



Paula Polasky brands a cardboard box while Dirk Meyer watches. The couple is starting a subscription box service. (Steve Kuchera / skuchera@duluthnews.com)

## Thinking outside the subscription box

By [Mike Creger](#) on Apr 25, 2016 at 9:00 a.m.

Call Jon Otis the Johnny Appleseed for flowers this growing season.

He has made a commitment to “plant a multitude of pollinator flowers throughout Duluth” as a partner with a new local business venture in the growing market of subscription boxes: MinnBox.

Duluthians Paula Polasky and Dirk Meyer, her partner in life and now business, plan to start shipping monthly subscription boxes June 1. Their niche is that the cache of items they ship – which remain a surprise for customers – are local or Minnesota-made with an added twist: The box and contents will contain zero waste. It means that MinnBox requires companies that wish to have their products included in the shipments employ packaging that won’t add to a landfill. Also, those partners have to make a “Green Commitment” for the month their items go out through MinnBox.

For Otis, owner of Lake Superior Honey, not much of a pitch had to be made to hook up with MinnBox.

“I really wanted to be a part of it,” he said. No problem with his packaging – his honey comes directly from hives and is stored in reusable glass jars. And promoting a healthy bee environment is part of the company ethos. His MinnBox pledge to plant flowers is an extension of that mission, Otis said. “This will help keep our natural flora intact and support the bees in our region,” he wrote in his pledge to MinnBox.

Helping promote local products and encouraging green principles left Otis “excited” about MinnBox. He also gets his product out to a new customer base. “And I like to support people starting up businesses in the community,” he said.

Polasky and Meyer will post updates on the MinnBox website on how its partners are doing with their

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### This Week's Circulares



green tasks.

The website for MinnBox went live over the weekend, a nod to Earth Day on Friday. The couple plans to take 100 subscriptions to start. A one-time box costs \$45. Monthly boxes cost \$35. A special handmade wooden box, as opposed to cardboard, will include a “luxury item,” Polasky said.

Each box will include a gift from the couple, something that “allows people to live a greener life,” she said.

### Find the niche

In the subscription box business, MinnBox would be called “curative,” meaning items are carefully chosen with a theme in mind. Liz Cadman, who runs the website called My Subscription Addiction, said niche products are the way to go for startups. Cadman has been keeping track of subscription services across the country since 2012, and her site is known as the place to start when thinking about starting or subscribing to a service. She said there are at least 2,000 available today, up from 1,200 nine months ago.

Cadman said more-established retailers and brands such as WalMart, Disney and Adidas are getting into the game. That means small startups have to have something no one else does.

“It’s more of a strategic thing,” she said from her office in Pittsburgh. There no longer is room for copy-cat boxes, she said, which means the local and regional focus of MinnBox may find success. “You can experience a city,” she said, “and get products you can’t find online. That’s a huge advantage.”

Cadman got hooked on subscription boxes like many other people, with the cosmetic samples found in Birchbox, the service started in 2010. For \$10 a month, subscribers received a box of samples given away by cosmetic companies. It took off.

Today there are boxes for book enthusiasts, comics, pet treats, fitness gear, oddball snacks, wine and children’s products.

The appeal, Cadman said, is receiving a box each month without knowing exactly what you’ll find. “You’re sending yourself a surprise gift,” she said.

MinnBox finds itself in the mean when it comes to price. Cadman, who said the average customer subscribes to seven boxes, said prices range from \$10 to the \$30 range. There are more speciality boxes, some sent quarterly, that can run up to \$200 for a shipment.

### Idea launches

The MinnBox concept was born out of Polasky and Meyer’s commitment at home to stop adding to landfills with wasteful packaging. Polasky had started reading blogs about plastic pollution, learning facts about the level of the substance in our oceans that will someday outweigh the fish, she said.

“Once you start paying attention, you see it everywhere,” she said. She finds herself walking her dogs and picking up trash along Congdon neighborhood streets. She recalled finding a computer ditched and had to get her car to retrieve it.

Meyer grew up in Germany and recalled a friend from there telling him how amazed he is by the amount of trash the United States produces.

When they started to reduce and nearly eliminate their own use of plastics, the feeling was overwhelming, Polasky said. They immediately wondered: “How do we tell more people?” she said.

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One day, Polasky saw an ad for a subscription box and her mind started churning the idea around. She is a native of Northeastern Minnesota and was trying to picture a box with state-made products that also had a sustainability purpose. “How do we connect the dots?” she recalled thinking.

By last June, what would be called MinnBox began taking shape. “It’s just an idea that wouldn’t go away,” she said.

Meyer said his exposure to Duluth’s new entrepreneurial spirit fed the couple’s pursuit. “I wouldn’t have thought about starting a business a few years ago,” he said.

MinnBox “hit on every point” on what they were trying to tell the world, Polasky said.

Meyer liked the idea of supporting small business, steering people away from big boxes and “buying all this cheap stuff, always wrapped in plastic. We can put a face with products.”

Polasky is an attorney. Meyer is the conductor of the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra. It’s not like they needed to take on more tasks.

“We’ve got good friends,” Polasky said. They have cheered the team on and also pledged to help, especially in May when the packing of boxes begins.

Cadman said there is plenty of turnover in the subscription box industry. Startups find they can’t keep finding items to place in the boxes and still make money.

For now, Meyer says “that would be a good problem to have.” But they are mindful of trying to take on too much at once. They will start with a plan for 100 boxes and see how that month goes, they said.

### **Economy of scale**

They are not getting free samples from the companies they partner with. Part of the MinnBox pitch is that it will pay the wholesale value for the items companies want to share. “We want this to be of value for the business,” Polasky said.

And a value for the customers, she said. “The quality of these products will be so much better.”

“We’re not the Birchbox,” she said, noting its grand scale and the items it ships, “landfill garbage.”

They’ve spent months working out the price points, including the onerous costs of shipping. The price of the subscription is “right in the middle” compared to other subscriptions, she said.

The green principle rules for MinnBox, the couple said. “We want the challenge of businesses that don’t care” about a green footprint, Polasky said. Pollution eventually will come back into our food streams, she said. “We need to educate people.”

MinnBox is one way to do that, she said.

The business response to MinnBox has shown them that like minds are out there.

“People are starting to come with us,” Polasky said.

Gracia’s Great Lake Soap is switching out its colored wrapping paper packaging for compostable and unbleached coffee filters.

Great North Candle said it will continue its “regular green business practices” and, as part of its

MinnBox pledge, will donate 25 percent of store sales for its featured month and an extra 30 days to the Minnesota Environmental Fund.

“I was quite impressed with their concept,” said Therese Thull, owner of Untainted Organic Skin Care & Spa Products, based in the Twin Cities area. “It’s a great opportunity for handmade vendors.”

Cadman said shopping online has changed. More people are going directly to retailer sites, meaning there might not be as much exposure to alternative products. A subscription box fills that void, she said.

Polasky said they started approaching businesses in November and the pitch only took a couple of minutes. The idea of MinnBox paying for products and getting them into the hands of a wider audience appealed, she said, enough that the “Green Commitment” became an easy trade-off.

Polasky and Meyer realize they are making a commitment of their own with MinnBox.

“Will it make us busier? That’s been a conversation,” Polasky said. She thinks they have room for it.

“Most of it is quite fun,” Meyer said of the runup to MinnBox. “It’s fun to create something together.”

“We just have to remember to find time to turn it off,” Polasky said.

#### **About MinnBox**

\* MinnBox is a Duluth-based subscription box that features products made by Minnesota’s small businesses. Several will be from the Northland. Each box includes several products, anything from edibles to home goods and convenience items. The box will be zero-waste, meaning the product packaging, including the main box itself, will be reusable or recyclable. Companies that team with MinnBox will make “Green Commitments” for the month they are featured in a shipment.

\* MinnBox owners Paula Polasky and Dirk Meyer will include a gift of their own in the boxes, something that will encourage customers to be mindful of the environment.

\* The MinnBox will cost \$35 for a monthly subscription. A one-time box is \$45. A handmade wooden box with an extra luxury item will be \$85.

\* A full review of what MinnBox has to offer can be found at [minnbox.com](http://minnbox.com) .

\* For a national look at the more than 2,000 subscription box services – with updates, reviews and blogs – visit [mysubscriptionaddiction.com](http://mysubscriptionaddiction.com) .

\* Current partner businesses with MinnBox include Wild Roots Herbal Body Care, Dirty Knees Soap Co., Duluth Pack, Crapola! snacks, Bent Paddle Brewing Co., Doggie Brew Bites, Great Northern Candle, Gracia’s Great Lake Soap, Duluth Preserving Co., Untainted Skin Care, Lake Superior Honey, Lazy Monk bags and Duluth Coffee Co.

Mike Creger  
[mcreger@duluthnews.com](mailto:mcreger@duluthnews.com)  
(218) 723-5218

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