Building A Better Mailbox

WHEN Vanessa Troyer and Chris Farentinos first hit on the idea that would change their lives, they were thinking big — a little too big, actually.

“It was a mail receptacle/guest house,” Mr. Farentinos jokes, describing an oversized, locking mailbox nicknamed the Elephant Trunk.

His wife agrees. “It was big enough to fit a small family,” Ms. Troyer recalls of their contraption, which the couple invented in 1998 to accept delivery of large packages and to keep the parcels safe and dry, no matter how long homeowners were away.

Back then, they were driven by the belief that as Americans ordered more and more merchandise online, particularly bulky computers, the Elephant Trunk would become a must-have item. It might have happened, too, except that while Mr. Farentinos and Ms. Troyer were still tinkering, the flat screen was born. Before the Elephant Trunk could even be tested and brought to market, its main reason for being — microwave-size computer monitors — became obsolete.

You might wonder why Ms. Troyer, 45, and Mr. Farentinos, 43, can giggle about this. Here’s the answer: From the ashes of their failed experiment arose two smaller products — the Oasis and the Oasis Jr. — that have put their company, Architectural Mailboxes, on the map.

Their smallest locking curbside model is available at Costco.com, Target.com, Lowe’s and about half of Home Depot’s 1,300 stores in the United States. To date, the couple estimates that they’ve sold more than 150,000 of their newfangled, secure letter drops, which cost $79 to $258. They expect to sell 50,000 more this year.

This mom-and-pop success story — the owners qualify because they have two daughters — seemed the perfect way for me to kick off this monthly column about summoning creativity to achieve innovation.

It is often said that there are no new ideas, but Ms. Troyer and Mr. Farentinos turned that cliché inside out. By correctly anticipating how the high-tech future would change the way we shop, they updated one of the most low-tech items around: the repository of snail mail, the trusty mailbox. Along the way, they responded to a growing concern — identity theft — that established mailbox suppliers had failed to address.

“Identity theft was at the top of consumers’ minds. And the mailbox industry was dominated by some large players that just didn’t have an answer for it,” says Rhys Jones, the Home Depot executive who first stocked the Oasis line in 2005 because it met “a need we needed met.”

What was so special about an Oasis? Well, for one thing, thieves couldn’t get their hands past its patented Hopper door — a hinged opening that functions much like those on the Postal Service’s big blue mailboxes. Also, it wasn’t ugly.

“Typically, some of the best innovations come from the small guys,” says Mr. Jones. “They’re more willing to take a risk and they see things that others don’t.” The Oasis was “safe and secure, aesthetically pleasing, do-it-yourself friendly and a great price for the value.”

Oh, and it had something else: a pitchwoman who was unwilling to hear the word no. “Vanessa,” Mr. Jones notes, “is very passionate about her product.”

Ms. Troyer, who handles marketing for the company, first buttonholed Mr. Jones at a trade show. She’d been trying to get into Home Depot for months when he walked by her booth.

“I saw the orange lanyard all the Home Depot people wore, and ran up to him,” she recalls. (This is a signature move for her: she introduced herself to her husband of 20 years in much the same way.)

Mr. Jones recalls that when Home Depot first agreed to test the Oasis Jr. in 50 stores, Ms. Troyer helped pick the locations — she had kept her own records of where the product had sold best. “She knew what consumers wanted,” he says, “and where.”

Consider, too, the way she typed the name of Jeff Bezos, the founder and C.E.O. of Amazon.com, into Google and clicked through 58 pages until she found his phone number. She called and, saying that she wanted to send Mr. Bezos a birthday card, also got his address.

Mr. Farentinos created a detailed PowerPoint presentation showing how much money Amazon lost when its packages were stolen or returned because customers lacked a lockable mailbox. They sent Mr. Bezos the analysis along with an Oasis Jr., writing “A birthday gift for Jeff” on the FedEx label.

A day after the “gift” arrived, an Amazon employee called. The site sold its first Architectural Mailboxes product in January 2006, and it now carries more than 140.

“Amazon helped legitimize us,” says Mr. Farentinos, an engineer who designs the company’s products, which now have a range of competition from other companies. Before becoming a mailbox mogul, he designed baseball bats for Easton Sports and had quality control and management roles at Mattel.

As he spoke, he stood in his company’s 23,000-square-foot warehouse in Compton, Calif., which is crammed with curbside and wall-mountable mailboxes in every imaginable color and finish. While Necessity may indeed be the Mother of Invention, the experience of Ms. Troyer and Mr. Farentinos proves that invention also needs an occasional assist from what we’ll call its two eccentric Aunts: Flexibility and Perseverance. The couple had the flexibility to ditch the Elephant Trunk and the persistence to get the attention of the nation’s largest retailers. (Thank you, Uncle Jeff.)

“We knew we were laying new pipe — most people’s image of a mailbox is a bread-box shape,” says Ms. Troyer, noting the importance of Amazon’s endorsement to the company’s success.

As for Mr. Bezos, she acknowledges: “I still don’t know when his birthday actually is.”
WHEN asked how the Elephant Trunk, a large, lockable mailbox, got its name, Vanessa Troyer laughed and rolled her eyes. You could tell she had been asked the question many times.

“The name Elephant Trunk came about just because the Elephant Trunk can hold a lot,” Ms. Troyer, 48, said recently, sitting in a conference room at Architectural Mailboxes, the company that she and her husband, Chris Farentinos, 45, run in Redondo Beach, Calif. “It was as big as a baby elephant” — and not just its nose.

That, it turned out, was a problem. Back in 1999, when she and Mr. Farentinos dreamed up the Elephant Trunk, it was designed to be large enough to hold the television-size computers that people were ordering as e-commerce began to take off. But while it was still in prototype, flat-screen computer monitors came along, defeating its purpose.

“It was deflating,” Ms. Troyer said. “All this time and money and energy had been wasted.”

If Ms. Troyer did not sound all that deflated, it’s because the Elephant Trunk is back — in a slightly modified form. Now more the size of a baby panda, it is being introduced in 157 Home Depot stores around the country in a three-month test run. Mr. Farentinos, a former designer of baseball hats, says he wants it to become a “lifestyle product” that no household can do without. Just as everyone has a mailbox for snail mail, he hopes that everyone will soon have an Elephant Trunk for home-delivered packages.

The couple were featured in this column in 2010 for the Oasis, a lockable mailbox for regular mail that they started selling when the Elephant Trunk fell through. Their story shed light on how an idea can be as dependent on timing and adaptability as anything else.

Even after showing the Elephant Trunk into the proverbial drawer, the couple were convinced that it would eventually see the light of day; it was just a matter of when. Sure, computers had become skinnier, but more and more people were shopping online for a wide range of products, and they often were not home to accept the packages.

Beyond the annoyance of coming home and finding those packages “behind a planter,” Ms. Troyer said, or wet from the rain, there was the danger of parcel theft.

Still, when they floated the idea of a mailbox for packages, the response from retailers was, “I think it’s too soon for that,” Ms. Troyer said. “They’d say, ‘I don’t get it. It’s too big.’” Mr. Farentinos said. The couple, who have been married for 23 years and business partners for 11, often finish each other’s sentences.

But as the years went by, and online retailing became ever more pervasive — 157 million United States consumers now shop online, according to a report by Forrester Research — the idea of a safe place to store deliveries seemed more of a no-brainer. Amazon.com is experimenting with a service that lets shoppers have their purchases sent to metal lockers, much like post-office boxes, that are set up in convenience and other stores.

Last year, good timing was compounded by luck when Ms. Troyer and Mr. Farentinos met with Theresa Graham, a merchant for the hardware category at Home Depot. As they chatted, Ms. Graham explained that she was a working mother who often came home to boxes strewed all over the porch. She said to Ms. Troyer and Mr. Farentinos: “You know, what I’d really like to see is not a mailbox, but a parcel drop.” Ms. Troyer recalled.

“Chris and I looked at each other and our eyes lit up. It was like, O.K., it’s Chris Farentinos and Vanessa Troyer with some of their revised “Elephant Trunks,” intended for safe home deliveries of packages.

time.”

Yet even with a green light, the Elephant Trunk needed some tweaking. For one thing, it was much too big, measuring 3 feet by 3 feet by 3 feet. But what was the proper size? “The constraint was how willing people are to put something like this on their front porch,” Mr. Farentinos said. “We wanted to make it big enough to accommodate almost anything, but we also wanted to make it, at least out of the chute, something that would not be so obtrusive that they would be resistant to using it, and also not cost-prohibitive.”

After researching what types of items people most often buy online — the answer was clothing — the couple began experimenting with different dimensions, setting on a model that is narrower and less deep than the original “E.T.” as Ms. Troyer affectionately called the Elephant Trunk. They also modified the original design so that now it can accept multiple deliveries.

Another hurdle was persuading a major parcel carrier to deliver to the Elephant Trunk. Ms. Troyer spent months trying to contact executives at United Parcel Service via LinkedIn.

“I’d search, search, search, find their e-mail and send them our presentation,” she said. “I’m an online stalker! That’s what I’ve turned into.”

In the end, no stalking was necessary. Through Ms. Graham, a meeting was set up with U.P.S., which agreed to deliver packages to the Elephant Trunk if residents provided instructions to do so.

The product “satisfies a growing need to provide a secure drop location of parcel deliveries,” Ms. Graham said. “No one wants their purchases left out in plain sight.”

Ms. Troyer and Mr. Farentinos are already envisioning different types of Elephant Trunks for the future — say, for apartment dwellers, or for people who might actually want a bigger mailbox.

“We call her Mama E.T. She’s going to have babies,” Ms. Troyer said, smiling as she patted an Elephant Trunk next to her on the floor. “There’s going to be more.”