



NessaLee Baby owner Vanessa Antonelli marries style, service, and Hollywood glam in her two New Jersey specialty stores.

Fashion-forward NessaLee Baby opens second Jersey store

BY JANE KITCHEN

VANESSA ANTONELLI IS NOT YOUR typical newcomer to the baby business who got into the industry after having children. Instead, her story started when she was fresh out of college and charged \$30,000 worth of Uggs on her parents' credit card.

When she was in college, Antonelli interned with a celebrity booking firm, but soon found that the late nights didn't agree with her. During her time in Hollywood, she noticed a few people wearing boots that she loved. Convinced they were the next hot thing, she was determined to get in on the action.

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“But Uggs wasn't opening any new accounts, so like any crazy 22-year-old, I bought \$30,000 worth of Uggs at retail on my parents' credit card,” said Antonelli.

Her investment paid off: for the next couple of months, as the demand for the hard-to-find trendy boots grew, Antonelli sold the Uggs on eBay for up to \$800 a pair.

“I decided that there was a market for things that celebrities were wearing,” she said.

So in 2003, she started a website, NessaLee Style, with a focus on selling products seen with celebrities. It soon became a full-blown business.

And soon after, NessaLee — named for a combination of Antonelli's first and middle names — grew naturally into the booming business of celebrity babies.

“It grew in ways I never thought was going to happen,” said Antonelli.

She spent a year operating both NessaLee Style and NessaLee Baby side-by-side, but soon realized that she couldn't do both, so made the decision to focus entirely on the growing baby business.

As part of that focus, Antonelli opened a brick-and-mortar store in Freehold, N.J. three years ago.

“Probably I was crazy at the time,” she said. “I never thought customers were going to come into my store, but I thought, ‘We'll have the space, the warehousing, and if they want to...’”

And want to they did. While Antonelli still operates the Website (complete with “search by celebrity” functionality), she finds that most of her

customers shop in the brick-and-mortar stores.

“A lot of our online sales are driven by people who have been in our store,” she said. “They're looking for this whole experience they get to get in the store that's different from anywhere else. A lot of our customers are luxury shoppers and they want that hand-holding.”

Things have been so successful in Antonelli's Freehold store that she recently opened a second location 45 minutes away in Livingston, N.J.

With both stores, Antonelli has focused on creating a welcoming environment that is truly designed and decorated.

“It's important to me that people walk into your store and say, ‘Wow, that's pretty,’” she said. “I mean, your store shouldn't be uglier than your house.”

NessaLee Baby also offers services and details not found at other stores.

Her Livingston store includes a stroller test track with multiple terrains — including a Manhattan sidewalk or the beach — so that customers can see how different strollers perform on the surfaces they'll be using most often.

Antonelli also offers stroller spa services, including a stroller peel or a car seat facial, and custom-

NESSALEE BABY AT A GLANCE

Owner: Vanessa Antonelli

Number of stores: 2

Location of stores: Freehold, N.J. and Livingston, N.J.

Years in business: 3

Square footage of stores: Freehold — 2,000; Livingston — 3,500 plus 1,000-square-foot classroom

Major furniture vendors: DucDuc, Spot on Square, Natart, MDB, Franklin & Ben, Monte, Babyletto, Nurseryworks

Major gear vendors: Orbit, Bugaboo, UPPAbaby, Baby Jogger, Mamas & Papas, Cybex, Nuna

Major bedding vendors: Oilo, Dwell, custom

Major feeding vendors: Life Factory, Boon, ZoLi, Beaba

Major glider manufacturers: Monte, Jennifer Delonge, Little Castle, Dutailier, Babyletto, Nurseryworks

Major mattress vendor: Nook

Major layette vendors: Little Hip Squeaks, Mish Mish, Baby Steps, Axl

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ers who buy gear from her store receive one complimentary cleaning in the first 12 months.

Customers who buy furniture from NessaLee Baby are offered nursery design at no cost, including a complimentary room drawing, and an on-staff artist can create custom canopies for strollers in designs like camouflage, plaid, or flowers.

Expectant parents who register at NessaLee Baby receive free or discounted classes at the store on subjects like stroller school, CPR and first aid, sleep training, car seats and music classes. Antonelli also hosts a dinner for expectant moms.

The classes have been so important to Antonelli's business that when she opened her Livingston store, she made room for a 1,000-square-foot classroom.

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NessaLee Baby has not lost its celebrity roots, either — pictures of celebrities using products are hung throughout the store to help customers in their product selection.

“It's not the most important thing, and obviously, we're the experts,” said Antonelli. “But celebrities have access to everything and get gifted everything under the sun, so if out of all those possibilities — when money is no object — they're choosing a product over and over again, that says something.”

For the grand opening of the Livingston store, Antonelli said she wanted to make a grand entrance. She partnered with Project Nursery so customers who made appointments in advance could have help from the famous design resource during the opening day.

And of course, Antonelli also pulled in a celebrity to help with the celebration. Courtney Lopez, wife of actor Mario Lopez, who is expecting her second child, made the trip for the store opening, and Antonelli said she was a perfect fit — approachable to customers, talking to them the whole time.

The first month of business in Livingston has been better than expected, said Antonelli, with a good, welcoming reception from area customers who had been waiting for the store to open.

Her next move is to expand the Freehold store, and after that, to take cues from her customers — and of course, to remember her roots and her knack for spotting a trend before anyone else. ■



WHAT'S IN STORE



MAMAS & PAPAS



ZOLI



FRANKLIN & BEN



NOOK