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SMALL-BUSINESS MAKEOVER

Los Feliz custom drapery salon having tough time snagging new clients

Consultant Mona L. Eisman suggests ideas that can help family-owned Gypsy's Palace reach \$500,000 in annual sales.



Stacey Finch, left, Amanda Luellwitz, center and Jillian Johann are sisters who own Gypsy's Palace, a custom drapery shop in Los Feliz that is struggling to gain new clients. "The jobs we are doing right now are fantastic," Johann says, "and if we could multiply what we are doing by five, we would be just thrilled because we know we are capable and prepared for more." (Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times / September 4)

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Meet the expert: Mona L. Eisman
Gypsy's Palace: at a glance

By Cyndia Zwahlen
September 8, 2009

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It started with a dramatic set of black chiffon drapes.

Jillian Johann sewed them years ago for a sister's friend. Threaded onto black iron rods, the eye-catching curtains brought other orders.

Johann sewed. Sister Stacey Finch installed. A third sister, Amanda Luellwitz, stitched baby blankets for those looking to

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Their sidelines became full time six years ago when the trio opened Gypsy's Palace, a custom drapery salon in Los Feliz.

"Word just started spreading and it got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and now we want it to get real big," Johann says.

Sales are projected to zip up to \$360,000 this year compared with \$230,000 in 2008 as more interior designers bring steady work to the shop. They've also attracted celebrity clients, film directors and other creative professionals who call Los Feliz home. But they want annual sales to surpass \$500,000.

"The jobs we are doing right now are fantastic," Johann says, "and if we could multiply what we are doing by five, we would be just thrilled because we know we are capable and prepared for more."

She and her sisters weren't always passionate about fabric. They didn't learn to sew until they were in their 20s -- and only then because their mother, a longtime seamstress, brought her 1979 Singer machine to their apartment and insisted, says Johann, 36. (Finch is 39 and Luellwitz is 37.)

They were hooked.

Now that their dream of owning a fabric and drapery business has come true, they're having trouble attracting enough of the right kind of client.

The sisters tried e-mail marketing but worried they would annoy people. They mailed fliers to high-end homeowners, but with little result. A four-color marketing piece aimed at interior designers hasn't brought much new business.

"We feel stuck," Johann says.

Consultant Mona L. Eisman, principal of Eisman Marketing Group in El Segundo, knows why. Small-business owners often stall after unsuccessful attempts to build sales, says the veteran marketing executive with experience at cosmetics, fashion, entertainment, medical and consumer products companies.

Eisman says the sisters are in a good position to capitalize on recession-inspired trends that see more people entertaining at home and freshening the decor rather than making major purchases. But she says they need to jazz up their generic-looking website, spruce up the store's interior and focus on existing custom clients.

Here are Eisman's recommendations:

*** Create a client list.** A computerized list of client names, contact information and order histories will be the foundation of an effort to increase sales.

Eisman asked the sisters to go through their invoices to collect information. They will then create the list using contact management software they already have but never used.

*** Add pizzazz to the store's interior.** The inside of Gypsy's Palace doesn't reflect the creative, fresh work the sisters do for their clients, Eisman says. Simple changes can make a big difference and convey their design point of view, which she says will help attract more of the clients who will appreciate their style.

"We want to bring more design inspiration to the front of the store and offer more choices, more interesting selections. It didn't have enough energy," Eisman says. "If you want to work from your floor, if you want to sell from your floor, then you have to invest in your retail space."

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She suggests the sewing notions -- pins, needles, thread -- at the front of the store be trimmed by half and eventually moved to the back.

Eisman likes the elegant vignette in the shop window featuring a caramel-colored custom silk shade, a chaise reupholstered in camel velvet and a towering vase from the store's accessory line. She says the sisters need to create several more showcases (including a copy of an "amazing, amazing" bathroom they did for a young music star) to inspire customers and give them an instant idea of the owners' design ability.

* **Rethink focus on store's history.** When the sisters bought the 1,200-square-foot store in 2003, the previous owner gave them a deal on the price because he liked that they were going to keep it sewing-oriented. The women had hoped the store's longtime location and history would help them keep customers while attracting new ones.

But Eisman says they are overestimating the value of the location, the history and the revenue potential of the home-sewer business that stems from the former operation.

"I love telling a story, I love being an old sewing and notions store from the neighborhood," she says. "That doesn't mean that's the business you want to be in today."

* **Focus on existing custom clients.** Doing this will make a big difference in how the sisters choose products and how they market their business, Eisman says. For example, they can cut back on carrying items to attract walk-in home sewers.

Reaching out to existing clients by sending out regular e-mails, including a quarterly newsletter highlighting new products, will keep Gypsy's Palace on customers' minds and make it easier to get more of the referrals that account for much of the store's business.

* **Keep in touch with clients after projects are completed.** Business-building ideas, client development and relationship programs can keep the store connected to its customers during the eight to 10 years that may pass before they are ready to replace their window treatments.

Eisman suggests the store offer a small line of holiday products -- home accessories, tablecloths and napkins. Include three or four looks: one more formal, one straight holiday and two that are contemporary and fresh, she says.

The goal isn't to sell a ton of those items but to have a new reason to connect with clients. Offering ideas on how to use fabrics and window treatments to update a child's room affordably or freshen up a home are other ways the sisters can engage clients.

* **Sell excess inventory.** Eisman applauds the sisters' idea to rent a booth at the monthly Rose Bowl flea market in Pasadena. It's a great way to turn aging inventory into cash.

And, she says, many interior designers take advantage of the higher-priced early admission to get a look before the crowds arrive. The market could be a great place for the trio to chat with potential customers in a relaxed way.

* **Upgrade the website.** The store's website, at www.gpdrapery.com, doesn't showcase their portfolio of client projects, Eisman says.

She also would like the sisters to post a list explaining why Gypsy's Palace is better than competitors. The shop owners can highlight points as large as never missing deadlines and always staying within budgets and as seemingly small as wearing quiet shoes while in clients' homes so as not to be too intrusive.

* **Start planning for a new location.** Johann and her sisters have been talking about eventually relocating Gypsy's Palace to a spot with more interior-design-oriented foot traffic.

Before they make any decisions about locations, Eisman recommends they put into motion her

Promise, Peril in South

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Photos, map and reader comments

suggestions to position the business for the increased attention, expenses and sales that a new location probably would bring.

Johann and her sisters say the focus on planning for growth is a welcome change.

"We kept saying, 'We hope someone's going to walk through the door' and 'I hope the phone will ring,' " Johann says. "She said, 'No. We are going to plan to have someone walk through the door and plan to have that phone ring.' Even just that little idea really changed us."

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