

WELCOME TO THE FAMILIA

AN EXPLOSION OF MAFIAS, COLLECTIVES, AND CO-OPS SHOWS THAT CRAFTING IS ALL IN THE FAMILY

by Jessica Herman

In 2003, the Austin Craft Mafia turned up on the DIY scene, like a fairy godmother for all DIYers trying to make sense of running a business. About a year later, a like-minded foursome in Portland, Oregon, formed Portland Super Crafty, seeking the kind of support the ACM provided its crafty members: mutual promotion, group advertising, and the less tangible benefits of belonging to a group of like-minded folks. Besides an overwhelming succession of positive press, the two groups have garnered some pretty sexy book and TV deals. It's hardly a wonder that DIY collectives are popping up across the nation, and even across the pond: The Craft Mafia Web Ring (craftmafia.com/webring) alone links to almost 15 groups in the United States and the U.K.

Chicagoan Cinnamon Cooper started e-mailing the ACM in the spring of 2004 to ask for advice about starting a crafters group. Cooper, who creates purses under the company name Poise.cc, learned she wasn't the only one inquiring; collectives were burgeoning in cities nationwide. After posting the idea on her blog, one thing led to the next and a group of five Chicago crafters solidified as the Chicago Craft Mafia. They share ACM's mafia mentality: They mean serious business.

Loosetooth.com proprietor and CCM member Brandy Agerbeck says that ACM's members devoted a lot of time and energy to building ACM as a powerful and compelling brand, but that the nine individual businesses that comprise it have remained equally robust. "I like to think that we're sort of like a band and we've all got our solo projects." That includes supporting their friends when only half the group was selected to appear on Home & Garden Television's show *Crafters Coast to Coast*.

Whisking aside the principles of cut-throat competition, the ladies and men promote one another's businesses via word of mouth and through the Craft Mafia Web ring, sharing vital how-to information and occasionally collaborating on creative projects. Excluding the daily grind of everything from book-keeping to business-card making — which "You have to DIY!" bemoans CCMer Leah Bohannon of



clockwise from top left: Chicago Craft Mafia's Leah Bohannon, Brandy Agerbeck, Mark Smithivas, Richelle Albrecht, Cinnamon Cooper, and Michelle Dortch

Red Glow 1500 (redglow1500.com) — the groups seem more or less utopian. They meet regularly and divvy up tasks as they arise, according to the members' availability and skills.

"The core energy has everything to do with presenting an idea that being in business and being a crafter doesn't have to do with being in the realm of competitiveness or hierarchy," says Lucky Loo Loo (luckylooloo.com) founder Rachel O'Rourke, a member of Portland Super Crafty. "That comes from being a collective."

The collectives also provide inspiration and practical business advice to other would-be mafiosos. In addition to explaining "how to start your own Craft Mafia," the ACM and Portland Super

Crafty Web sites offer tips on topics ranging from starting up a business, down to nitty-gritty tidbits, gleaned from links to business journals, and other Web sites and magazines.

Plenty of crafters readily resist attaching any political agenda to their handcrafted teamwork, attributing their drive to the desire to jumpstart their own careers and those of their peers. However, O'Rourke is happy to talk shop and politics all in one breath. "[The movement] goes against the false idea that to be an American you have to be an individual," she says. "People are not letting themselves be spoon-fed with the idea that you have to do everything on your own. It feels good to be influenced by other people, and you can also have your own vision."