

TOP 50 WOMEN IN BUSINESS

Volk took her product from markets to national chains

By Erika Martin
Staff Writer

Even if life hadn't given Lori Volk lemons, she likely would have still found a way to make lemonade.

And right now, with the state in the depths of a four-year drought, lemons have become somewhat scarce — along with other ingredients in Volk's ginger-and lavender-infused bottled beverages sold under the Lori's Original Lemonade label. But the buoyant Volk overcame the challenge, doubling business over the last year.

"We're tied to the ranchers and Mother Nature — things I hadn't thought about," Volk said. "It's just making us stronger. We'll always find a way, that's just what I do."

In fact, Volk said she has become connected with even better sources than before.

The supply pressures have also pushed Volk to strengthen the company's values.

Despite a thinning supplier pool, the drinks remain certified organic, "and that's my goal — to always be that — and then beside that no additives or no preservatives, nothing artificial," she said. "We wanted to keep it like you could make it in your kitchen. We don't want something introduced that you would have to buy out of a lab."

Instead of going into damage-control mode, Volk has responded to supply pressures by putting on her problem-solving hat.

"The secret is that it's not going to get easier. You just have to get better at being able to handle the things that are thrown your way," Volk said. "I think you gain confidence each time you have to overcome a major challenge."

The company will bottle the first test run of a new lemongrass-flavored lemonade on April 2. The beverage will have only 40 calories and 9 grams of sugar per serving, significantly less than

the current line.

"This one is really light and refreshing because the lemongrass really brightens up the lemon somehow, and we're sweetening it with a little organic cane sugar and organic stevia" Volk said. "The blend is really nice, so there's no stevia aftertaste."

Although customers are clamoring for a plain flavor, Volk said lemongrass was the closest she could bring herself.

"We're looking for adventurous customers, and I hope we're going to find them," Volk said. "It's out of the ordinary and off the beaten path because it's kind of like me."

Indeed, Volk, a 52-year-old mother of three, has taken the road less traveled to funding her kids education. Originally, Lori's Original Lemonade was the main ticket, but once Volk realized the lengths to which she could take her small startup, she and her husband sold their Ojai home and moved into a sailboat in Ventura Harbor.

"In the beginning, I started this as a way to pay for college. I was desperate, but then I realized I didn't need the house," Volk said. "I figured, the fewer expenses we had personally, the more I could be free to create this company. The house was just too much, it was bogging us down. So I live in a boat and I sleep



Lori Volk, founder of Lori's Original Lemonade, will be expanding her business through 31 additional locations.

in a bunk." Her oldest two children have now graduated, while the youngest has just one more year to complete.

Instead of taking money out of the business for college, Volk can now invest it back into growth. She's now concentrating on bringing in the right team members and building the Lori's brand. So far, the company has five employees, as well as a number of contractors to who showcase the beverages at trade shows across the country.

Lori's Original Lemonade will soon

be offered in 31 additional locations — 13 Vons, Albertsons and Safeway stores throughout the Tri-Counties as well as all 18 Gelson's Markets locations. Next, Volk hopes to tackle Northern California, where the company already has a presence in Santa Cruz, and the San Diego area.

"Every day is a challenge. I wake up and I get to do it all over again," she said. "It's just a huge puzzle and I need to work through the pieces and get them connecting properly."