

Small Business of the Month: Russian Pointe

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by Susan Caminiti.

In our latest installment of SBC's monthly small business feature, we meet Aleksandra Efimova, founder and president of [Russian Pointe](#), a ballet shoe, apparel, and accessories company with headquarters in Chicago. In a recent interview with business writer Susan Caminiti, Efimova speaks about coming to the U.S. as a teenager, how she started Russian Pointe, and why running her own business is a dream come true.

SC: What brought you to the United States as a young girl?

AE: My mother was an art teacher in Russia and she was invited to the U.S. to teach art to kids for a few months. She was divorced from my dad, and while traveling here she met her future husband—my stepdad—who is American. I was only 15 [in 1993] and not old enough to stay in Russia so I moved with them. I always dreamed of America as the land of opportunity and I did want to come here, but moving from St. Petersburg to Ann Arbor, Michigan was a major shock. I went from being in a private art and dance school in Russia to a public school and I didn't speak any English.

SC: How did you deal with that kind of culture shock?

AE: I was young and you just deal with things one day at a time. I knew I wanted to be in America, so when you have a dream and a vision you just handle the challenges and difficulties that get in the way.

SC: Where did the idea for Russian Pointe come from?

AE: I was attending Eastern Michigan University, studying international business and marketing. I would go back to Russia a few times a year and on one visit I met some cobblers that were making ballet shoes for the Bolshoi Ballet there. They were looking for distribution of pointe shoes in the U.S. and had made a few unsuccessful attempts. At the time, I was 20 years old and was doing some modeling at the auto trade shows in Detroit. I felt like I was not really developing my talents in international business that way. So I figured, what do I have to lose? I'll sell some ballet shoes out of my dorm room for a couple of years and help put myself through school.

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Aleksandra Efimova, founder and president, Russian Pointe

SC: Did you do any research before you started?

AE: No, not really. I didn't have any money, connections, or business experience. You can read all the books on marketing, advertising, and selling, but doing it in real life is very different. The shoes were made in Russia and I'd get a couple hundred pairs a month and would go to local schools and stores to sell them. My whole marketing pitch was, 'Hi, I'm from Russia and I have Russian ballet shoes and they're really good because Russian ballerinas are really good.' That was my whole sales pitch. Now when we sell our products to retailers or from our website we talk about the product features, the marketing plan, the safety of the shoe, the performance of the shoe. It's so much more developed.

SC: When did you realize you could really build a business from this idea?

AE: I graduated from college in 2000. That's when I had to make a choice—do I apply for a job or keep building what I started? I had been on my own for two years with Russian Pointe and already had a couple of part-time employees. When you work for someone else, you have to work within their dream and vision. With my business, I design my own vision.

SC: Once you decided to pursue this full time, what changes did you make?

AE: One of the big things I realized early on was that to keep the brand image high in the consumer's eyes, we should not allow discounting. Other brands got hurt when the retailers would discount their product. I didn't want that to happen to Russian Pointe so we make sure retailers know there is no discounting of the product.

SC: Did retailers like this?

AE: They actually were happy about it. It gives them confidence that if they carry the product, the customer will come back to them because they're not going to get it cheaper anywhere else. It also makes the retailer compete on something other than price. They have to be good with product knowledge and customer service

SC: What percentage of your business is done with retailers vs. online?

AE: We have about 400 retailers in the U.S. that sell our products and that accounts for about 75 percent of our sales. The rest is from online sales. We are in the midst of giving our website site a major facelift to really drive e-commerce. Our customers who are between the ages of 12 and 18 are really comfortable buying online. We want to make our whole social media presence more compelling and make Russian Pointe products part of their life. We really want to be the authoritative voice in the industry. And we're getting there. Our sales are up 23 percent so far this year.

SC: Fit is so crucial with pointe shoes. How do you accomplish that if your push is to have more business come from online sales?

AE: In addition to the pointe shoes we sell accessories and educational products and none of these products have to be fitted as strictly. Those are easy gift items customers can buy. With pointe shoes, we strongly suggest that everyone gets fitted the first time at a local retailer. Then additional shoes can be ordered online if the size hasn't changed. We also have educational materials online that give great info about the proper techniques for fitting.



BUSINESS: RUSSIAN POINTE
OWNER: ALEKSANDRA EFIMOVA
Website: www.russianpointe.com
Address: 1500 W Cortland Street
Chicago, IL 60642
No. of Employees: 15
Price range of pointe shoes:
\$55 to \$88

SC: You graduated from Harvard Business School's Executive/Owner Management program in 2010. What's the biggest takeaway from your time there?

AE: Probably the biggest thing I took away was the ability to recognize that my role as the leader of this company is to create a vision for the brand, and to communicate that vision to my team, customers, and suppliers. Also, I learned how important it is to set clear goals and priorities for the 15 people who work for me.

SC: So we have to ask: as someone who sells ballet shoes, do you still dance?

AE: At this point in my life, I like other activities. I go hiking in the Grand Canyon, and I love to bike and sail. I think I need a break from dancing.