Customer Spotlight – The Sketchy Artist

April Ripka of The Sketchy Artist in Northfield is the SBDC’s customer spotlight for this quarter. April started the business in 2007 and is one of Northfield’s downtown business attractions. The Sketchy Artist is an art supply/gift boutique business.

I asked April a few questions about her business and here is what she had to say:

- **Question:** What made you want to start this type of business in Northfield?
  - **Answer:** Never did I think I would be owning my own shop, but I definitely had an urge to work for myself. The opportunity came to me out of the blue, but in an instant I knew it was the right move for me. Northfield is a great, supportive community and has had a successful and beloved art store for 28 years prior to me. It only made sense to continue with the legacy – but as a new store with new character. I’m so lucky to be doing what I do in the city I am in. Honestly, I feel The Sketchy Artist works in Northfield because it’s Northfield. It’s a unique city and no other place would embrace this store as much as it does. We’re a good fit.

- **Question:** What influence did your parents have on your decision to be a business owner?
  - **Answer:** They were supportive, as they have always been my whole life. I couldn’t have done anything without them. My mother became a silent partner, helping me initially to find resources (such as the SBDC!) and today continues to do the bookkeeping. My father helped build a lot of shelving and still likes to stop in and help out with random maintenance jobs. Even my siblings like to help out. I am very grateful for my entire family for their ongoing support.

- **Question:** How do you pick your products to sell?
  - **Answer:** Mostly instinct. The rest is a combination of what I like, quality, price-point, knowing my customers, the uncommonness of a line/product, and what makes sense for the store’s personality/genre. I feel knowing what you want your store to be (what kind of things you want to carry, what you don’t, the look and feel, etc.) makes a lasting impression on customers. They ‘get’ your store. And I don’t care if something is a trend or a best-seller in other stores; if it doesn’t make sense in my shop then it doesn’t belong on my shelves.

- **Question:** Over the last seven years in business, how has your market/consumer changed?
  - **Answer:** I don’t feel it’s changed as much as grown when it comes to customers. The biggest chance in the market has been an increase in online stores. Having to compete with their convenience, larger selection and prices has been a challenge. Brick and mortar shops struggle with this on a daily basis – small business in general – so I feel it’s important to concentrate on the customer service I provide, as well as the ambiance of the store. I strive to remind people just how unique the experience can be in a small shop vs big box/online retail.

- **Question:** What was your biggest mistake that you have made with your business?
  - **Answer:** Nothing has been a big mistake. There are always struggles and something new to learn, finding something could be done a different/better way, etc. but every time I sign up under a merchant service for credit card processing I feel like I made a big mistake!

- **Question:** How did the SBDC help your business?
  - **Answer:** The first couple of years the SBDC was essential in giving us financial guidance, securing our loan and meeting with us quarterly to make sure we were on the right track, which was essential for someone who didn’t know what they were doing! Rick Indrelie still continues to check in with us and is always there if/when we have questions or need further advice. Always a great feeling to know we have such a fabulous resource to turn to!

Please go to The Sketchy Artist website at [www.thesketchyartist.com](http://www.thesketchyartist.com) or visit them in downtown Northfield at 300 Division Street South.