



Raising a glass to independent success

Superior customer service, a great staff and effective marketing are all crucial elements of any retail vision. Marrying these elements and executing them, however, can result in more than just a successful operation. | *By Camilla Cornell*

Gerri Charles once spent hours in a border line-up picking up a pair of shoes for a client of her Abbotsford, B.C. bridal store Champagne & Lace. On another occasion, a staff member drove two and a half hours to Kamloops to deliver a missing pair of tuxedo pants. And a few years ago, a young woman wandered in to the store to say that she'd been planning to get married in her shorts in her back yard, but she had been thinking that she might like a dress instead. "That's when the adrenalin started pumping and the Super Consultant cape came out," says Charles. In just four hours, Charles managed to kit the woman out in full bridal regalia. "She drove away in her wedding dress," she says.

It's all in a day's work for the energetic Charles, and it's one of the reasons that her bridal and prom-wear store has stood the test of time, celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. "We are in the Cinderella business," she says. "Little girls dream about their weddings practically out of the high chair. They'll be having a bath and they'll stack the bubbles on their arms like gloves and make a dress with them. A wedding dress is not just another purchase. We help women feel beautiful."

Customer service... a competitive advantage

For Charles, that superior customer service is what sets Champagne & Lace apart from national bridal chains and online alternatives and has helped her compete despite the fact that shoppers can get lower prices by crossing the border to the U.S. "I'm an Eaton's girl," she says, referring to her early training with Eaton's high-end fashion boutique. "I didn't work bridal, but I picked up a lot of tips about marketing, fashion, window dressing and customer service." Charles' brides and prom girls "leave complete." In the case of brides, they visit the store by appointment only and can pull together everything from their wedding dress to veils, jewelry and shoes. "How can you alter your dress if you don't know what shoes you'll be wearing?" she asks.

Once the bride has been outfitted, Charles and her team ask about the invitations, as well as dresses and shoes for the bridesmaids, the flower girl and the mother of the bride—all of which she can supply. "It's helpful to the customer. She's going to need those other components, so we may as well be the ones to provide them."

Seamstresses are also an integral part of the team. “There’s no spandex in a wedding gown,” points out Charles. “If it doesn’t fit you in the butt we have to augment it or take it in.” And if brides put on a little weight or drop a few pounds because of nerves, that dress may have to be altered again. “We can be working with brides for 10 months,” says Charles. “This has to be the most labour-intensive retail environment there is.”

Ensuring added value through great staff

That very fact, however, makes the experience memorable to clients. And although things sometimes go wrong, the measure of a good business is what you do to make it right again, contends Charles. As an independent, it’s crucial to add value for the customer. “We do a lot of counseling here,” she says. “If you’re getting married in Mexico, often there’s blood work that has to be done. There’s more to it than just getting on an airplane. We have hand-outs if brides need a justice of the peace or a party planner or a florist. It’s all part of what we do. We’re part of the process.”

Of course, providing that great customer experience to everyone who walks through the door is beyond the capacity of just one person. “The staff is key,” says Charles, who employs 18 women, eight of whom have been with her for ten years or more and one, Manager Robynn MacFarlane, for 23 years. That’s something to boast about in the retail industry where turnover tends to be high. But Charles prides herself on her ability to attract and manage a great team.

Employee recognition

“I’m not going to get any blue ribbons for being a flexible employer because, let’s face it, this is bridal. You’re working Saturdays and evenings,” she admits. But Charles is there alongside her staff, and she makes a point of rewarding their loyalty. After five years of service employees get a diamond ring, and after 10 years, they’re awarded a diamond pendant. “Usually I have the girls’ cars detailed for Valentine’s Day,” adds Charles. “But this year, Cirque de Soleil is coming to town, so we bought tickets for everyone to go.”

Most importantly, Charles never stints on praise or recognition – each woman gets two roses in a bud vase on the anniversary of the day she started with Champagne & Lace, and their boss brings in goodies and sometimes drops them off for sick employees. “We’re chocolate-fueled here,” she jokes. Although the sales people are paid an hourly rate plus commission, Charles likes to up the ante by generating in-house contests that allow employees to win everything from spa treatments to restaurant gift certificates.

Smart hiring

Just as important as those front-line staff members, says Charles, are the behind-the-scenes folks who help keep her store running smoothly. “I hire to my weaknesses,” she says. “You tend to try to do everything yourself at the beginning, but it’s a false economy. If you can make \$100 an hour on the sales floor and it only costs you \$20 to have someone come in and do



your books, then that’s the best choice for your business.”

Charles has an excellent book-keeper and uses direct deposit to streamline the payroll process and ensure that records of employment are easily obtained. And she uses a retail consultant, In Focus, to help her with inventory management. “One of the biggest problems in retail is managing your buying in changing markets,” she contends. “If there’s one thing that’s going to sink you, it’s inventory.”

In addition, there are two people in the office “and one spends her life either emailing, faxing or phoning suppliers or customers.” In an attempt to extend the ribbon of communication and connection, “we put happy faces on the orders or little heart stickers and we’ll send them pictures of the staff so they know who they’re talking to.” But sometimes, you just have to pick up the phone, says Charles. “It’s easy to deliver bad news by email,” she explains. Then you can talk about what they can do. “They may have a Size ten in stock that we can alter to fit a Size eight,” she says. “Or maybe they could get one from Florida but it will cost \$25 extra to expedite the shipping. It might be worth it for that bride.”

Community involvement

Given her daily workload, Charles could be forgiven if she rarely ventured out into her community. But the retail dynamo is involved with Big Brothers and helps organize the annual Crystal Gala – a breast cancer fund-raiser in her community. To top it off, she has just finished a six-year stint as a police commissioner. “I think it’s really important for independent businesspeople to get out of our stores and get into the community,” she explains. “We all think we’re too busy. But I find

I learn a lot. It's about exposure and perspective. You need to step outside and look at your business from the outside in, like the customer does."

Marketing efforts

Charles never stops promoting her business. She advertises a little on the radio and in wedding magazines in Vancouver and B.C.'s Lower Mainland, along with some local publications. Knowing that clients love to feel they're getting something extra, she also runs regular promotions. "The first 25 brides who bought in January this year got a bottle of champagne," she says. "And we sometimes give out champagne glasses." The prom girls get Booster Juice coupons and Charles recently pulled together a \$1,500 prize package for a contest surrounding the store's 25th an-

niversary. "It's tricky," she says. "We need to be top of mind, but you're not looking for a wedding gown unless you're getting married."

Strangely, one strategy that worked for Charles was participating in a Walmart ad with her staff a few years ago. The ad featured their Secret Santa gift exchange. Although she took a bit of flack for having "crossed the line," as one independent retailer put it, Charles asserts that the staff had a great deal of fun.

The icing on the cake: a double-digit increase in sales just after the ad came out. "You can't buy publicity like that," she says. And in reply to her critics she points out that the mega-stores aren't going anywhere, with or without her support. "As independents, we just have to make sure that we are always doing it better," contends Charles. "If we're not, then we don't deserve the business."

Cultivating success for your business as an independent retailer can be challenging, but ensuring that the right combination of customer service, dedicated staff and an effective marketing mix can go a long way toward achieving your goals. Take a look at these seven elements that have allowed Champagne and Lace to develop and maintain a successful operation:

Give yourself a competitive advantage by providing superior customer service...

Go the extra mile for your customer. Do they need that little bit of added attention? Cater to their needs and expectations and let them know that you are there to serve them. By providing them with a dynamic and fulfilling shopping experience you ensure that they'll be back in your store.

Ensure the right staff are on board to provide your customer with added value...

Surround yourself with great staff that can execute your customer service vision and go the extra mile for your customer. A happy customer is a returning customer, and one who will share their exceptional experience with their friends and family.

Retain your best employees through recognition...

Retaining the loyalty of the best and brightest can be a difficult proposition for many retailers, but recognizing the hard work of your staff can help a great deal. Provide them with incentives, rewards or simple praise for a job well done. You might be surprised at the results of a little positive reinforcement.

Hire the right support to ensure smooth operations...

Frontline staff are obviously integral to the customer experience, but what about behind the scenes? Make sure you have the right people in the right supporting positions to ensure a smooth operation for your business. Hiring capable book-keepers for your finances

and consultants to help with merchandising, store design and inventory management will enable you to focus on your customer and growing your business.

Extend your communication and connection to customers whenever possible...

Make sure you communicate with your customers effectively and in a timely fashion. If there's a customer complaint - address it immediately and with an open mind. And, never underestimate the power of the telephone - your voice or the voice of one of your staff members can be a welcome sound to a customer and will go a long way toward lending a personal touch to your service.

Become involved in your local community...

Involvement in local charities and events not only shows your community that you are an active member, but can also serve as an excellent, low-cost marketing initiative. People like to know that their local merchants are there for them and their friends and that they share the same concerns and interests.

Develop an innovative and strategic marketing mix...

In addition to community involvement, ensuring that your brand and services are visible in a range of mediums is important. Consider advertising online, in print, on radio and on display boards. But, make sure you understand who your target audience is and where they are most likely to see your presence - saving unnecessary marketing dollars can be used in another area of your business to help you grow.