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Car magnets alert motorists to young drivers

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SPRING LAKE -- Corinne Fortenbacher's drive to keep her son safe behind the wheel without cramping his style has grown into a business gaining national exposure.

The Spring Lake family last year designed a sporty magnet decal reading "Rookie Driver" to put on the rear of their car when their son, Austin, was driving with his learner's permit.

This would alert other drivers to give the car some space.

They had 100 printed up in September 2006, requested 500 more in February and now order them by the thousands, Fortenbacher said.

Through their Web site to date, they have sold about 5,000 to customers in 44 states and Canada. They have invested nearly \$30,000 and are "close to making a profit," she said.

"It started out as something we needed, and turned into something really cool," Fortenbacher said. "It's been fun. I feel like I'm actually doing something good."

It all began with a near-collision in May 2006.

Austin had just received his learner's permit in Grand Haven. He asked to drive home from the Secretary of State's office.

With Corinne in the passenger seat, they approached a construction zone on U.S. 31 near Jackson Street when an impatient truck driver rattled the 15-year-old's nerves.

The truck driver pulled up on the teen's rear bumper and honked his horn. That forced Austin into a rookie mistake: He took his eyes off the road when he turned to see the truck.

The car swerved, and the Fortenbachers barely escaped an accident.

"He about crashed into the barrels. It was simple inexperience," said his father, Jeff.

Corinne decided to do something about it.

When they got home, she got on the Internet and found bumper stickers that said "student driver in training."

"Austin thought they were stupid. He said, 'If I have to put that on my car, I just won't drive.'"

So they agreed to design one that Austin and his friends would think was cool. Austin said "student driver" just seemed lame. But since he is a sports fan, "rookie driver" passed the test.

Just to be sure, they ran it through the ultimate coolness test: They showed the design to young women in his class.

"They all said, 'Yeah, that's way cooler than the lame ones out there,' " Corinne said.

They ended up with three versions. A 10-by-7-inch model says Rookie Driver in Training and sells for \$9.95, while the 7-by-4 1/2 inch magnets say Rookie Driver or New Driver, for \$8.95.

With that, RookieDriver.net was born.

"It has helped a lot. When they recognize that I'm new, they give me a lot more space. And if I mess up, they don't get road rage and stuff like that," Austin said.

His mother agrees.

"It certainly makes the new driver more relaxed, because people are not so aggressive toward them. So, yeah, I do think this could save a life."

An out-of-town company manufactures the magnets, but the family handles all other aspects of the business.

Corinne does the marketing, mailing and customer service, while Jeff Fortenbacher runs the Web site. That is on top of the couple's other job as regional directors for the Maui Wowi coffee and smoothie franchise.

Austin, now 16, no longer uses the sticker. But he recommends them to friends and classmates who are rookie drivers.

"He got to the point where he had the confidence, and we had the confidence in him," Corinne said. "He's a full-fledged driver right now."

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