

Truth Belts' synthetic and natural-fibre creations are a hit among animal lovers in the U.S.



TARA WALTON/TORONTO STAR

Renia Pruchnicki, owner of Truth Belts, says an online sales strategy was her company's most important marketing investment.

# Designer taps vegan appetite for leather-free fashions

**SUSAN DOWN**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

It's not what's in Renia Pruchnicki's belts that makes them so popular, it's what isn't.

The Toronto designer's line, Truth Belts, is made from synthetics and natural fibres such as jute.

As a result, the small company has cinched a reputation among the growing vegan market for its chic alternatives to leather.

When she started, she wasn't purposely aiming at the anti-leather market.

"My background was as a technical designer of backpacks and ski-wear and luggage," said Pruchnicki, 38, who has a degree in fashion design from Ryerson University. "So, I was familiar with all these materials and had never used leather before."

Pruchnicki founded her company in 2001 after she was laid off from

her job as a designer. She enrolled in a government self-employment program and learned the business skills to build her company, but found it a challenge.

"When I first started I didn't have any money and all the sales I made had to be reinvested back into the company," she said, adding that it took her 2½ years before she started making a profit. She never thought about quitting her own business, just getting a second job.

"When I realized how hard it was, I had to get a full-time job and then do Truth on the side," she said. "Sometimes I'd work until midnight on the company."

She talked to her employer, California Innovations, and gradually cut back her hours, seamlessly moving from employee to employer.

The company took off in 2003, after Truth Belts won a prestigious

Proggy Award from PETA (People for Ethical Treatment of Animals) as best leather replacement clothing company in North America.

Now Truth Belts is a solid and growing company with an office in Leslieville and a warehouse in Etobicoke. Pruchnicki designs all the belts and hires a contractor to do the sewing. She also makes room for a design intern from Ryerson to work on shipping, trade shows and marketing, and hires friends to help with shows and busy periods.

She has designed a line of bamboo T-shirts (made in Scarborough) and accessories such as wristlets and jewellery, as well as a new line of five belts with buckles that are nickel free.

The names of the products reflect her own interests as well as her own cheeky humour. For example, a

# PETA award boosts company's profile

---

## NO LEATHER, FUR

While vegetarians do not include meat in their diets, vegans exclude all animal by-products, such as leather and fur, from their lives and meat from their kitchens.

U.K. designer Stella McCartney, pictured below, is one of the most visible animal-friendly fashionistas, whose shoes and vegan line for Adidas have earned her widespread support.

About 4 per cent of Canadians and nearly 3 per cent of Americans follow a vegetarian diet,

according to a study by the Dietitians of Canada and the American Dietetic Association.

The Toronto Vegetarian Association attracts about 15,000 people to its Vegetarian Food Fair each September (11-13).

Susan Down



### THINKING BIG from B1

stretchy belt is called the Buffet, and her leather-look belts are named after cattle breeds such as Angus.

Her new fall line is called Shanti, reflecting her interests in meditation and spirituality. Other belts have distinctive names such as the Matador (a bar she liked), Gotham (a nod to the Batman movies) and the Hughes (named after a boyfriend).

Wholesaling to specialty stores in the United States and Canada makes up about half of annual revenue (close to \$100,000), and half divided between direct Internet sales and retailing at craft shows such as One of a Kind.

To market the company, she has advertised in magazines and on other websites with limited success. This fall she is trying television commercials in selected U.S. cities (a version of the ad appears on her website — [vegetarianbelts.com](http://vegetarianbelts.com)).

Because her customers find her on the Internet, an effective website strategy was the most important marketing investment.

"We used to have a catalogue. Now

people don't want to do that. They just want to get on the computer," she said.

Her profile, especially in the U.S., continues to grow. About 80 per cent of Truth Belts' customers are in the U.S.

"There are more stores that are vegan. They (Americans) spend more money than Canadians. People in the states are spenders, I find," said Pruchnicki.

"These stores just found me, I guess, because it's such a niche market — through Internet searches. More and more stores asked me if they could carry my product. I was really lucky. I felt like it just fell into my lap."

Pruchnicki is proud of her achievements and, despite the effort, she admits her long days don't really feel like work.

"I wanted to create a life for myself that I loved," she said. "I love designing products. I'm naturally good at it and I always enjoyed doing it."

Pruchnicki has advice for potential entrepreneurs: "Don't let other people stop you. You have to follow your heart in life and live your truth."