



MARCHA LABS Wool Wax Creme



Hands. Montanan's hands provide livelihoods for their families. They fix things, build things and work in all kinds of weather, including sun, rain, and snow. The hands of a working man or woman may be calloused and scarred from past or current injuries. Even the toughest hands may suffer from chapped, cracked and bleeding skin. According to WebMD, hand distress is often caused by a lack of moisture in the skin. This cannot be helped by drinking water. Instead, a moisturizer applied directly to the skin helps keep water from evaporating and provides relief. Recommended ingredients for good moisturizers include natural or synthetic emollients (non-cosmetic moisturizer) and humectants (preserves moisture). Natural emollients include lanolin, an oil found in sheep

wool. One of the byproducts of washing the wool fleece when flocks of sheep get their annual spring haircut, lanolin is also called wool wax because it is a very thick oil. While petting a lamb at the county 4-H fair is a quick way to soften dry hands, it is not convenient to take a lamb wherever you go. One Montana company has a more practical solution for distressed hands. Marcha Labs is on the Devlin family ranch, more than 30 miles northwest of Terry, Montana (about 200 miles east of Billings). Marcha Labs uses lanolin to make Wool Wax Creme, a skin care product designed to relieve rough and dry skin problems.



History of Marcha Labs

Marcha Labs was originally founded by Margaret Harrison in Pasco, Washington, and is currently owned by Ron Devlin. The Devlin family's first involvement with Wool Wax Creme was when Ron's mother, Isabelle, sold the creme as a fundraiser for the Montana Wool Grower Women. Isabelle Devlin purchased the company from Harrison when she retired in the early 1990s. Ron worked with his mother and bought the business from her in 1998. When Ron was elected to the Montana legislature in 2000, he reached out to friend Eileen Terhaar who wanted a career change from working in the Miles City school system. Terhaar moved to the ranch where she continues to run the business. She is assisted in the daily operations of making Wool Wax Creme by friend and neighbor Ellen Franko. Terhaar and Franko mix Wool Wax Creme about 80 days of the year, roughly seven days per month, except April when they take off for calving. They can produce about 42 gallons, or 600 nine-ounce containers in a day. When not making the product, Terhaar takes and fills customer orders, orders supplies, breaks down the bulk-packaged ingredients into batch-ready quantities, ships products and keeps the books. Devlin services the equipment. Wool Wax Creme is sold nationally and is currently listed as an "Amazon's Choice" product for being highly rated, well priced and available to ship immediately.

Challenges of a Rural Small Business

One of the biggest challenges facing Marcha Labs is being so far in the country. During a tough winter, the roads are blown shut with snow from time to time, delaying orders and making it difficult to find temporary help. Most of the bulk supplies to make Wool Wax Creme cannot be shipped directly to Marcha Labs and are instead shipped to Billings. In addition, it's getting harder to source supplies such as lanolin as suppliers get bigger. Many times, when a supplier changes hands, the Devlins receive a letter thanking them for their patronage but informing them that they are too small to continue doing business with. There is always something new to learn when operating a business. Accepting credit card payment, putting bar codes on products, and responding to insurance requests are some examples of changes that Devlin has made over the years. To sell to Canadian customers, Marcha Labs was NAFTA certified with the U.S. Department of Commerce.

It's About the People

Devlin says Marcha Labs has been very fortunate to find excellent employees over the years, even with the distance to the ranch. Both Devlin and Terhaar appreciate the people who work for them and enjoy their hard work and company. Devlin said his first tendency was to stand over his employees and tell them step by step what he wanted done. Over time, however, he found it was more effective to train the employees, then give them a set of expectations and walk away. While this was hard to do, he says empowering his employees to do their job has more positive results. Made in Montana Wool Wax Creme is recognized a "Made in Montana" product. The "Made in Montana" label represents hardworking Montanans like the Devlins, whose goal is to make a unique product.

For more information about Marcha Labs or Wool Wax Creme, visit marchalabs.com. ■

Ellen Franko, left, and Eileen Terhaar, right.



ADVICE TO HOME-BASED BUSINESS OWNERS

SHOW UP FOR WORK. Terhaar recommends having defined hours when customers know they can reach you. She and Devlin seldom go to town together because they feel it's important for someone to answer the phone when a customer calls.

CROSS TRAIN. Terhaar stresses the importance of making sure you cross train others to perform job tasks. Then, when the unexpected comes up, there are others familiar with the task and business operations can continue.

MONITOR COSTS AND PRODUCTION. Devlin's agriculture background serves him well on the production side of the business. Farmers and ranchers are used to making more with less, looking for equipment to improve efficiency, and buying in bulk. Also, a business' reputation is built through supplying a consistent, quality product that meets the consumer's needs, whether it be Wool Wax Creme or calves sold from the ranch.

SEEK ADVICE. A fellow business owner told Devlin that as much time should be spent on marketing as on production. Devlin buys into that philosophy, but personally finds it to be difficult to spend more time on marketing than on product production.

CUSTOMER SERVICE IS IMPORTANT. Devlin and Terhaar pride themselves on promptly responding to customers and servicing their needs. They understand that word of mouth is the most powerful tool they have to make their company successful and a unique quality product keeps customers coming back for more.