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Section: BUSINESS

THE NEXT BIG THING?

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Shamoli Patel, an electrical engineer often too busy to cook dinner for her children, came across a newspaper article two years ago about a new concept called the meal-assembly business.

To Patel, it sounded like the perfect antidote for time-starved people who longed for home-cooked meals. They could visit a store and prepare a week's worth of dinners in less than two hours.

Rather than try it as a customer, though, Patel went a step further. She opened her own store, Super Suppers, in Marlboro. "It seemed like the right opportunity," Patel, 43, of Freehold Township, said.

Patel is one of at least four entrepreneurs in the Monmouth-Ocean area since the beginning of 2006 who have latched onto a novel idea and opened a meal-assembly business. In doing so, they hope it will not only resonate with consumers, but also have staying power as a business for the long term.

For entrepreneurs, lining up behind a good idea is an inherent risk of owning a business. Are they truly getting in on the ground floor of a trend that will catch on, like McDonald's in 1948 or Starbucks in 1971? Or will consumers, with their notoriously short attention spans, tire of the idea and desert them?

"You have companies that (transcend) the trend, and it no longer becomes a trend, but a part of society," said Justin M. Klein, a lawyer who specializes in franchising for Marks & Klein in Red Bank. "That's part of the mystique of getting in on the ground level."

The idea of a meal-assembly business has been compelling enough to attract a contingent of entrepreneurs. They include Super Suppers, Suzanne's Kitchen in Eatontown and Entree Vous in Marlboro. The owners have spent upwards of \$35,000 each for a franchise, not including equipment or rent.

A fourth company, Simply Dish in Middletown, is independently owned. But co-owner Margot Meahan said the company is selling its own franchises and plans to open stores in

Wall and Brick.

The owners tapped into an industry that began in Seattle in 2002. Since then, it has grown to more than 1,200 stores nationwide, and the industry anticipates sales to reach \$504 million this year, twice as much as last year, according to the Easy Meal Prep Association in Cheyenne, Wyo.

Ellen Ades, co-owner of Suzanne's Kitchen, pointed to two reasons for the explosive growth:

Parents, tired of fast-food, take-out and eating at restaurants, would rather sit down with their family at the dinner table. They can stop at a meal assembly store for an hour or two and prepare a healthy dinner that will last several days.

Technology has made the industry efficient enough to operate profitably. Ten years ago, owners would have needed to hire workers to keep track of orders and inventory, making the cost prohibitive. Now, they can do it online, she said.

"This is the birth of an industry based on the technology out there and the need," Ades, 56, of Ocean Township, said.

Whether consumers flock to meal-assembly businesses, however, is another matter.

Consumers may try it once or twice, but if they lose interest, it runs the risk of turning into a fad — an idea that takes hold in popular culture for a year or two, then disappears, said Ira Mayer, president of EPM Communications, a New York company that researches consumer trends.

Fads often are associated with products such as pet rocks, mood rings and the Rubik's Cube, but they also can afflict businesses that don't adapt to their customers' desires.

Atkins Nutritional Inc., a company that made millions from the low-carb Atkins diet, filed for bankruptcy in 2005 after the diet fell out of favor. It since has emerged from bankruptcy with a business plan that focuses on nutrition instead of dieting.

"Is it a novelty factor that's going to wear off, or is there a long-term factor?" Mayer said.

"I think that's the issue."

Indeed, the business landscape is littered with ingenious ideas that have been supplanted.

Rotisserie chicken, laser tag and frozen yogurt all have enjoyed the spotlight — briefly.

These days, Heelys Inc. manufactures wheeled sneakers, which sold so well that the company went public last year. Will those shoes catch a cultural wave, like skateboards, and last for 20 years? Or will they become like scooters — here today, gone tomorrow?

Mona Doyle, president of The Consumer Network Inc., a consumer research company in Philadelphia, said ideas with staying power connect with social changes and are so appealing to consumers they become repeat buyers.

Bagged salad has saved families immeasurable time, she said, but it no doubt would have flopped if the lettuce wilted as soon as it left the store, sending consumers back to the produce department.

"We've been moving toward prepared food for a long time," Doyle said. "Very few people now really cook from scratch. Even then, you use convenient ingredients — a previously shaped hamburger and open a bag of salad. We've been moving toward convenience."

The meal-assembly business may be a trend whose time has come, but will it last?

As with any business, there are hurdles ahead. The owners said it has been difficult to easily explain their business to the mass market, which makes it tough to convince them how it will improve their lives significantly.

And some owners said they already are tweaking the idea. Suzanne's Kitchen, for example, typically asks customers to sign up in advance, but Ades said she recently set aside 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. for walk-in customers to help her capitalize on consumers who make last-minute decisions.

"It certainly is something that is emerging," Doyle said. "Is it a trend that's really going to hang in there? I think it is going to be around and is going to be refined. . . . (But) I'm not sure this is going to replace take out."

The local entrepreneurs, however, think the odds are good that the idea will last.

Anissa Berger, 37, of Marlboro, opened the latest entry to the marketplace, Entree Vous, last month. She said she first heard of the idea after she gave birth to her son; nurses told her to test out a meal preparation store to help her save time.

The idea struck a chord. She could imagine how many other parents want to eat a home-cooked meal with their children, but don't have time. So she and her husband, Gary, decided to open the business.

"I think most ideas have been done to death," Berger said. "If you wanted to start your own business and start a Subway or a restaurant, it's all been done. This hasn't been done. I think I'm getting in on the ground floor of something that will be big."

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