

Los Angeles Times
BUSINESS

Thursday, February 28, 2008

latimes.com

\$90.02 ▼1.27 | NASDAQ 2,353.78 ▲8.79 | GOLD \$958.20 ▲12.10 | OIL \$99.64 ▼1.24 | EURO in dollars 1.512 ▲0.015 | U.S. T-BILL (6-mo.) 2.01% ▼0.04 | U.S. T-NOTE (10-yr



IRYAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

AMBITIOUS: Monica Hillman, left, and Gabrielle DeSantis-Cummings started Gigi Hill to offer a practical and stylish bag for soccer moms. The firm had \$85,000 in sales last year, mostly through home parties. The two aim to bring annual sales to \$25 million.

SMALL-BUSINESS MAKEOVER

Tote makers pack ambitious plans

Gabrielle DeSantis-Cummings and Monica Hillman are eager to expand their home-based firm smartly.

By **CYNDIA ZWAHLEN**
Special to The Times

It started with a \$10 tote. Soccer moms Monica Hillman and Gabrielle DeSantis-Cummings, passing the time on the sidelines at their kids' games, had been brainstorming ideas for a business they could run from home.

The conversation turned to Hillman's tote and their frustration over finding a decent bag that could handle a busy mother's needs. They wanted function. They wanted fashion. And they didn't want to mortgage the house to pay for the perfect combo.

"We kept looking at this bag and saying, 'There has to be a better way,'" says Hillman, 42.

They were convinced that women would

snap up a better bag, one that could haul soccer snacks in style as easily as beach towels, diapers or work files.

After a year of tinkering with samples, they launched Gigi Hill in mid-2006 from Hillman's Yorba Linda living room with \$5,000 in savings and \$23,000 in loans and investments from friends and family.

Today the company is turning a profit with \$85,000 in annual sales, and DeSantis-Cummings and Hillman are laying plans to recruit a national network of independent salespeople to sell their collection Tupperware-style at home sales parties. They're also wooing potential investors.

"If we can get an infusion of cash, we can anticipate our sales will grow," says Hillman, a former senior compensation analyst at Washington Mutual Inc.

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