering," advised Patricia Green, an assistant professor at the Rutgers University School of Management in Newark. "Then, really understand that niche."

The U.S. Small Business Administration can help with that. It just opened a new high tech business information center in Newark. Entrepreneurs can log on to one of seven computers for free and research every aspect of the venture they're planning to start, then crank out a business plan.

Vincent D'Elia, assistant director of the Small Business Development Center at Bergen Community College in Paramus, said "most businesses, especially sole proprietorships and independent contractors, do not do enough market research. They don't do their home-

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Card designers return to niche

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work. They start with the attitude 'we'll run it up the flagpole and see who salutes it.' This doesn't work today," he said. "What people need to do is see what the market wants."

Jennifer Singer's strategy was to write an article every week, submit it to a top newspaper, then use the clips to help nail a syndicate deal. She got published in a few major newspapers and magazines. But rejection letters kept mounting and the syndicates wouldn't bite.

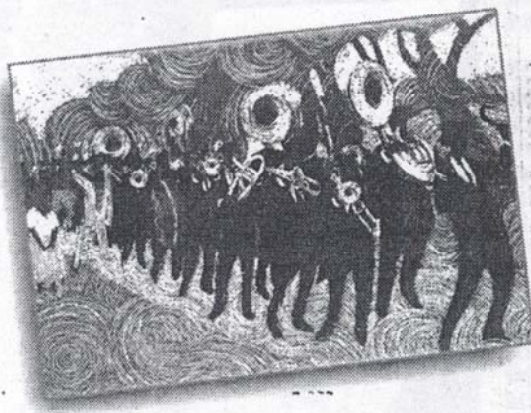
Well, no wonder. King Features, the world's biggest syndicate, gets more than

6,000 submissions annually. Two or three make the grade. Within five years, many features get canned for failing to find an audience.

Syndicates sell the work of artists and writers to newspapers nationwide. The revenue gets split between the syndicate and artist or writer.

When Ann Haaland of Dover proposed that they create a home-based business cartoon, Singer didn't know if she could handle more rejection. Yet, she agreed to give it a try "because I believe we have a great idea."

Singer said people working from home are 50 million and growing. "It is about time" for a cartoon about them, she said.



The Ervings' "Little Woolly" card, second from left, will compete in the lucrative African-American niche market with those, shown flanking it, produced by Hallmark Cards Inc. and American greetings.