

and accountant was way too expensive, around \$1,000. It cost her \$90.00 at City Hall to file all the necessary paperwork.

She sold her first pointes in 1999. "I could hardly sell 100 pairs a month. Now my company is selling 100 pairs the first two hours of daily business." How was she looking for the potential customers? "I could hardly speak English at that time, and my first calls sounded like this: "Hi, my name is Aleksandra. I sell Russian pointes, you have to buy them, because Russian ballet is the best!"

There was no Internet then, and to find potential customers, Aleksandra asked all her friends, travelling to the different cities, to write down phone numbers and addresses for dance schools and stores they find in local "Yellow Pages". Little by little she built her database, started calling the stores and flying in to meet potential customers. "Every morning I was waking up thinking how to sell more. I had no budget for advertising, and I had no mentors at that time." She invested \$56,000 she made that year in long-distance calls, business trips, promotional materials, and shipping (she was taking packages to UPS and FedEx locations by herself at the end of each day). At 22, Efimova left college to pursue her growing business.

Little by little Aleksandra created a greater variety of products. She was looking for dance wear and accessories manufacturers - tutus, leotards, tights, and ribbons were all on her list. The Russian factory Efimova started working with creates a special collection for her nowadays.

Working with her customers – distributors, dancers, dance students and their parents, Efimova realized that the American market is so different from the one in Russia. "Only the slim and flexible are being chosen by Russian ballet schools. Here, in USA, everybody can dance, because children are supposed to follow their dreams. That's why size L and XL leotards, pointes size 42-43 are among our most popular items." There is one more difference: pointes with V-cut are very popular in Russia, they are considered to be the symbol of classic Russian style. On the USA market, we mostly sell U-cut pointes with elastic. Russian Pointes retail for \$88. "We are

not the most expensive brand, but we are a premium-quality," notes Aleksandra.

Russian Pointe product is represented in Canada, Latin American, and in Philippines. The brand is expanding to the European market in 2014.

When the business turned 10, in 2008, Aleksandra enrolled in the Owner / President Management Program at Harvard. She wanted to understand, how to grow and expand her business. Harvard professors advised to stress out the uniqueness and quality of the product, and that's exactly what Aleksandra did. "Now, when we ask our customers what they like about our shoes, they say: comfortable, beautiful, love the color, elegant packaging." By the way, packaging is one of Efimova's trump cards and what makes her so different from her competitors. New box design in purple for "Aleksandra for Russian Pointe" brand was introduced last year. "I was inspired by Tiffany boxes. I wanted our packaging to be as aesthetically pleasing!" Customers loved the new design: "I feel like a kid on Christmas," a 10-year-old dancer says while holding the box. You can find more than 1000 messages like this one on #russianpointe Instagram.

For her youngest customers Efimova created a line of books and toys. She introduces children to the world of ballet in her "Nutcracker", "Cinderella", and "Sleeping Beauty" series. These books and toys are carried not only in the dance stores, but also in museums, and opera and ballet theater gift shops.

"I've heard immigrants complaining about not having enough opportunity and being a minority. I turn all minuses into pluses! Yes, I still speak with an accent, but my voice is being remembered and associated with Russian Ballet," says Efimova. She also promotes Russian culture – when prominent Russian artists are in town, she organizes large receptions to honor their art (she has held receptions for Spivakov, Netrebko, Georgiev, Eifman), where she invites both Russians and Americans. "Russian culture is the one to be proud of. I want Americans to know more about Russian heritage."