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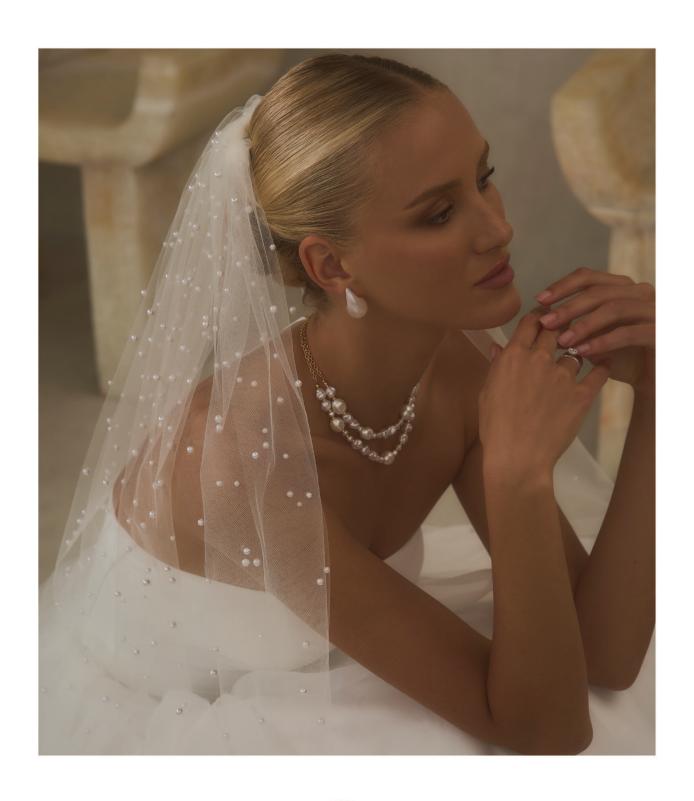












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Trending

Seen in New York

New York Bridal Market events, designers and venues.

by VOWS Staff 40

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In Your Hospitality Era

Embracing a hospitality mindset transforms every interaction from simply a transaction into a meaningful, memorable by Katie Roberts 46 experience.

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Fueled by optimism and spending power, the wedding market is holding strong - and Taylor Swift's "Love Story" might just by Daniel P. Smith **52** make it shimmer.



Beyond the Business

Dresses by Day, Dance Floors by Night

Retailers reveal the unexpected hobbies that keep them grounded, inspired and full of life. by Amanda Baltazar 58

Occasions Bridal The VOWS Profile: and Eveningwear

Running Solo, Thriving Big

After COVID made her a one-woman team, this Connecticut retailer doubled down on passion, creativity and customer care and built a stronger boutique in the process.

by Shannon Hurd 66









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Every bit of the 1,400-square-foot Occasions Bridal and Eveningwear is utilized to sell, and merchandise is accessible.

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On the cover
Owner Gail Furniss in her
Bethel, Conn. Boutique.

Credit:The Dear Darling Co., www.thedeardarling.com

VOWS: (USPS 0012-456) (ISSN 1081-6658) is published bimonthly by Grimes and Associates, Inc., 23120 Alicia Parkway, Suite 200 Mission Viejo, CA 92692. Periodical postage paid at San Juan Capistrano, CA, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER, Send address changes to VOWS Magazine, 23120 Alicia Parkway, Suite 200, Mission Viejo, CA 92692-1212. Subscription rates are \$30 per year. All foreign subscriptions are \$55 U.S. Single copies and back issues are available for \$5.50 each. Please allow eight-to-ten weeks advance notice for change of address. Include former and current address and zip codes.

Optimism for **2026...**

despite current headwinds

In reviewing VOWS writer Daniel Smith's optimistic 2026 industry forecast ("Say Yes to the Future") I was struck by what wasn't directly included in the report, what is in my opinion a key driver of the possibility of success next year: our individual and collective resiliency.



Peter Grimes
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949 388-4848

Several of the key points addressed in this issue's 2026 article were also highlighted in last year's VOWS 2025 projections, compiled in November 2024.

Though we were optimistic then that the election would bring a promise of stability, we did not (could not) anticipate the strident approach to import tariffs imposed in January, which over the course of the following months stalled what we thought was to be a relieving period of growth for the industry.

For 2026, we see reasons for similar optimism...but are now further buoyed by the creativity shown by all of us working cohesively together to react and adapt to this year's fluctuating costs of goods and shaky consumer sentiment.

The headwinds that affected us in 2025 will not soon dissipate. But we can (and should) take solace in knowing that we have been tempered by these trials and have come through with our resiliency, dedication and authenticity intact.

Which is itself a measure of success... and a reminder of our abilities and worthiness.

Wishing you all the best of the seasons. . . and a prosperous 2026.

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Shannon Hurd Editor In Chief shannon@vowsmagazine.com 720-936-3326

Passion as a Pathway

Why pursuing what lights you up makes you a stronger, more creative retailer.

"Find something you're passionate about and keep tremendously interested in it."

This quote, by the famous chef Julia Child, has always spoken to me. In fact, it's practically my life motto.

I've always been one to chase my passions, and interestingly, many of the coolest things that have happened to me as well as some of the best opportunities have occurred when emerging myself in worlds that make me happy.

One example: I'm a season ticket holder for the Colorado Rockies, and have somewhat built up a following as a super fan in that community. This has led to (among other things) the chance to throw out a first pitch at a game, the opportunity to be interviewed on TV multiple times and even an invitation to be an inaugural member of MLB's Fan Council. I prioritize the Rockies because attending games brings joy and adds balance to my life. The friendships, networking, open doors, creative spark and other awesome things that have occurred as a result have just been bonuses.

Such was the inspiration for our story "Dresses by Day, Dance Floors by Night" (pg. 58), which profiles a handful of retailers' "after work" passions and hobbies. These hobbies are diverse, ranging from dancing to gardening to visiting theme parks and fostering pets. But one element they all share: helping the people involved feel complete.

"The reality is that if I don't do both, I don't feel like a whole person," says Jillian Forsberg, owner of Dress Gallery in Wichita, Kan. and author of multiple books including the historical fiction novel "The Rhino Keeper" (2024).

Enjoying your passions isn't indulgent it's essential.

This is a sentiment many can relate to. And, I would argue, spending time on your hobbies ultimately helps you build a better business. It's not just about taking care of yourself so you can be in the right mindset and physical condition to help others. It's also about stimulating another part of your brain – giving yourself a chance to think outside the box and spark creative ideas you can then apply to your boutique.

So, in short, you should never feel guilty for regularly carving out time to indulge in your passions. In fact, consider it a non-negotiable necessity and prioritize it as one of the best things you can do for yourself. Not only will you have a ton of fun but ultimately, your business will thank you!



Boutique Contributors (+Instagram handles – give them a follow!)

Ania Bridal, Portland, Ore. @aniabridal Annabelle's Bridal Boutique, Visalia, Calif.

@annabellesbridal

Boutique Leslie Bridal, Dover, N.H. @boutiquelesliebridal

Bridal Elegance, Grand Rapids, Mich.

@bridalelegancegr

Bridal Gallery of Orlando, Orlando, Fla.

@bridalgalleryoforlando

Charlotte's Bridal & Formal Wear, Eau Claire, La Crosse & Madison, Wis. @charlottesbridal

Clarice's Bridal, St. Louis, Mo. @claricesbridal Dress Gallery, Wichita, Kan. @shopdressgallery Facchianos Bridal and Formal Attire,

Broken Arrow, Okla. @facchianosbridal

Galleria Gowns, Highland Heights, Ohio @galleriagowns

Modern Bride & Formal Shop, Bedford, N.H. @modernbridenh

Occasions Bridal and Eveningwear, Bethel, Conn. @occasionsbethel

Rina's Bridal Boutique & Atelier, Jackson, Tenn. @rinasbridal

Simple Elegance Bridal, Bowdon, Ga.

@simplelegancebridal

Taylored For You Bridal Boutique,
Mechanicsburg, Pa. **@tayloredforyou**

The Sentimentalist, Atlanta, Ga.

@thesentimentalistatl



For more information email lori@dessy.com or call 646-638-9617.

dessy.com | @dessygroup

Also check the VOWS online calendar for updates and additions: https://www.vowsmagazine.com/events

2025/2026 Market Dates

December 8-10, 2025

Mon Cheri Academy LIVE In-Person Event

Three-day educational program open for all bridal professionals co-sponsored by National Bridal Market. Location: The MART, Chicago. IL Discount hotel rooms available

www.nationalbridalmarket.com/mca

February 21-23

Sposaitalia Collezioni

Milano Bridal Week

Milan, Italy

https://sposaitaliacollezioni.fieramilano.it/en

February 22-26

New York Fashion Week Designers at the Essex House

JW Marriott Essex House New York, NY

www.designersattheessex.com

March 15-17

National Bridal Market Chicago

Merchandise Mart, Chicago, IL

www.nationalbridalmarket.com

March 22-24

London Bridal Week

London, England

www.bridalweek.com/essential-info

March 22-24

Rome Bridal Week

Rome, Italy

www.romebridalweek.com

March 28-30

European Bridal Week

Messe Essen, Germany

www.europeanbridalweek.com

March 30-April I

ANDMORE Formal Markets

Apparel Mart, Atlanta, GA

www.atlanta-apparel.com/markets/formal-markets

New York Luxury Bridal Fashion Market

Design house members of The Bridal Council showcasing bridal collections at individual showrooms, New York City, NY

www.thebridalcouncil.com

April 8-9

Designers at the Essex House

JW Marriott Essex House NYC 160 Central Park South New York, NY

www.designersattheessex.com

April 8-9

Melange de Blanc NY Bridal Market

Starrett-Lehigh Building New York, NY

www.melangedeblanc.com

April 8-9

One Fine Day Bridal Market

CANOE STUDIOS

601 W 26th St, New York, NY

https://onefinedaybridalmarket.com/pages/ourevents

April 8-9

The Fringe Collective

Starrett-Lehigh Building New York, NY

www.thefringecollective.com

April 8-9

Union Square Couture

The Lotte New York Palace Hotel 455 Madison Ave, New York

www.unionsquarecouture.com

April 22-26

Barcelona Bridal Fashion Week

Barcelona, Spain

www.barcelonabridalweek.com

August 3-7

AndMore Formal Markets

Apparel Mart, Atlanta, GA

www.atlanta-apparel.com/markets/formal-markets

August 16-18

National Bridal Market Chicago

Merchandise Mart, Chicago, IL

www.nationalbridalmarket.com

September 13-15

Harrogate Bridal Week

Harrogate Convention Centre

Harrogate, England

www.bridalweek.com/essential-info

October 2026 TBA

NY Luxury Bridal Fashion Week

Designers at the Essex House

IW Marriott Essex House NYC 160 Central Park South

New York, NY

www.designersattheessex.com

Melange de Blanc NY Bridal Market

Starrett-Lehigh Building New York, NY

www.melangedeblanc.com

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The Fringe Collective

Starrett-Lehigh Building New York, NY

www.thefringecollective.com

Union Square Couture

The Lotte New York Palace Hotel 455 Madison Ave, New York

www.unionsquarecouture.com



To share your industry-specific news

releases in our **Tidbits** section, e-mail

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Readers are invited to submit letters via mail, email or fax. VOWS: reserves the right to edit for length and grammar. Wedding-product ven-dors also may submit material, 250 words or fewer preferred, for our Marketplace section. Opinion pieces of 1,300 words or less are always welcome for our Perspectives column. All materials can be returned if requested.

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2026 International Bridal Markets

Couturier Stéphane Rolland to be spotlighted at Barcelona Bridal Week

Parisian couturier Stéphane Rolland, one of the leading names in contemporary Haute Couture, will headline the tenth anniversary of Barcelona Bridal Night, the signature gala of Barcelona Bridal Fashion Week (BBFW). It will be the designer's first show in Spain – an event where fashion, architecture and culture converge as part of his creative universe and his vision of couture as a form of artistic expression.

Barcelona Bridal Fashion Week, the international leader in bridal fashion, will take place April 22-26, 2026 at Fira de Barcelona's Montjuïc venue. It will provide the stage for Rolland's Spanish debut, during which he will present a collection featuring both retrospective pieces and a selection of 20 exclusive looks created for the occasion. The showcase will feature 80 Haute Couture creations, evenly divided between bridal designs and evening and red-carpet gowns.

"Presenting my work at BBFW is a great honor," Rolland said. "Barcelona shares with Haute Couture the same devotion to form, volume, and artistic expression. My dresses are emotional architectures, and this is a unique opportunity to share that spirit with an international audience in a profoundly cultural city."

Albasarí Caro, Director of Fira de Barcelona's event, adds: "Having Stéphane Rolland at the tenth anniversary of the Bridal Night marks a milestone that reflects our commitment to excellence. His presence elevates the artistic level of the event and reinforces Barcelona's status as a global epicenter of design and Haute Couture. His visual language and ability to move audiences through form make him the perfect guest for such a special edition."

Stéphane Rolland will be the star of the tenth anniversary of the most iconic night of BBFW, joining other great designers who have shown their



Parisian couturier Stéphane Rolland, guest designer for Barcelona Bridal Fashion Week's April 2026 event; Albasari Caro, director of Fira de Barcelona's

collections at previous editions, such as Vivienne Westwood, Giambattista Valli. Viktor & Rolf and Elie Saab, among others.

This year's event, which will take place on the evening of April 22, will feature a special setting: the location chosen will be Hall 8 of the Montjuïc venue, built for the 1929 International Exhibition to house the Metallurgy. Electricity and Power industry showcase. Its Art Deco style with expressionist influences and its imposing polyhedral dome will be the setting for the event and will strengthen the idea of continuity between the catwalk and the trade show, design and business, in an emblematic setting for fashion and contemporary creation. It will be one of the central events of BBFW in a particularly significant year for the city, which in 2026 will be the world capital of architecture.

Organized by Fira de Barcelona with the support of the Catalan Ministry of Business and Labour, Barcelona Bridal Fashion Week stands as one of the foremost international platforms for bridal fashion. The 2026 edition, held from April 22 to 26 at the Montjuïc venue, will bring together more than 400 brands and around 40 designers on the runway, highlighting not only bridal collections but also ceremony, guest and red-carpet fashion.

For registration and/or exhibiting information, visit

www.barcelonabridalweek.com.

European Bridal Week Launches New 2026 Campaign

European Bridal Week has unveiled its 2026 campaign, kicking off the new season with a focus on the artistry, creativity, and elegance of bridal and fashion.

The campaign "Embracing The Artistry Of Bridal" highlights bridal fashion as enchanting, epic, and expressive, emphasising the emotional impact, storytelling, and craftsmanship that define the industry today. With the upcoming edition scheduled for March 28 – 30, 2026 at Messe Essen, Germany, EBW provides a platform where innovation meets tradition and artistry takes centre stage.

"Bridal fashion is a form of artistry that tells stories, evokes emotions, and inspires creativity," says Siegrid Hampsink, Event Director of European Bridal Week. "Our 2026 campaign embraces that artistry, celebrating designers' creativity and offering visitors an experience that reflects the elegance, innovation, and expressive energy of the bridal industry. It also sends a clear message: in bridal fashion, you can be different; you don't have to fit into a single frame. Inclusion, individuality, and personal expression are part of the artistry we celebrate."

EBW continues to distinguish itself as more than just a trade show. With



Siegrid Hampsink, Event Director of European Bridal Week, held March 28 - 30, 2026 at Messe Essen, Germany.



Heard around the Industry.

around 500 leading and emerging brands across two halls, this B2B event is a strategically curated platform for meaningful connections, allowing designers, retailers, and industry professionals to engage, collaborate, and discover new business opportunities. The campaign reinforces EBW's dedication to authenticity and insight, providing a window into the creativity, craft, and passion that shape contemporary bridal fashion.

"Our team knows the industry from the inside – from design to retail, from production to event management," Hampsink said. "This campaign reflects that deep understanding of the industry, highlighting the artistry, emotion, and craftsmanship that make European Bridal Week unique. It also reminds everyone that bridal fashion can be inclusive, embracing difference, diversity, and individuality."

For additional information, visit www.europeanbridalweek.com.

Rome Bridal Week 2026 presents first-ever RBW awards

Rome Bridal Week, taking place from March 22 - 24, 2026, is set to raise the bar for international bridal fashion events with the introduction of the RBW Awards, a new highlight celebrating excellence, innovation, and creativity within the global bridal industry.

The RBW Awards, set to take place on Sunday, March 22, 2026, at the elegant event area of Fiera di Roma, will honour designers, manufacturers, and professionals who are shaping the future of bridal fashion. Winners will be determined through a combined process of jury selection and visitor voting, ensuring that both industry expertise and retail experience play an important role in the outcome.

Registered bridal stores visiting Rome Bridal Week 2026 are invited to vote for their favorite brands exhibiting at the show. Each store will have one vote per award category, helping decide which companies take home the prestigious RBW Awards.

Elena Colonna, Sales & Event Director of Rome Bridal Week, said: "We are thrilled to introduce the RBW



Elena Colonna, sales and event directory, Rome Bridal Week, announced first ever RBW Awards.

Awards as a new highlight within the Rome Bridal Week experience. The RBW Awards are our way of celebrating the passion and artistry that drive this industry forward. They recognize those who constantly innovate, inspire, and set new standards for bridal excellence for the Italian market. We want to honor the professionals behind the beauty – the ones who make dreams tangible."

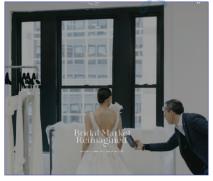
Registration for Rome Bridal Week 2026 is now open. All qualified bridal professionals are invited to register for free admission to Italy's leading B2B bridal fashion event. During the registration process, visitors will also be able to cast their votes for the RBW Awards directly through their personal registration account.

For 2026, Rome Bridal Week continues to strengthen its international reach through a dedicated visitors program, focusing on welcoming leading bridal retailers and buyers from Asia as well as from the Middle East.

"These regions represent a dynamic and growing buying force. Buyers from Asia and the Arab countries are continuously looking for new ideas, distinctive designs, and creative expressions in bridal fashion. Their presence at Rome Bridal Week adds incredible energy to the event and opens valuable opportunities for global exchange and collaboration," explained Colonna.

To register and/or view additional information, visit

www.romebridalweek.com.



Mélange de Blanc working towards NY Market collaboration

In an attempt to reshape the New York luxury bridal fashion market land-scape, **Mélange de Blanc** is working with other Bridal Markets to join forces in order to launch a reimagined, all-inclusive New York bridal market experience.

Beginning Spring 2026, the collaboration will debut at the iconic Starrett-Lehigh Building in Manhattan, featuring an expansive showroom designed to host every major luxury and mid-tier designer under one roof.

"We've been hearing the same feedback for years: New York Bridal Fashion Week needs cohesion," said Kimberly Marcoux, co-founder of Mélange de Blanc. "Buyers are exhausted from cross-town sprints and scattered showrooms—it's not sustainable. Everyone misses the days when designers were under one roof at the Piers, so we are bringing that back but more modern, elevated and in a more efficient way to connect."

The goal for this strategic alliance addresses long-standing industry challenges – chief among them, the disjointed nature of market week. Instead of navigating dozens of venues and conflicting schedules, the approach is to welcome buyers into one dynamic, centralized space curated for connection, discovery, and business growth.

"Our mission has always been collaboration over competition," said Tepsii, operations director at Mélange de Blanc. "We've known for a while what needed to change... we just needed the right partners. Now together we're creating something the industry has needed for a long time while ensuring the new market is not only

Tidbits continued on page 36

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Heard around the Industry.

functional but elevated in experience and reach. This will create space for deeper connections, stronger outcomes, and a more thoughtful use of time, energy, and resources."

Last spring, The Fringe Collective announced its October move to Mélange de Blanc. Director Marteal Mayer is bringing her inclusive and sustainable designers to this new collaboration – further strengthening the value of this new bridal market experience.

The inaugural edition of this unified market attempt will take place in April 2026 during New York Luxury Bridal Fashion Week. Full dates, brand partners, and special programming will be announced in the coming months. Visit www.MelangedeBlanc.com for additional details.

Industry News

Needleman's celebrates 100-year legacy of serving brides

Needleman's Bridal and Formal celebrated 100 years of business in Vermont with a special event held late October at its South Burlington location.

Currently owned and operated by Mark and Heather Needleman, the family-run business first opened its doors in 1925 in Newport, Vermont, and has been helping generations of Vermonters look and feel their best for life's most important occasions ever since.

Believed to be one of the oldest bridal and formalwear shops in the country continuously operated by the same family, Needleman's continues to honor its legacy of personal service and timeless style, with stores in both Newport and South Burlington.

"Since 1925 we've been helping couples say 'I do,'" said owner Mark Needleman. "Whether it's finding the gown of their dreams or the perfect suit, we want everyone who walks through our doors to feel comfortable, confident, and cared for."

Reflecting on the family legacy, and his and Heather's years of serving brides and the community, Needleman offered a simple "life lesson":



The grand opening of **Needleman's** store in 1965 featured **Marvin**, **Carol**, **Martha** and **Ed Needleman** flanking Newport mayor **Melvin Carter** (center).

"Go all in! We want every customer to look their best, whether it is a wedding, prom, or any special event," said Mark Needleman. "The photos last a lifetime, and we take that personally."

Founded in Newport, Vermont, the business began when Louis Needleman opened American Clothing in 1921. His brother Ed joined in 1923 and, with his wife Martha, opened a women's boutique in 1925 that sold out of dresses on its first day.

Bridalwear was central from the beginning. Ed and Martha's shop offered dresses, shoes, and bridal gowns with a mission to carry "everything for everybody." Their son Marvin joined in 1963 and, with his wife Carol, expanded the bridal business further by outfitting Eastern Star chapters across Vermont and shaping the store's growing reputation for elegance and service.

The next generation carried the legacy forward. Marvin and Carol's son Mark and his wife Heather expanded Needleman's into the Burlington area, where it continues to thrive today.

The Burlington store draws customers from across Vermont, New York, New Hampshire, and Canada, all seeking Needleman's expert guidance and personalized fittings. In addition to the Burlington location, the Northeast Kingdom is proudly served through an innovative traveling tuxedo service.

Needleman's reputation has always been built on outstanding customer service and deep community ties.



Mark and **Heather Needleman**, at their store's 100th anniversary celebration.



Needleman's has been a proud supporter of Make A Wish for more than 20 years, donating \$50,000+. Pictured: **Emily Malley**, Make a Wish foundation; **Mark** and **Heather Needleman**.

From dyeing shoes by hand the night before a wedding to chasing down packages during a UPS strike, the Needleman family has always gone the extra mile

What sets Needleman's apart from online retailers is the one-on-one experience. Every fitting and selection is handled directly with the customer, ensuring they feel confident and cared for:

After 100 years, the name Needleman's still stands for service, style, and family. And thanks to the passion of each generation, it continues to flourish.

Needleman's has not only endured, it has triumphed. Through the rise of big box stores, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the digital transformation brought on by the internet, Needleman's Bridal & Formal has continued to succeed by staying



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true to its core values: exceptional service, personalized care, and a curated selection that speaks to every generation.

For additional details, visit www.needlemansbridal.com.

Products/Services

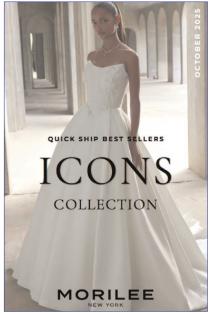
Morilee launches Icons quick ship collection

Morilee New York has launched it latest Quick Ship Program enabling retailers to receive select bestselling gowns in a fraction of the company's usual lead time.

Curated from its most in-demand lcons Collection designs, these 25 styles are each available for immediate delivery, backed by a significant investment in inventory to support this initiative.

"The program answers the modern bride's need for flexibility and instant gratification," explained **Molly Rusk**, Morilee New York's Senior Director, SEO and Digital.

"And it empowers our retail part-



Morilee New York's Quick Ship Best Sellers from its lcons collection was launched in October. Pictured: cover of 16-page look book featuring 25 available gowns.

ners to saye 'yes' to more brides. By keeping high-performing styles readily available, we empower stores to close sales confidently and meet last-minute



Morilee New York program includes styles Sandie and Shay (pictured).

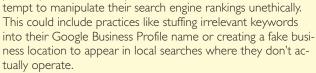
requests, strengthening both customer satisfaction and sell-through," she added.

Quick Ship program assortment is continually refreshed to feature current bestsellers, including timeless ball gowns, romantic A-lines, and sleek modern looks, making Quick Ship not only fast but fashion-relevant year-round.

For additional details on Morilee New York Icons Quick Ship dresses, contact your local or regional Morilee sales rep.

Whistle-blowing on your competitors

Maintaining a level playing field is crucial for all vendors. Sometimes, however, you may encounter competitors who at-

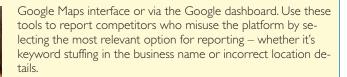


These tactics can distort client perceptions and unfairly divert potential business.

If you notice competitors engaging in deceptive practices, you can act as a whistleblower. Reporting these actions to Google isn't about maliciously undercutting competition; it's about ensuring that all businesses play by the rules that make the marketplace fair for everyone.

Here's how you can responsibly handle such situations:

- Verify the Misconduct. Before taking any action, make sure that what you're observing is indeed a violation of Google's policies. Review the specific guidelines regarding Google Business Profiles to confirm that the behavior in question is prohibited.
- Report Through Proper Channels: Google provides a way to report incorrect or misleading information directly through the



- *Provide Evidence:* When submitting your report, include any evidence that supports your claims. This might be screenshots, detailed descriptions of the misconduct, and any patterns you've noticed over time. The clearer your report, the easier for Google to assess and take appropriate action.
- Stay Professional. Remember, the goal is to maintain integrity within the industry, not to engage in negative tactics yourself. Keep your communications factual and professional, focusing on the issue and how it affects fair competition and consumer choice.

By taking these steps, you're contributing to a trustworthy environment where couples can make informed decisions based on merit and genuine reputation, not manipulated search results.

— Alan Berg and Brian Lawrence

Reprinted with permission from recent book on Website and SEO strategies by acclaimed speakers, authors and wedding industry consultants

Alan Berg and Brian Lawrence entitled "From Browsing to Booking...

Website and SEO Strategies for Wedding and Event Pros."

Their book is available at www.shopalanberg.com. For information on Alan's Sales Training, Speaking and Consulting, visit www.AlanBerg.com.

For information on Brian's web design and seo services, visit www.BrianLawrence.com.

Tidbits continued on page 38

Continued from page 37

The Reality of Resale Bridal Gowns: A Data-Driven Look at Second-Hand Wedding Dress Demand in the US

The bridal industry is constantly influenced by changing consumer values and digital media. A pervasive narrative suggests an explosive growth, or "boom," in the second-hand wedding dress market, primarily driven by consumer desires for sustainability and affordability.

We challenge that narrative by providing an empirical analysis of consumer search behavior in the United States from 2017 to 2025.

The results:

- Absolute Market Disparity (Scale): The US primary market is overwhelmingly dominant. General wedding dress search terms generate approximately 981,100 monthly searches, a volume that is 37 times larger than the combined 26,400 monthly searches for all second-hand terms.
- Primary Market Trend (Channel Shift): Interest in the general term "Wedding Dresses" shows a signifcant long-term decline (index 72 in 2017 to 52 in 2025). This is the most critical finding, signaling a massive channel shift where brides are increasingly moving to visual platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest) for discovery, reducing reliance on Google Search.
- Second-Hand Trend (Combined Stability): When the three specific second-hand search terms are combined into a Weighted Composite Index (weighted by their absolute volume), the segment's interest, relative to its own history, is also declining. More critically, the second-hand segment's popularity, when measured against the general "Wedding Dresses" index, has remained at/stable since 2017 (Relative Ratio: 0.843 in 2017 vs. 0.848 in 2025).
- Strategic Implication: The second-hand segment is not gaining significant relative ground on the primary market and remains a fractional part of the total market scale. Brands must prioritize adapting to the channel shift and reinforcing the core value propositions of new dresses.

The combined analysis of scale and trend provides three critical mandates for US bridal brands:



I. Prioritize the Channel Shift: The declining "Wedding Dresses" trend is the most significant threat. Brands must increase investment and focus on visually-driven social platforms (Pinterest, Insta-

gram, TikTok) to recapture the market discovery process.

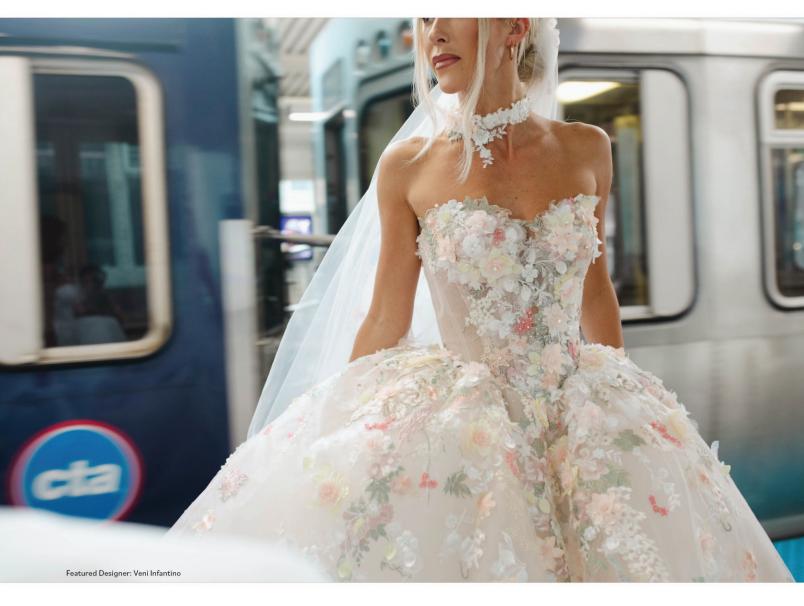
- 2. Reinforce Core Value over Affordability: The primary market's sheer scale (37:1 ratio) proves that most brides still choose new. Marketing should emphasize the unique value propositions of new dresses, such as:
- Emotional Significance: The "first time" experience
- Perfect Fit and Personalization: The security of bespoke sizing and professional alterations.
- Sustainability: Proactively promote the ethical sourcing and sustainable processes of new collections to neutralize the second-hand market's eco-friendly claim.
- Manage Resale Expectations: The combined trend data shows that the resale segment is not growing its relative share of the market. Brands should acknowledge the segment exists but allocate resources proportionate to its fractional absolute size (2.7% of the total search volume) rather than fearing an exaggerated competitive threat.

Bridify app connects retailers with engaged brides who love their dream dress and are ready to book an appointment. Currently limited to the UK, Bridify is ondergoing an expansion into the North American bridal market. Details can be found at **www.bridifyapp.com**.

- James Waddington, Bridify co-founder







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Seen in New York

One Fine Day

Melange de Blanc

New York Bridal Market events, designers and venues.



Designers at the Essex Bridal Market

After a successful October NYBW market at the **Designers at the Essex New York Bridal Market**, exhibitors saw a 85% increase in buyer traffic from last season, according to show promoter Angela Carey.

"Our retailers traveled from across the globe from Korea, China, Europe and across the United States," said Carey, "with 90% of our exhibitors picking up new stores and surpassing their expected sales goals."

Categories presented during the two-day show held at the JW Marriott Essex House in Manhattan, included:

For bridal:

Tony Ward Le Spose Di Gio Cortana House of Idan Kelly Chase Couture The Atelier by Professor Jimmy Choo OBE

For social occasion:

Maison Murad Tina di Martina Designs The MCC Brand Kelly Chase Bridal

Designers at the Essex House next bridal Market is April 8-9, 2026, where it will be hosting an invitation-only launch party the morning of Wednesday, April 8, hosting designers, retailers, press and high-profile media.

"This party will announce our official debut into bridal as we step forward with renowned designers from around the world," Carey added "We have space for 15 bridal designers to participate in our launch party exhibition, where we will have live models showcasing designs while buyers and press enjoy passed hors d'oeurves, speciality coffees and cocktails."

For additional details for next season's event, visit www.DesignersattheEssex.com.



Dessy's New York showroom

Dessy Group Spring 2026 Collection Highlights

The **Dessy Group**'s Spring 2026 collection showcases trendy vibes with cool textures, dreamy prints and killer cuts, featuring an impressive array of bridesmaid dresses in rich jewel tones like burgundy lace and olive green satin, alongside romantic floral prints, and champagne hues in luxurious fabrics including satin twill, crepe and magnolia floral tulle.

Retailers who viewed the collections in New York during Bridal Week gave Dessy Group rave reviews, praising the brand's ability to blend timeless elegance with on-trend designs that appeal to today's fashion-forward bridal parties. View the collections at https://looklive.dessy.com/.



House of Idan's **Crawford**, from its Fall 2026 collection.

House of Idan - FW26 Collection

Bathed in the timeless glamour of old Hollywood, the House of Idan's Fall 2026 bridal collection channels the magnetic allure of silver-screen sirens – women whose strength, confidence, and sensuality captivated the world.

Inspired by the effortless poise of stars like Lana Turner, Rita Hayworth, and Ava Gardner, each design celebrates a bride who owns her moment, moving with the same bold elegance and intoxicating presence that once lit up the golden age of cinema.

Luxe fabrics, sculpted silhouettes, and subtle, smoldering details pay homage to a time when style was an art form and femininity was power – reminding us that true beauty lies not just in the gown, but in the woman who commands the room.

www.houseofidan.com.



Justin Alexander Signature Fall/Winter 2026 Collection Inspiration Rebel Romance

The Justin Alexander Signature Fall/Winter collection balances daring innovation with timeless craftsmanship.

Luxe liquid fabrications of organza and satin flow with effortless drama, while textured skirts with basque waistlines rise into couture volume creating silhouettes that demand attention.

Metallic rebellion shimmers thorough ornate beading and lavish embellishments, a

daring counterpoint to sculptural rosettes and inverted necklines that reimagine bridal traditions.

This collection embodies romance unbound – an intoxicating fusion of strength and softness, tradition and transformation. It is where devotion meets defiance, and every gown becomes a vow to break the rules beautifully.



Blanc de Perez Fall collection by Lazaro

Maison Perez and Blanc de Perez by Lazaro Fall 2026 Collections

The **Maison Perez** and **Blanc de Perez** runway presentation unveiled a new era of couture from designer **Lazaro**.

Sculptural silhouettes, intricate embellishment, and the unmistakable romance of Lazaro's designs were evident in both collections.

Ashdon Brands premiered Lazaro's latest creations in a stunning double feature runway event held at St. Bartholomew's Church in Manhattan. www.ashdonbrands.com

Dreams by Lihi Hod 2026 Collection Inspiration

In a quiet château just beyond Paris, light spilled across ancient stone and silk; a mo-



Dreams by Lihi Hod

ment that became the heart of LUMIÈRE, the newest bridal collection from **Lihi Hod**'s **Dreams** line.

Meaning light in French, LUMIÈRE is an ode to radiance in its most delicate form: the soft glow that lives within every woman. Inspired by stillness, refinement, and the poetry of simplicity, the collection captures the grace of natural light as it moves — subtle, fluid, and eternal. It is a meditation on beauty, designed for those who understand that true luxury lies in restraint.

Each gown in LUMIÈRE carries the meticulous discipline of haute couture with the quiet modernity that defines Lihi Hod. Silhouettes range from sculptural mikado ball gowns with architectural ruching and hand-finished corsetry to ethereal lace sheaths that trace the body with precision and ease. Layers of silk taffeta, embroidered tulle, and floral lace evoke the duality of structure and softness. Thoughtful details like detachable bows, refined draping, and delicate boning reflect Lihi Hod's signature craftsmanship, honed at the House of Dior. The palette remains luminous and pure, allowing texture and tailoring to speak as the ultimate form of elegance.

www.lihihod.com



Nicole + Felicia

Nicole + Felicia Fall 2026 Collection Inspiration

This 10-year anniversary collection celebrates the craftsmanship at the heart of **Nicole + Felicia**, honoring the artistry passed down through decades of family production heritage.

Every stage of creation, from sketch to stitch, is executed with meticulous care to achieve flawless quality and its signature aesthetic.

Refined corsetry sits at the heart of the collection, paired with dramatic yet impeccably engineered structure that highlights the body's natural shape. Signature floral elements with elegant, clean lines — a hallmark of Nicole + Felicia — soften the architecture and bring a sense of organic movement.

www.nicoleandfelicia.com

Seen in New York - Melange de Blanc

Continued from page 41

Melange de Blanc New York Bridal Market

The Melange de Blanc Bridal Market, held at an event facility at 5th Avenue in Manhattan, showcased more than 35 domestic and international gown and accessory designers during its lively three-day program, including key designers as part of the The Fringe Collective.

"What made this season's Mélange de Blanc so special was the sense of connection and collaboration," said Kimberly Marcoux, co-owner of Mélange de Blanc. "From buyers discovering their next bestsellers to exhibitors sharing their artistry and passion, there was a shared excitement that reminded us why this community is so extraordinary. Everyone was really embracing innovation, individuality, and mutual support and respect for each other and it was really special to see."

Ámong the sponsors for the October event: Dressit; ANDMORE Formal Markets; House of Bernal Flowers; JMC Photo Booths; Lova Candles; Luxe Redux Bridal; The Wedding Gown Specialists, and VOWS

Key bridal trends on display at the Melange de Blanc program, and identified by Marcoux:

Bows - The more the better and Stephanie Cachapuz proved that.



Intentional Volume - Evidenced by Eve of Milady and ARHA.







Tal Kedem Bridal Couture

Sculpted and Drop Waist Corsets -Shown by Tal Kedem Bridal Couture, and Vagabond.



Texture - Examples... Daniella Marie, and Knightly







Annarita

Color - As in Annarita.



Bridal Suits - Distinctive styling from Amoretalla, and Justyna Smart.



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Seen in New York - One Fine Day

2026 Bridal Trends from October's New York Bridal Market by One Fine Day

New York Bridal Market by **One Fine Day** returned to Canoe Studios for New York's premiere event during Bridal Fashion Week providing an unforgettable three-day showcase filled with high vibes, pretty things, sparkle, and inspiration.

This season featured a beautifully curated lineup of more than 40 fashion-forward designers from around the globe. From new collection launches and trunk shows to exclusive showcases and panel discussions, the event was definitely a highlight of the bridal industry – a celebration of creativity, craftsmanship, and community.

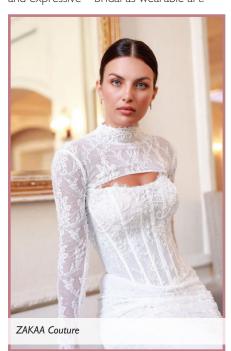
Additionally **Weddingpro** provided a stunning lounge and delicious treats, **Kylie Minogue** wines and bubbles, and **Angie & Naomi Photo Co** captured the event's best moments through incredible photography. A special thank you was extended to **Hayley Paige, Nayri Kalayjian**, and **Esther Lee**, Deputy Editor of **The Knot**, for joining us on "The Business of Bridal: Gen Z, Social Media & the New Sales Playbook" panel and sharing their invaluable expertise and industry insights.

New York Bridal Market by One Fine Day will be returning in April 2026.

Here are the standout trends that defined the week:

Couture Craftsmanship & Artistry

From the haute-couture elegance of **ZAKAA Couture** to the custom artistry of independent ateliers, gowns shimmered with hand-beaded embellishments, 3D florals, and sculptural draping. Designers leaned into craftsmanship that felt personal and expressive – bridal as wearable art.





Madi Lane Bridal Group

Elevated Minimalism

Clean lines, fluid structure, and architectural precision were everywhere. Designers including **Kelly Lin, Maison Oui**, and **Madi Lane** championed the quiet confidence of minimalism, proving that pared-back silhouettes can still captivate. Subtle texture, bias cuts, and asymmetric necklines gave these simple gowns a refined depth that felt modern and effortless.



BECCAR

Romantic Lavers

Soft tulle, translucent lace, and ethereal overlays created movement and lightness across the collections. Collections from **BECCAR**, **Viero Bridal**, and **Viviana Urrea** embraced volume and transparency, offering brides a modern take on romanticism that felt fresh – not fussy.



Elizabeth Lee

Colors & Accent Tones

While classic white and ivory remained foundational, designers weren't afraid to experiment. Collections from **Imolacy** and **Elizabeth Lee** featured hints of blush, champagne, and even bold black — bringing warmth and dimension to traditional palettes.



Statement Sleeves & Dramatic Details

Sleeves made their mark in every form detachable, puffed, sculptural, and sheer. Trains swept dramatically through showrooms, and open backs or exaggerated bows added the perfect moment of theatre. Designers like **Bo Lee** and **Shikoba Bride** blurred the line between bridal and red carpet, creating looks that felt bold and unapologetically modern.

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Continued from page 43



Pnina Tornai Kintsugi Couture

Pnina Tornai "Kintsuai" 2026 Couture

"I don't believe in camouflaging your cracks-you cannot heal until you acknowledge where you are broken. This collection is about the beauty found in imperfections, once you accept them. Imperfection isn't a bad thing-you cannot live life without breaking. Imperfection is a sign of a life truly lived

"I chose to call this collection **Kintsugi**, the golden healing, after the ancient Japanese art of mending precious ceramics with gold. I believe that we all carry gold in our hearts, and once we agree to share it with others, we become part of the healing energy of this world.

"I shot this collection in Jerusalem, the city of gold, because Jerusalem is the city that unites the world's three great monotheistic religions. It is time to heal all that is broken and spread our threads of gold-and we will be stronger and more beautiful than ever before."

— Nina Tornai



Reem Acra

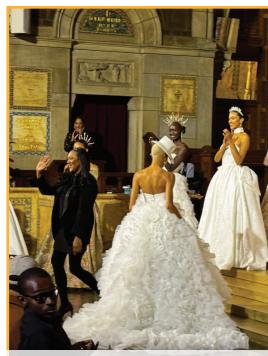
Reem Acra Signature FW26 Collection Inspiration

The Lightness of Winter "I feel this collection is my most ethereal yet — weightless and luminous, like air itself. It carries the essence of my signature style — voluminous ballgowns, sweeping capes, fluid bias cuts, and the intricate embroideries that have become our hallmark — but reimagined with a lighter touch.

"Some of these silhouettes I haven't revisited in years, yet they feel perfectly of this moment when rendered with such delicacy. Even our embroideries have taken on a whisper-light feel, from the three-dimensional flowers to the signature embroidered bows that dance across a gossamer silk chiffon cape. Worn over a strapless column, it becomes effortlessly modern.

"The palette is entirely white, kissed with silvery light and the faintest blue undertone – like moonlight on snow. I adore tulle for its dreamlike texture, and here, I've even braided it to create an otherworldly effect – romantic, celestial, and impossibly light."

Reem Acra



Yumi Katsura by Paulette Cleghorn

Yumi Katsura Fall 2026"Symphony II" Bridal Collection by Paulette Cleghorn

Timeless Romance & Modern Majesty From whispers of vintage charm to sweeping statements of grandeur, this collection celebrates the bride who embraces both tradition and bold individuality.

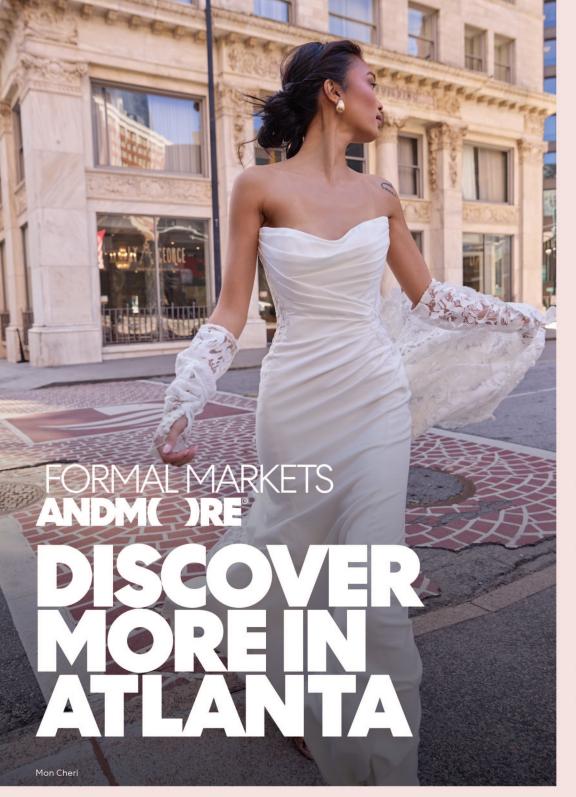
Crafted in the most exquisite fabrics and adorned with couture details, each gown tells its own love story – united by a shared devotion to elegance.

"From timeless tradition and vintage charm to bold modernity and regal grandeur. Each gown is a testament to craftsmanship, designed to make every bride feel radiant, confident, and utterly unforgettable on her most magical day. With fabrics that shimmer, silhouettes that flatter, and details that tell a story, these dresses don't just dress the bride – they crown her in moments of everlasting elegance and romance."

- Paulette Cleghorn

Melange de Blanc

One Fine Day







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Sales success extends far beyond the transactional. It is highly dependent on your ability to stand apart, providing exceptional, elevated shopping experiences or, as Rina Cerdiera, co-owner of Rina's Bridal Boutique & Atelier in Jackson, Tenn., sees it, the opportunity with every bride to support "a journey... one that you're in with the bride, walking with the bride, even emotionally invested in with her."

To her point, a couple of years ago, VOWS introduced a then-emerging term called "hospitality training" (as opposed to "sales training") to more reflect accurately the genuine experience boutiques strive to provide their brides and other guests. The idea was to reframe the sales mindset by aligning with the hospitality approach of evoking pampering care, experience-driven service.

Today, we believe in this concept more so than ever; everything in your training and customer experience should be shaped by the hospitality lens to deliver exceptional, personalized experiences. Let's dive into some updated hospitality training tips, plus strategies that support a culture of hospitality retail.

It Starts With a Shift in Thoughts & Words

The language you use matters. How you talk about training and retail experiences can absolutely create a powerful shift that impacts the thoughts, actions and success of your staff.

Without a doubt, the term "sales training" carries a very twodimensional, transactional feel. It implies a pushy approach or techniques solely designed to overcome objections and earn the sale at all costs.

Meanwhile, "hospitality training" shifts the energy to a deeper level of connection and service, catering to and celebrating the bride. It sets a tone – hospitality is about warmth, care and genuine connection. How you set expectations around and talk about training can directly impact how your team members view their jobs.

Given that the language you use plays a powerful role in the hospitality approach, choose words that intentionally invite, celebrate and support the bride and her party to help create an experience that feels personal, not transactional.

Take a look at these examples that

highlight language based in transactional sales vs. hospitality sales:

Transactional (Sales-Focused)

"Let me know if you need help."

Hospitality (Experience-Focused)

"I'm here to guide you every step of the way. Would you like me to start by bringing you a few different gowns so you can give me feedback on what feels like a good direction for you?"

Transactional (Sales-Focused)

"Appointments are required. Do you want to book one?" Hospitality (Experience-Focused)

"We'd love to welcome you in for a personal appointment and make that experience special for you! Do you have a date in mind that might work?"

Transactional (Sales-Focused)

"Do you have a budget?"

Hospitality (Experience-Focused)

"Let's talk about what feels comfortable for you financially so we can find the perfect gown within your price range."

Transactional (Sales-Focused)

"Are you ready to buy today?"

Hospitality (Experience-Focused)

"What do you think about what you've tried on so far today? We want you to feel confident in your choice!"

Transactional (Sales-Focused)

"This gown is marked down." Hospitality (Experience-Focused)

"I thought of this gown because it fits your vision beautifully – and it happens to be a great value, too."

Put it into practice: In your next

Choose words carefully - the language you use matters!

training session, review those examples with your team. Ask each team member to come up with their own instances of transaction-focused language, then brainstorm alternatives that better reflect the hospitality mindset.

Sales v. Hospitality Training: A deep dive

When exploring the differences and similarities between sales and hospitality training, start by looking at some online reviews/Google reviews (either your store's or another's), mining examples of behaviors that have come across as a bit too salesy or less customer-focused.

Traditional sales training emphasizes closing, handling objections and increasing the size of the sale. It's goal-focused over people-focused, valuing first and foremost techniques to overcome problems and promote urgency and upselling.

These are valuable, evergreen skills your stylists do need; however, this old-school approach comes with the implication that a sale must be made at all costs, putting your needs ahead of the bride's.

On the other hand, hospitality training focuses on experience – creating comfort, building trust and helping brides feel like their most special selves.

Brian Fortin, co-owner of Modern Bride & Formal Shop in Bedford, N.H., says modern sales center around making sure the client is getting what she wants.

"It's really about making her happy and feeling welcome through all kinds of tangible and intangible things," he says. "Even just walking up to her and greeting her with a warm smile is really important... our goal is to help her find a dress... and that's one reason our staff is wage-based, not commission."

Janiah Delancy, a lead bridal stylist at Ania Bridal in Portland, Ore., builds on that point.

"From start to finish, it's getting to know my bride on a personal level and genuinely caring for her experience, listening to her, and getting that trust in the beginning," Delancy says.

Every aspect of hospitality training supports staff in their efforts to put the customer at the center of your care. This is done by coaching them on how to bring in information, resources, product, additional staff and special experiential touches that empower the bride and carry her throughout the shopping journey. It empowers the entire team to



Modern Bride & Formal Shop of Bedford, N.H., writes the names of every bride who comes into the store on a glass wall at the entrance, a way to communicate upfront to customers that they matter.

feel as if they've helped a bride fulfill her dreams.

To that point, there are definitely some commonalities between transactional hospitality sales training. Both require building and sustaining product knowledge, confidence and excellent communication skills. And both ultimately lead to the same goal: a happy bride who says yes, not only to the dress but boutique, your relationship with her, and the incredible value you add to her experience.

The result? A mutually beneficial outcome, including meeting your store and staff's performance goals.

At the end of the day, it's really just about doing the right thing for your brides. It's practicing authentic kindness and making sure your training focuses on that core value because that is ultimately best for all parties involved.

"We are not car salesmen or some traveling circus performing tricks before we flee town," Cerdiera says. "It's a 'do unto

A BARBAR O

It's about doing the right thing and practicing authentic kindness.

others as you would have them do unto you' approach.'"

Put it into practice: Support your staff in creating hospitality experiences by...

• Setting the tone, putting expectations in writing. It's important to clearly define expectations for your team so there's no confusion about your store's values and how everyone contributes when it comes to creating a culture of hospitality. Document what you expect in job descriptions, employee manuals and other onboarding materials — not just in training sessions.

Revisit these expectations in meetings to ensure staff always understands that your focus is on creating exceptional customer experiences, not a sales-first environment. Also, remember that as the storeowner or

manager, it's your job to model the behavior you expect through verbal and nonverbal communication cues.

Speaking of expectations, training your team to set expectations for the bride is also a way to ensure a hospitable experience for all. This can occur when scheduling an appointment, as well as the day of their appointment, when reviewing important aspects of the shopping experience.

• Correctly frame the stylist's role. Encourage stylists to think of themselves as hosts, not just salespeople. In training, ask them: What makes a great host? Draw up a list of answers with your team and discuss what each element means and how it can translate into thoughts, words and actions, as well as the store's look and vibe.

Have stylists give examples and take ownership of how they can improve upon thinking and behaving as a gracious host. What new effort or process can make a big difference? It could be writing customer thank-you cards or wowing customers with unexpected tokens of personalization.

Cerdiera has implemented what she calls "rush week," where a stylist is randomly selected to fluff every dress in the boutique to I) make sure it looks regularly fresh and lovely for customers; and 2) to get reacquainted or remain familiar with the gowns, their features, styles, etc., by touching and really looking at each dress. This brush-up of the store helps staff brush up the brain, ensuring they are top-of-the-game when it comes to product knowledge and com-



Staff have ample opportunities to provide custom touches at **Rina's Bridal** in Jackson, Tenn. Brid<mark>es</mark> receive a sketch of their gown and flowers in their weddings' colors as a token of appreciation.

municating accurate information to brides.

• Elevate the experience. If you're not doing so already, offer celebratory touches champagne toasts, a photo wall or their names featured in the dressing room, or little gifts that go the extra mile. The industry has quickly caught on to this practice, making it a commonplace but highly valued aspect of bridal shopping today. Even five years ago, not so many stores provided VIP experiences – it was more of a rare, highly exclusive offering. Since then, the VIP treatment has become an industry standard, so much so that many brides have come to expect that you'll offer this level of private, customized service to some degree.

In business for 40+ years now, Modern Bride & Formal Shop offers its more private-shopping experience through after-hours appointments, a special seating area with more luxurious, comfy couches, a charcuterie board, and her name on the glass frontentrance welcome wall that elevates the experience within the first few seconds of her coming into the store.

"We don't even advertise the VIP experience and are overbooked with them, with a 98% closing ratio," Fortin says.

As well, Ania Bridal is rocking its "Ania Experience" packages, which range from its free Private Wedding Suite offering that includes, among other features, complimentary champagne and parking validation at a nearby downtown garage to its most robust package, the Diamond Package, with an array of perks such as catering, a longer

Let the bride talk more than you to build trust.

appointment, more guests, upgraded champagne, parking right across the street, and more.

That said, the experience really starts with the visit to their website, where brides can watch a beautiful video about what to expect from Ania Bridal – elevated service, feelings of joy, bonding between the stylist and the customer, alterations, and more.

According to boutique owner Pamela Tan, Ania Bridal also takes personalized measures in advance of the bride setting foot in the door, such as through an extensive pre-interview with the bride, which enables the store to get a feel for her personality and needs, then pairs her up with the stylist who will be the best fit. The intention behind everything they do builds connection and trust, the critical underpinnings of sales.

Require active listening. Remind your staff that it's their job to ask thoughtful questions remember the details that matter most to the bride. Whether it's over the phone or by text, when you're hosting the first or last appointment, or responding to an online review long after the sale, take notes – whether written or mental - and use your listening skills, following the 80/20 rule: listening and asking open-ended questions 80 percent of the time, talking 20 percent of the time.

"My consultants are so extroverted, and we love talking to brides," Cerdiera says. "But let her talk more than you and practice calm communication. We do a lot of role play around this with

mock-up appointments... such as with a shy bride or a difficult bride. . . and practice how we would respond."

Also don't forget to remind your staff about the importance of empathy as they listen to and relate with brides. Recognize the emotional weight of this purchase, and meet each bride where she is – excited, nervous, overwhelmed, etc.

"We practice active listening, calm communication and empathy, putting ourselves in the bride's shoes, remembering it's her appointment, not ours," Cerdiera says. "Role play is probably 30% of our training."

Fortin echoes that, noting that sometimes stylists can get carried away with sharing stories about their own weddings and bridal experiences. A little bit of that sharing can be useful, but the focus needs to remain on the customer, not the stylist.

Continued on page 50



Before a bride's appointment, stylists at **Ania Bridal** determine who is the best personality fit for that customer, so she is paired with someone who can meet her needs.

Continued from page 49

• Avoid being offensive at all costs. Unfortunately, some stores get a reputation for being offensive, earning negative reviews and bad word-of-mouth among customers and even storeowners.

For instance, as we know, beautiful brides come in all shapes and sizes, and one of the fastest ways to offend a customer is to talk about her size aloud or make disparaging remarks about fit or fat

"We are very delicate about how we handle measurements," Fortin says. "We don't blurt out measurements, or even sizes, but write them on paper and show them only to her. And if she's starting a family? We say, 'Wonderful!' and congratulate her. It's all about making her feel comfortable no matter what."

Take time to brainstorm with your staff to identify potential communication offenders or triggering topics that can arise with customers. Examples might include: family drama, financial stigma, race, religion, and politics – even if lighthearted or in a joking way.

You really don't know how people will take things. In training, troubleshoot with your staff how to avoid, manage or deflate those potential conversations, tactfully changing them back to the customer and her needs so as to ensure everyone present feels safe, welcome and supported.

• Remind your staff: It's ok if a sale takes time. The best decision a bride can make about her gown is the right decision about her gown. Sometimes that doesn't happen with you. And sometimes that doesn't happen

A no-pressure approach speaks louder than any tactic.

on the first visit, as frustrating as that can feel.

As Delancy says, "Don't push a bride into a sale if she's not ready. There are nonverbal cues that indicate she's iffy, not ready, or feeling nervous about such a big purchase, such as when she's got nervous hands or is looking at her family for approval and not at me. . . that's when we need to step away and let her have her moment in her gown, saying, 'I want you to feel as confident as I am that this is your gown, so let's have you talk with your family.' If she says, 'yeah, this is my gown', great, but if she needs to sleep on it, so be it. Either way, we want to support her...if you offer her a great experience, there's a good chance she'll come back."

• Keep the bride's best interest at heart. When you know a bride has tried on what could quite possibly be "the dress" yet has appointments scheduled elsewhere, it can be heartbreaking to watch her walk out that door. Yet we all know it happens despite having rock-star service and incredible gowns.

Again, the no-pressure approach is your only friend and making sure your stylists know this, despite their potential frustration, is really important in upholding a customer-focused sales environment. Even when the bride shares with you her intentions to visit other stores, you and your team can genuinely have concern for her and express that in a non-pressuring, empathetic

way.

"A lot of stores will try to discourage the bride from shopping elsewhere," Tan says. "But we just ask where she is going and, without saying anything negative, try to educate them as to what we do best or differently."

And, importantly, they invite the bride to come back after that next appointment.

"It expresses to the bride that we really do feel we are the best option," Tan says. "And if she expresses to us that she has many more (stores) to visit, we do tell her that we feel it's in her best interest to go to just one more store so as to not be overwhelmed and confused or ruin her overall experience."

As Delancy adds, "We put it like, 'Don't let it take the magic away. . . and don't take away this moment for yourself. If you feel like this is your dress, let's have your moment now!"

Ultimately, embracing a hospitality mindset transforms every interaction from being simply a transaction into a meaningful, memorable experience. When teams lead with care, connection and trust, brides feel valued, supported and celebrated throughout their journey – not just consumers being "sold to."

Handled consistently with the collaborative, proactive support of your staff, this approach will build lasting relationships, elevate and sustain your store's reputation, and naturally drive sales in a way that feels authentic and mutually rewarding. By centering hospitality at the heart of training and culture, you will create an environment where brides, staff and bottom line can truly thrive.

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After a pandemic-induced drop, the number of annual marriages in the U.S. has settled back in above the healthy and familiar two million mark.

Good news, bridal retailers: While the wedding market has its share of headwinds and challenges, the future is relatively bright, especially with one head-line-grabbing "Love Story" promising to inject enthusiasm and energy into the marketplace.

The Wedding Report's 2024 United States Wedding Market Statistics & Analysis pegs the total annual expenditure on U.S. weddings at more than \$63 billion and says the average wedding cost of \$31,428 in 2024 shows "couples are willing to invest significantly in their event, creating

Forecasts project steady 6-7% growth moving forward.

high-value opportunities for professional vendors."

That's the present, but what about the future?

Grand View Research projects the U.S. wedding services market to grow at a compounded annual growth rate of 6.8 percent from 2025 to 2030. Meanwhile, the United States Wedding Services Market Size and Share Analysis –

Growth Trends and Forecast Report 2025-2033 predicts a similarly healthy growth rate of six percent and foresees the U.S. wedding services market reaching \$106 billion by 2033. If those respective forecasts bear out, wedding industry vendors, including bridal boutiques, can look forward to a compelling future.

VOWS takes an earnest look at the data and what could lie ahead...

The total number of weddings is holding stable, but...

From 2000-2019, the annual

number of marriages in the U.S. sat in the 2-2.3 million range. Not surprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic pushed those numbers down to 1.6 million and 1.9 million in 2020 and 2021, respectively. In 2022, however, the overall marriage tally climbed to more than two million, where it remains. In 2024, the U.S. hosted 2,015,701 weddings and credible estimates say we'll close 2025 with more than two million marriages as well.

While not the 2.3 million-plus figures the U.S. saw around the turn of the century, the return to more than two million annual weddings for multiple years running signals "consistent and reliable demand for wedding services, providing a substantial client base for vendors across this market year after year," concludes The Wedding Report's 2024 United States Wedding Market Statistics & Analysis.

Now, one interesting caveat to these figures: the rate of marriages has dropped considerably this century, falling from 8.2 per 1,000 residents in 2000 to 6.1 in 2023, according to U.S. government data. In short, the nation's population growth is keeping the total number of weddings stable. But if the nation's population growth slows, it is reasonable to expect the total number of weddings to dip as well.

That said, here's the good news: while U.S. population growth is expected to decline, most estimates, including forecasts from the Congressional Budget Office, don't see that occurring at any reasonably significant level for another three decades. Now much can change in the interim, namely immigra-

Two-thirds of unmarried adults under 50 hope to marry someday.

tion, but there appears to be a healthy number of potential brides in the near-term pipeline.

By and large, young women want to say "I do"

Last New Year's Eve, a Wall Street Journal headline asked: "What Happens When a Whole Generation Never Grows Up?" The Journal cited "a mix of social and economic factors" holding an entire generation back from conventional markers of adulthood, including marriage. The Journal openly wondered if "what researchers once called a lag is starting to look more like a permanent state of arrested development." On the marriage front, the authors cited an Institute for Family Studies forecast that a third of today's young adults will never marry as further proof of stunted growth.

Admittedly, that's a gloomy forecast. Dig further, however, and reason for optimism

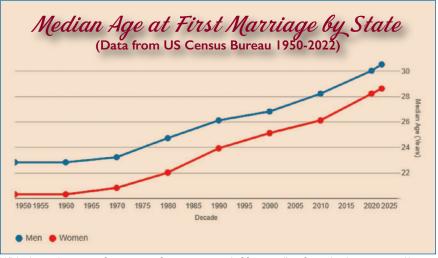
emerges.

While Millennials and Gen Z are setting up to be the most unhitched and marriage-reluctant generation in modern U.S. history, many are still getting married – albeit later in life and at a slower pace than previous generations. Even better, many express a desire to get married.

To the latter point, two in three adults under 50 who have never married say they want to get married someday, according to the Pew Research Center. Per-



While the marriage rate is falling and women are marrying later in life, women are still interested in saying "I do." In fact, three out of four non-LGBTQ adults ages 18-29 say they want to get married someday, according to Pew Research Center data.



While the median age at first marriage for women is nearly 29 nationally, a figure that has risen steadily over the last 75 years, that number varies greatly across the country. Utah has the lowest median age for women at first marriage at 25.3 while the District of Columbia ranks highest at age 31.7.

haps more interesting and surely encouraging, three out of four non-LGBTQ adults ages 18-29 report they want to tie the knot while only six percent of that cohort show no interest in marriage. Simply put, younger individuals are overwhelmingly hopeful they will say "I do" at some point, which is a positive sign for the bridal marketplace.

No question the institution of marriage has taken its hits. And yet, there remains a still-healthy number of individuals in the 20-50 year-old set who want to get married. People might delay getting hitched, but they're not giving up on marriage altogether and, in fact, hope to marry someday.

Speaking of age...

As to the issue of age, the median age for a first marriage in 2024 was 30.2 for men and 28.6 for women, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Those figures represent the continuation of a longstanding climb in the marriage age. (In 1950, for instance, men were married at an average age of 22.8 and women at 20.3.) The reasons behind the rising ages are varied and layered, from financial considerations to changing societal views around marriage to emotional maturity to wild shifts in dating rituals.

So, what's the rising median age of couples mean for bridal vendors, including dress boutiques?

Well, unlike previous generations in which parents traditionally covered most wedding expenses, Grand View's forecast of the U.S. Wedding Services Market notes many contemporary couples, by virtue of being older, are paying for their own weddings.

"This shift gives them more

Couples are investing in personalized, premium celebrations.

control over their budgets and allows them to spend on customized and premium services that reflect their personal preferences," Grand View reports. "The rise of dual-income households has also played a role, as couples with higher disposable incomes are willing to invest in lavish weddings, including high-end venues, designer wedding attire, personalized entertainment and elaborate floral arrangements."

By and large, older brides represent a positive trend for the bridal market. With increased age, they are more apt to be financially secure and positioned to invest in the wedding services they desire, including attire.

Marriage rates among U.S. ethnic and racial groups are falling – except for one group

While the U.S. is an increasingly pluralistic society with individuals



Faith-based wedding ceremonies set in places of worship are increasingly giving way to weddings in gardens, barns, wineries and other distinct venues.

of different races, ethnicities and religions marrying one another, marriage rates differ across racial and ethnic groups.

According to USA Facts, marriage rates over recent decades have declined across all races and ethnicities except one: Asian men and women. In 2024, 61 percent of Asian men and 62 percent of Asian women were married, a number that has remained relatively stable over the last 35 years.

By contrast, marriage rates among people who identify as white, Hispanic or Black have been dropping since the late 20th century. From 1990-2024, the marriage rate for white men dropped from 63 to 54 percent while the marriage rate for white women declined from 59 percent to 52 percent. Among Blacks, marriage rates have slid from 45 to 38 percent for men and from 40 to 33 percent for women. Marriage rates among Hispanics dropped the most, decreasing 10 percent for men and II percent for women since 1990.

Faith-based weddings are on the decline

Once the norm, the number of faith-based wedding ceremonies in the U.S. has continued to slide, a reality tied to broader societal shifts like declining religious affiliation among younger generations and greater interest in civil ceremonies. According to Zola, more than half of weddings are officiated by loved ones and nearly one in three couples are having religion-free weddings.

In the Catholic faith, specifically, there were 151,364 Catholic marriages registered in the United States in 2014. One decade later, the 175 Latin-rite

dioceses in the U.S. celebrated 107,051 weddings, according to the Official Catholic Directory. That's a 34 percent decline.

The decreasing number of faith-based weddings signals a continued break from tradition. Gardens, barns, wineries and beaches are replacing churches, chapels and temples as venues. Couples are trading ordained clergy and structured ceremonies featuring gospels and prayer for secular officiants and creative scripts quoting The Little Prince and Disney movies.

The break from tradition could mean once-standard elements of the wedding continue to fade as couples look to celebrate their collective identity and handcraft a specific vibe. Brides might become more open to non-white bridal gowns, for instance, while wedding parties, for so long 8-12 deep, could dwindle to two or zero.

In this fast-changing climate, vendors, including bridal boutiques, with experience catering to non-traditional ceremonies or a willingness to step outside time-honored norms could stand to gain. At the very least, it certainly bears monitoring how your brides are challenging convention and how their decisions might influence your inventory mix.

One alarming forecast

Before "I do," a proposal often kicks off the wedding planning in earnest – and the proposal often features a diamond ring. This makes diamond jewelry sales a bellwether for what's to come in the bridal marketplace.

Operating 2,700 retail stores as well as e-commerce sites under the Kay Jewelers, Zales, Jared and

Older brides have higher budgets and want customized experiences.

Blue Nile banners among others, Signet is the world's top retailer of diamond jewelry and the nation's largest jewelry retailer. And Signet's guidance for fiscal year 2026 isn't terribly rosy. Total sales are expected to sit between \$6.5-6.8 billion, representing a continued drop over recent years.

Now, take those figures with the proverbial grain of salt: Signet's total sales are projected to fall. Engagement sales are a part of that puzzle, but there are other pieces on the table. Nevertheless, conservative sales projections from the leading global retailer of diamond jewelry warrant some prudent attention.

Speaking of the ring...

Some brides may begin shopping for their wedding gown before a proposal, shunning warnings of bad luck to kickstart their planning. According to *The Knot* 2025 Real Weddings Study, 57 percent of couples discussed engagement and marriage more than a year before the proposal. And Gen Z is more likely than Millennials (61 to 50 percent) to start the conversation early.

Many bridal retailers loathe the customer booking an appointment without a wedding date. It screams more "dress up" than "serious buyer." It shouts "waste of time" more than "sales prospect."

However, brides without a wedding date could, in fact, be legitimate buyers and more ready than most. Let this be a reminder: consistently put your best foot

forward at all turns – even those that might not seem so promising.

Good news on the planning front

Time is on the bride's side – and yours, too.

In the U.S., couples spend an average of 15 months preparing for their big day. That engagement tenure is at least three months longer than other large markets around the world, according to *The Knot*'s 2025 Global Wedding Report, a survey of more than 33,000 newlyweds across eight countries.

Given the importance of getting special orders in early to account for manufacturing, shipping and alterations, bridal retailers should welcome more lead time – provided brides get into the boutique and make their decision



The Knot's 2025 Real Weddings Study places a bride's average wedding dress spend at \$2,100. Even as the costs of other wedding-related services climb and consume more of the budget, women continue to show a willingness to invest in their bridal gown.

in a reasonable timeframe. More leeway often translates into a more streamlined process and less stress for all involved.

Prioritizing the wedding dress

The Knot's 2025 Real Weddings Study pegs the average wedding dress spend at \$2,100, a 25-percent increase over 2018 (\$1,631).

Brides' investment in their wedding gown has remained rather steady over recent years, which is positive news given the rising costs of seemingly every other wedding-day ingredient, from food to florals to venues. It shows brides aren't cutting back on their wedding day attire even as inflation diminishes their spending power.

The tariff situation between the U.S. and China looms large here, though. Retailers have one of two ways to deal with added costs that could come from the economic tug of war between the globe's largest two economies: swallow the costs or pass the increasing costs onto consumers. At some point, many brides, besieged by rising prices elsewhere and facing budget constraints, may look to cut back on



When it comes to the top wedding dates of 2025, fall – namely, October – dominates.

The Taylor Swift effect could inject \$1.8 billion into weddings.

their gown purchase. At present, however, that doesn't seem to be the case, as the wedding dress remains a top priority.

October I do's

While December is the most popular month to get engaged in the U.S., according to reports from *The Knot*, October is home to four of the top wedding dates of 2025.

Knowing when engagements tend to tick upward and the target month of many weddings, bridal retailers can plan marketing accordingly and build specific messaging designed to spur action. For instance, a social-media post might read: "Planning an October 2026 wedding? Here's your wedding dress timeline."

The social-media push

Not surprisingly given the digitally charged lives today's younger generations lead, online platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest and YouTube are shaping wedding trends and couples' desires to have a one-of-a-kind, personalized celebration. In fact, *The Knot*'s 2025 Real Weddings Study reports 90 percent of planning takes place online.

And couples feel the strain, reasonable or not, to create aesthetically charged and unique events that show – and share – well online. In its U.S. Wedding Services Market forecast, Grand View Research says, "the pressure to create a 'Pinterest-worthy' or 'viral' wedding has led to increased spending on decor, luxury

venues and customized experiences."

The Taylor Swift-induced bridal bump

And now, the most promising development in the bridal marketplace, an event promising to "shake" the bridal industry and push all worries aside – about inflation and tariffs, about declining marriage rates, about a move away from traditional wedding elements: the impending nuptials of global icon Taylor Swift and NFL star Travis Kelce.

The August 2025 announcement of the couple's engagement resonated throughout the world thanks to Swift's international fame. (Resonated is probably an understatement, as Swift's Instagram post sharing the news is one of the 10 most-liked posts in Instagram history.) The couple's



In today's digitally charged age, many couples feel pressure to create Instagram-worthy weddings, which sparks increased spending. The average cost of a U.S. wedding is approaching \$32,000 and many prognosticators see that tally climbing steadily over the coming years.

planning and nuptials promise to romanticize the wedding experience unlike any other in decades, save perhaps the 2011 wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton.

"Their engagement and upcoming union will generate wedding enthusiasm," The Knot reported, suggesting Swift's young fans will engage in increased dialogue about weddings. "The rite of passage of weddings from a high-profile celebrity can create more interest in the cultural conversation, as reflected by the amount of coverage."

To wit, in the immediate weeks after the Swift-Kelce announcement, searches and demand for vintage and custom engagement rings climbed, according to *The Knot*.

Sparked by hot conversation around the Swift-Kelce nuptials, The Knot speculated the Taylor Swift Effect could spur a "\$1.8 billion incremental spend on U.S. weddings over the next two years," much of it fueled by the couple's decision making. Zola, meanwhile, conducted a recent survey of wedding vendors and found 96 percent believe Swift and Kelce's wedding will influence wedding trends in 2026 and 71 percent predict the couple's style and beauty choices will inspire couples' wedding trends.

"The wedding choices that Taylor and Travis make could result in what we estimate to be a significant impact on the industry," The Knot surmised, estimating people in the U.S. could spend \$200-plus million more in wedding fashion alone.

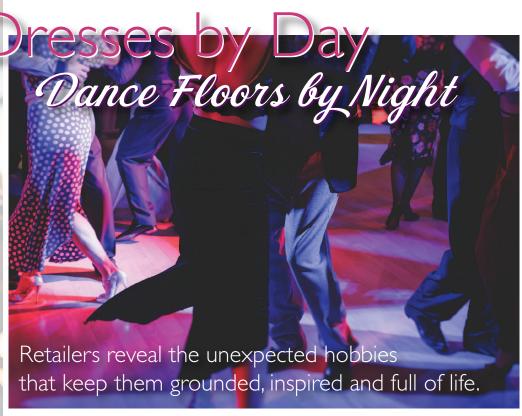
In fact, three out of five wedding professionals surveyed by

The Knot predicted fashion could see the biggest Swift-induced bump for those who are planning current or future weddings. Of note, the striped dress from Polo Ralph Lauren Swift sported during her engagement sold out the same day Swift announced the proposal on Instagram. Experts suspect Swift's entire bridal wardrobe will spark similarly wide, euphoric interest, elevating

enthusiasm about weddings and bridal fashion and perhaps even igniting higher-ticket purchases for those getting married.

"Based on the assumption that Taylor and her wedding party will buy and publicly reveal their dresses, we believe more couples will purchase dresses, and at slightly higher prices to closely mirror Taylor's likely higher-cost choices," The Knot concluded.





When the "Closed" sign goes up, the fun begins!

Behind every boutique is a passionate owner who, in addition to putting many hours into the store, also has a fulfilling life beyond its walls in the form of hobbies and passions.

These might be taken up for stress relief or exercise; to give back or simply have fun.

The one commonality is these extracurriculars round out their lives and add fulfillment. Sometimes, bridal inspiration happens as a result, too.

VOWS pulls back the curtain to take a peek at what fills owners' lives when their boutiques are closed...

Teaching cooking classes is Jennifer Thompson's hobby. Once a week, the owner of Facchianos Bridal and Formal Attire in Broken Arrow, Okla., runs a class, Cooking With Toni (her 92-year-old Italian mom), for her mother and her Italian friends at their assisted living facility. Between seven and 17 residents attend and Thompson cooks her mom's Italian recipes, which include pasta fagioli and linguine with white clam sauce.

"We talk about how we make the

food, then if there is a family story we share that, and we feed the residents once prepared," Thompson says. "We have a great time sharing my mom's recipes and she gets to eat her own cooking, which she says is better than



Jennifer Thompson (L) connects with her mom (R) and other assisted living residents through Italian cooking classes.



One of the many delicious Italian dishes they cook.

the dining room food."

Her mom misses cooking "terribly", Thompson says, and spent a lot of time in the kitchen when she was younger, with her children helping out.

"I guess this is a community service, but Italian cooking is my hobby," she says.





Salsa dancing is Anabel Chavez's passion, and it "keeps me sane and grounded."

The owner of **Annabelle's Bridal Boutique** in Visalia, Calif., watched the class many times before she built up the courage to attend, alone.

"I didn't want to turn 50 with-

Hobbies bring peace, purpose and plenty of inspiration.

out doing something fun in my life," she says.

Chavez may have taken up salsa for fun and exercise, but she "got hooked on the music and comradery." Now, she spends around four hours a week with her "salsa family."

Chavez has not looked back after taking up salsa almost 15 years ago.

"Just looking forward to doing something fun for yourself is the best feeling," she says.



Danielle Warren loves playing tennis, which she took up five years ago, after playing a few times as a teenager. These days the owner of **Boutique Leslie Bridal** in Dover, N.H., plays about once a week, usually with her aunt or her husband. Her husband, she says, is better than her, while she and her aunt are similarly matched.

"We can enjoy the game instead of getting my butt kicked every time," she says.

She plays at a sports complex near her house between April and

November and took it up for fun, exercise and to spend time with family.

"I grew up playing sports and I enjoy being active and competitive," she says. "This helps give me a break from work."

Another bonus: Playing tennis is very inexpensive, she says, since using the courts is free once you've purchased a racquet, balls and sneakers.

Another plus is it helps relieve the pressure from her bridal job.

"I run the shop by myself and it can be high demand, constantly getting phone calls and emails," she says. "I need to check out sometimes."



Regular ballroom dancing lessons provide an outlet and also bridal insight for **Krista McMichen**.

Krista McMichen, owner and president of **The Sentimentalist** in Atlanta, took up ballroom dance lessons 18 months ago.

"It has become my favorite outside-work activity," she says. "I've always enjoyed dancing and wanted to take more formal instruction."

McMichen takes three lessons a

week, each of which is around 50 minutes; one of her classes is usually a double lesson. As well, she participates in some coaching sessions from visiting dance instructors who help her with specific technique and styling, and preparation for competitions and performances. So far, she's learned the waltz, tango, foxtrot, rumba, bachata and cha cha.

McMichen attends the lessons alone and her primary instructor keeps up with her curriculum and helps her set goals. These aren't just dance goals but also health and fitness.

"Dancing is not only good for my body but it is good for my mind," she says. "My concentration and memorization abilities have improved."

And while ballroom dancing is a break from running her bridal business it does relate, she says, "as many brides like to have a choreographed dance at their wedding and I enjoy hearing about the plans for their special dance. I'm always thinking about how their dress will perform at their first dance."

ristin Carlson sold real estate before switching to bridal in 1993, but gave it up to raise her children. When her kids were all in high school, she returned to real estate, on the side, and has been enjoying it for 11 years.

"I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom when the kids were little and I had **Bridal Elegance** (Grand Rapids, Mich.) but you can call your own hours," she says. "You don't make your own hours with real estate; you drop everything to show people a house."

Carlson focuses on homes and only works with people she

Outside passions sharpen focus, stamina and confidence.





knows or likes.

"I love finding houses for people and solving problems and making sure the deals go well," she says. "Finding houses for people is like finding a dress for someone."

Her focus is always people.

"You're not going to be a good agent if it's not about the other people," she says. "It's the same in bridal."

Boating and camping combine as the passions for Katie Surkamp, owner of Clarice's Bridal in St. Louis, Mo. She loves packing up her four kids, aged 8 to 15, her husband, herself and her supplies into their camper van and taking off to their boat.

Surkamp prefers sleeping in the van to a tent, she says, "because we need AC and makeup and my bed."





It's also a matter of logistics since everything's already packed into the camper and she has a refrigerator.

Boating is such a passion that Surkamp tried to plan her kids' births around it. And she succeeded – three times. The fourth arrived mid-season in July.

"Boating is such a big part of my life," Surkamp says. "We make sandwiches and go out for the day on the boat. We relax, waterski, tube. Sometimes we put in a cove and swim around."

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Continued from page 60



A disciplined schedule helps **Jillian Forsberg** balance her writing passion and boutique.



based on the true story of a Dutch sea captain who traveled with an Indian rhinoceros called Clara across 18th century Europe.

illian Forsberg is an author, with two books published and another two coming soon. The owner of **Dress Gallery** in Wichita, Kan., has a history degree, which led her to write historical fiction – "The Rhino Keeper," published in 2024, and "The Porcelain Menagerie," which came out this year. She's also written a bridal book with a working title of "How to Find Your Gown."

"I always asked what I could do

"If I don't do both, I don't feel like a whole person."

with my history degree and I've always loved reading and writing," she says.

Forsberg is quite disciplined, waking up at 6 a.m., exercising for 30 to 60 minutes and writing from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. every day. And she hasn't missed a day of work.

"The reality is that if I don't do both, I don't feel like a whole person," she says. "I need the extroverted world of being in my shop and the introverted world of being in 18th century France. Finding something that stimulates the creative side, business side and the necessity of connecting with other people has engaged me a way I could never have imagined."

Forsberg mostly writes at the dining room table with a cat on her lap, a dog on her feet and interruptions from her daughter and husband.

"I'm glad my daughter sees me

doing things I'm passionate about and making money at the same time," she says. "She sees me doing something artistic and rewarding. She is literally a witness to a hard-working business owner and someone with a creative itch."

lenn Walker, owner of Charlotte's Bridal & Formal Wear which has three locations in Wisconsin, loves to read – a mixture of business books and novels, mostly thrillers and romance.

Walker started reading for fun after college, when she no longer had any required reading. Currently she reads about two dozen books a year, whenever she can.

"At the end of the day if I have extra time and don't want to watch TV or scroll on my phone, I try to pick up a book instead," she says.

Walker's favorite business books include Never Split the Difference (Chris Voss), Rich Dad, Poor Dad (Robert T. Kiyosaki) and Never Lose a Customer Again (Joey Cole-



man). On the fiction side, one of her favorite authors is Elin Hilderbrand.

Walker likes to read physical books when she's home and ebooks on her Kindle while she's traveling. But the business books she always reads in hard copy because she highlights sections, which she often goes back to and re-reads.

"Any time I can get a new nugget, I love it," she says.



Vicky Quach, manager of Bridal **Gallery of Orlando** in Florida, likes to spend time at church with her mom, Ellie Shackleton-Jones, owner of the boutique.

lones

"Faith and prayer are very important parts of our daily life," she says.

Several times a week before the shop opens, the motherdaughter duo attends a 30-minute mass at Holy Family Catholic Church in Orlando. This allows them to meditate and bring peace to the day.

"It's my gym for my mental health," Quach says.

Theme parks spark creativity for window displays.

A side benefit is that Quach has found a lot of her clients attend that church, volunteer there or even marry there "so it's brought us together in a different way," she says.

Bridal Gallery of Orlando recently started selling a line of veils that have been blessed. One-hundred percent of the profit from them go to local organizations, one of which is her church. Quach and her mom sometimes help out at the church when needed and donate dresses. They also contribute in an unconventional way: Shackleton-lones has altered clothes for the church's father and some of the nuns "just to give back," Quach says.

Dridal Gallery of Orlando Fash-Dion Director, Yram Rivera, loves visiting the many theme parks in Orlando.

Rivera goes to a theme park at least once a month, mostly more, and rotates which he visits. He goes on his own, with friends or with family. He visits his favorite restaurants. goes shopping, watches entertainment front and center, and goes on the biggest, fastest roller coasters.

"I do it all," he says. "I'm going to be 50 years old and I'm not going to wait for someone."

He wears his Disney outfit (mouse ears, bag, shirt and everything else coordinating). He has a spare bedroom full of Disney bags, he says.

And while it might be hard to equate theme parks with the bridal business, Rivera gets a lot of inspiration there "to get creative with my windows. I see colors or floral patterns I like to complement the dresses."

Rivera has another hobby, loosely related to this, which rolls around once a year. He decorates homes and trees for Christmas as well as makes custom wreaths. He started this 16 years ago and "I still have clients from 2009 who ask me to do it," he says.

Continued on page 64



the store.

Continued from page 63

Taylor Eisenberger started her gardening hobby during COVID. In the summer the owner of Taylored For You Bridal Boutique in Mechanicsburg, Pa., grows an outside garden with vegetables and herbs and brings the latter inside in the cooler months. She cans a lot of the tomatoes to make pasta sauce and her own salsa.

In the winter she uses a grow room her husband built in the basement. Here she has grow lights and heat mats and nurtures





Growing plants, herbs and vegetables is very rewarding for **Taylor Eisenberger**.

Brides who donate pet food get \$75 off their dress.

more than 85 indoor plants, plus in the spring gets her vegetable starts going here.

"It's very rewarding to see the growth from something that started out so small," she says. "You begin with this seed and it takes months and months. It's your little plant baby."

In the summer Eisenberger spends around 20 hours a week out in her garden and closer to five in the basement in winter months. Among other things, it is an escape.

"When I'm working on it my mind is not on the store," she says.

onnie Hannah, owner of Simple Elegance Bridal in Bowdon, Ga., describes herself as "the crazy cat lady." Six years ago she began fostering puppies from West Georgia Pet Rescue, though these days Hannah more frequently fosters kittens.

mals, and has to prevent herself from taking them all in as pets.

"We get very attached," she says.

She has the animals for several weeks and has a helping hand – her 12-year-old daughter, Lillian, who wants to be a vet when she's older. Her daughter gets less attached to the animals than she does.

"Lillian says we're doing everything we can and the more we do, the more pets that can be saved," Hannah says.

Hannah's hobby doesn't need to be expensive.

"The shelter will provide the food and necessities but I consider it part of my contributions, and that leaves the shelter more money to look after animals," she says.



\$75 discounts if brides donate pet food.

Surprisingly, this hobby has rolled into Simple Elegance. Hannah offers a \$75 discount on special order dresses if brides donate pet food to the local shelter.

"A lot of brides take advantage of it," she says. "It's funny to see them coming in with big bags of dog food." Hannah also donates litter, kennels, dog houses, cleaning supplies and toys.

Hannah spends anywhere from two to more than 20 hours a week on this hobby. "With my daughter being so passionate about it, it has just grown for us."

lara DeLisio, owner of Galleria Gowns in Highland Heights, Ohio, started making sourdough bread a couple of years ago after finding her local Whole Foods was consistently sold out.

"I decided that if I wanted it, I would have to make it myself," she says.

She received a sourdough starter from her friend, named it Stella and got started. Now, Stella sometimes makes it into the store "to do my stretch and folds and



Clara DeLisio's sourdough starter and bread both make it into the store on occasion because it's such a time-consuming hobby.

bulk fermentation in the kitchen area when I don't have enough time at home," DeLisio says.

She tries to bake bread once a week but admits, "it's very time-consuming."

Making sourdough bread is "incredibly relaxing and it's rewarding to create something from scratch that tastes professionally made," DeLisio says. She often shares it with her friends and employees

and makes other products like sourdough crackers.

"They're quite addicting, and I haven't bought crackers since I started making them," she says.

DeLisio has even considered turning bread baking into a fulltime career, but isn't ready to leave the bridal industry just yet.

"I still have many years ahead of me," she says.

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by Shannon Hurd



Where Is It?

Occasions Bridal and **Eveningwear Boutique** is located in the heart of downtown Bethel, Conn., right on the town green at 6 P.T. Barnum Square. The little town, with a population of approximately 20,000, has been described as feeling like "Mayberry, USA" or the set of a Hallmark movie, with its charming New England atmosphere.

ORG Fun fact: P.T. Barnum, who in 1871 founded what later became the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, was born in Bethel. Owner Gail Furniss's brother, David, is a sculptor who was commissioned to create a bronze statue of Barnum that now stands proudly outside of the library.

Although Bethel is a small town, it attracts brides and customers from up to a 2.5-hour radius, including many from New York.

Solopreneurs are a rare breed in bridal retail.

After all, the daily challenges of running a boutique, including merchandising, advertising and selling, could keep a fulltime staff of many busy around the clock.

Gail Furniss is one of those unicorns. The 63-year-old owner of Occasions Bridal and Eveningwear in Bethel, Conn., runs and operates her 1,400-squarefoot boutique solo, managing all aspects of the successful business while maintaining close relationships with her four grown kids.

She didn't start out that way in 1987 when Occasions first opened its doors. But after COVID, life necessitated the change. And with it came invaluable lessons on thriving, not only as a solopreneur but also in a small space: Making the most of every square foot. Creating an amazing customer experience. Buying smartly.

And, her secret sauce: passion.

"The most important thing I have found is you have to really love what you do," Gail says. "And honestly, this is my happy place; I just really love being here

and I really love my customers. And I think, ultimately, that shows through."

Meant to Be

Growing up, Gail was always sketching or doodling dresses. She even went to the Singer sewing camp to feed her passion for making things.

Later, she studied Fashion Merchandising at Berkley Junior College, and aside from a brief stint selling real estate - always worked in a bridal shop.

"And I just loved it," she says. "I have always really loved selling as well as bridal; I worked in maybe four different bridal stores overall."

Then, when she was 24, an opportunity presented itself: A vacant storefront became available and she jumped on it.

"When you're young you're just invincible and you don't really think about it," she says. "Plus, it was the height of the Princess Di era and it just seemed like the perfect time to open a bridal store."

The initial 600-square-foot version of Occasions was born in 1987 in the heart of downtown Bethel, Conn. Gail's previous exposure to bridal retail meant she had a good understanding of brands,



merchandise and operations heading into things.

"It was kind of easy for me to just walk in and set things up," she says. "But there were a lot of learning curves in buying merchandise that was going to sell as opposed to what I personally liked."

Another early challenge was market saturation. Despite the fact Bethel is a small town, it has a lot of bridal shops. In fact, when Gail opened her store, another opened two minutes down the road at the same exact time.

"So that was really tough," she says. "I learned a lot in that first year, and I remember being pretty scared. But then it just kind of took off because in the 80s you could do no wrong. People were really embracing weddings and it was a big time in bridal."

Things went so well, in fact, that Occasions outgrew its original location in less than a year. Gail moved next door into a bigger 1,400-square-foot boutique, where Occasions has remained to this day.

It sells three main niches: bridal, prom and moms, with sales evenly divided about 1/3 to each. In addition to carrying both branded and private-label gowns, Occasions also has its own signature collection, started about 15 years ago, featuring dresses created from scratch and existing dresses that have been modified to suit a customer's preference.

"I think that's the reason a lot of brides buy from me," she says. "It brings out that creative, fun aesthetic since I like to design and create, and it sets me apart from another store that says: well, this is the dress."

Gail distinguishes her boutique

Keys: Smart curation, creativity and lots of heart.

in key ways. First, she makes an effort to really get to know her customers and build a relationship with them before starting the sales process.

"I'm a chatterbox, and people take it as just being friendly but every little nugget I get is helping me build trust and understand that customer and what they're looking for better" she says. "Then you're not just aimlessly pulling out merchandise."

Secondly, she immediately takes the pressure off, to make people feel comfortable.

"I tell everyone: Today we're just going to have fun!" she says. "We're going to have a little field trip and go through the dresses. It's like Harry Potter's wand: Your dress is going to pick you!"

Finally, Occasions boasts a party-like atmosphere: every time



Gail Furniss with her four children Richard Furniss, Elizabeth O'Connor, Benjamin Furniss and Samuel Furniss and son-in-law Rory O'Connor at Rory and Elizabeth's wedding. She maintains close relationships with all of them, which is a huge priority: "It's important for many young owners to know that it is possible to be a business owner and a mom," Gail says.

Most Memorable Moment

With 38 years in the bridal industry, Gail Furniss has been part of countless unforgettable stories. One that stands out happened the Friday after Thanksgiving:



A woman in her late 30s came in to Occasions with her boyfriend. He had secretly planned a surprise wedding for that very day — he bought her a gown, hired a justice of the peace and arranged a reception, all for 2pm. This woman arrived at Occasions at 10am in tears, overwhelmed and upset that she hadn't been included in planning such a meaningful moment. She hated the gown he had chosen and asked Gail through sobs if she was "overreacting" for wanting to wear something she actually felt beautiful in, with her hair, makeup and nails done.

Meanwhile, her boyfriend insisted this was the most romantic gesture he could give her. The store was filled with other appointments, and everyone was invested in helping. Thankfully, staff found a gown she loved, made quick alterations and she was able to leave for hair and makeup before a friend picked up the dress in time for the ceremony.

"I'll never forget her vulnerability in that moment, or the reminder that a wedding day is deeply personal," Gail says. "I've always hoped she walked down the aisle that afternoon feeling beautiful and truly loved."

The VOWS Profile

Occasions Bridal and Eveningwear



Showering customers with confetti or rose petals after a purchase results in a lot of joy and marketing buzz.



Every inch of wall space is utilized strategically to sell, and merchandise is accessible.

a prom girl buys a dress, she gets to pop a giant balloon that showers her in confetti (brides get showered in rose petals). This was based loosely on a store Gail remembers from childhood called Markoff's. Everyone wanted to go there, she says, because if you bought a pair of shoes you got to ride the carousel and get a balloon on a stick.

"I really wanted to highlight my customers and bring those warm fuzzies to them they'll always remember," she says. "And people just love it. It's really funny how much joy that little balloon brings!"

There's also a marketing benefit

When said pics get tagged on Instagram, "you'd be surprised at how viral they can go," Gail says. "It acts as a virtual fashion show because everyone sees all the new dresses. People constantly come in saying, 'OMG I saw my friend just bought a dress here and I want to shop here too!"

One-Woman Show

In the height of the 90s, Occasions was really busy, with lines for fitting rooms and people even changing in the bathroom during prom season. Gail always had a staff of two to four working with her.

Then COVID-19 hit and the women who had been with her for more than 20 years decided, for various reasons including health issues and homeschooling duties, they didn't want to come back. Gail suddenly found herself in a very different position: by herself.

She definitely wasn't willing to give up the business she describes as "my happy place", but the real-



ity of working solo necessitated several changes, including the decision to go appointment only. Despite this she still gets walk-ins and, if possible, makes the strategic decision to accommodate them.

"You'd be surprised – a lot of walk-ins will buy, whereas appointments have 10 appointments at other stores throughout the day and aren't ready to buy yet, so I hate to turn away a walk-in," she says.

While being a solopreneur definitely has its benefits — people love working directly with the owner because it makes them feel recognized in a way they typically don't at larger stores, Gail says - the main challenge is wearing a lot of hats. While former employees occasionally help fill in during prom season, being on her own largely means powering through tasks she doesn't always feel like doing and developing a good workflow.

"You have to know why you want to be in this business, lean into what you're good at and outsource things you don't enjoy," she says. "That's really going to help keep you excited."

One of Gail's main strengths is her personality.

"It was funny – one day when I was only in my 40s someone said, 'Oh, you're so mumsy!' and I thought, OMG, what a horrible thing to say!" she says. "But I think what they meant was I'm comfortable, warm and inviting. I think that really helps set people at ease."

She outsources numbers work to an accountant, who has been with her more than 30 years, and receives social-media and computer help from her children Ricky, Elizabeth, Benjamin and Samuel.

Every inch counts - and every customer is treated like family.

There are many things she has learned about thriving as a small store, including don't overbuy.

"That's a big, big mistake," she says.

Aside from the expense, "your store will get cluttered, it'll start looking dated and you'll be in a lot of trouble," she says. "When you go to market you must know your vendors and they have to understand you're a small store and don't have the same buying power for one brand."

It's also crucial to know your numbers, including how much you sell in a category and also your expenses "because numbers never lie," she says.

Gail is always examining how she is doing in each category and what specifically is attributing to that. As well, she carefully examines office expenses and operating costs, looking for ways to cut back even on little things such as trash, lights or hangers.

"We're not making the money we made in the 90s any longer, so it's really important that you have to know where you can cut and how you can make your numbers work," she says.

Next, to combat the loneliness that can come from working alone, she advises retailers build a network of fellow store owners to converse with. Market



In The Spotlight: Occasions Bridal and Eveningwear

Established: 1987 Size: 1,200 sq. ft Dressing Rooms: 3–5 Own or Rent: Own

Gown Price Range: \$299–\$2,000 Average Bridal Sale: \$1,499

Percentage of Sales From Bridal: 30 Other Niches Carried: mother of the bride, prom, eveningwear, accessories Total Lines Carried: 12 (bridal, prom,

MOB)

Staff: Owner-operated, with seasonal help during prom

Alterations: Occasions has its own seamstress located directly across the street in her own building

Database Systems: BBL,

Estyle Central

Marketing: Primarily word of mouth from past prom, bridal and MOB clients; also social media. Previously in-

vested in Google Ads, fashion shows and paid advertising.

Website:

www.occasionsbridalshop.com Social Media:

Instagram – @occasionsbethel (4,161 followers)

Facebook – Occasions Bethel (2,594 followers)

Goodwill Causes: Charities: Mental health advocacy (NAMI), National Alliance on Mental illness. "If you know of anyone suffering from mental illness, they are a great organization for resources and support," Gail says. Also, food rescue and insecurity efforts.

Good Business Read: "Let Them" by Mel Robbins. "It taught me to reclaim personal power by focusing on what I can control (my actions, emotions and well-being) rather than trying to change others," Gail says. "It's an empowering shift that has brought peace and clarity in both life and business."

and trade shows are invaluable for this.

Years ago, Gail – whose closest industry friend is someone she met at market 10 years ago - joined with a few stores to form a Zoom group during prom season to share marketing ideas and spot trends, which met weekly for months.

"It was incredibly enriching," she says. "And be very honest with whomever you do align with because it's infuriating when someone is telling you how amazing they're doing and they're lying. You must have somebody who is hon-

Make every rack earn its place— or let it go.

est with you and is willing to share information openly."

Finally, every time you go somewhere as a customer, take something away from that experience. Whether having her car serviced or buying a piece of furniture, Gail will pay attention to how she was treated and felt entering that establishment.

"That has really helped me in my sales performance and how I want people to feel when they come in," she says.

Making the Most of a Small Space

Occasions is only 1,400 square feet. This necessitates making the most of every bit of space.

"I look around and say every piece of this store owes me rent," Gail says. "So I ask: is this rack paying its rent to me or isn't it? I think you have to be intuitive enough and know your numbers enough to know when to let a category go and when to add a category."

Throughout the years, Occasions has parted ways with or cut back drastically on multiple categories, including shoes, gifts, lingerie and bridesmaids, because they weren't making enough money to justify the square footage.

She is also adept at making the most of every square foot.

"Really, I think sourcing is my secret sauce," she says. "I grew up in an artistic family, so I think of my store as a museum. You have to know how to curate and have the right mix — especially as a boutique. A salon can afford to have a ton of merchandise but a boutique has to be very mindful because you don't have the square footage."

Gail's wall space is utilized to sell, and it is accessible.

Behind her desk is a slat wall filled with jewelry. Curio cabinets hold merchandise and the few pairs of shoes she still has are left out so people can try them on with a dress.

"I think that if you're in the fitting room and there's a display where you can just pick something up and put it on with your dress you're going to be much more susceptible to wanting to buy it," she says.



Gail regularly updates the store's front windows with fresh product to attract customers.



Gail constantly evaluates numbers and doesn't hesitate to cut ties with underperforming lines.



She makes the most of the two large storefront windows, which are a really big draw for customers, diligently changing them and posting on Instagram a window of the day.

"Pay attention to your windows because people are going to drive by and see them and if you have a lazy window and don't change it (they'll assume you) have a lazy store," she says. "You have to be on the cutting edge of changing it all the time."

Finally, creating an open space where customers can interact with each other has been invaluable, especially on those busy days during prom season when Gail has multiple people in the store at the same time and is running between tasks.

"I can't always be one on one, so I've created a party atmosphere where everyone can talk to each other and sometimes people who just met will even go out to lunch together," she says. "This big, open space just kind of keeps things flowing naturally, making it fun and effortless."

Future Plans

Throughout the years, Gail has had multiple people, including customers and relatives, tell her she needs to expand. However, the idea doesn't interest her.

"I'm doing this because I love it and I don't feel like I'd have

Looks & Lines

Bridal: Morilee, private collections, Occasions' own signature collection

Mothers: Jasmine, Morilee, House of Wu, Daymor, Marsoni, Occasions' own signature collection

Prom: Clarisse, Jovani, Alyce Paris, Colors Dress

Open space and good energy help brides feel at home.

that same feeling, and would lose control, if I expanded or had multiple locations," she says.

Moving forward, she's content to stay in her same location, working in the industry she loves, and plans to do it "as long as I'm relevant."

"Truthfully when I walk in this is my happy place; I get a kick out of being here," she says. "I know that sounds crazy but I really love what I do and I think my customers really can feel that."

Acknowledging bridal can be

very stressful, even when you have passion, Gail makes a point to take a few minutes and sit quietly if something frustrates or angers her rather than spewing to everybody.

"I'm a big person about meditation," she says. "And you'll realize maybe there is a better way to handle things or a solution you haven't thought of."

Regardless of the ups and downs, she has no doubt she has found her happy place, and hopes she is creating that for others.

"If there is one takeaway I just want everyone to be loved, have fun and feel special here," she says.



Q: What is your approach to market buys?

A: I treat market as a research trip and do my homework before I go — studying trends, brand presence and what's generating buzz. I'm a numbers person, so I also analyze past sales and inventory variety to guide decisions. Being a boutique, I aim for unique styles that aren't saturated in my area. It can be tempting to overbuy. # I rule to remember is that numbers never lie; know your numbers.

Q: How are you managing rising costs?

A: Sourcing is one of my strengths. I spend hours finding brands that deliver both value and style at price points my customers are comfortable with. While difficult, I won't hesitate to part with a line that no longer aligns with my clientele's needs.

Q: What is your advice to smaller stores?

A: Wear many hats, but lean into your strengths. Differentiate yourself with a niche that reflects your heart and your store's spirit. Customers come back because they know you, trust you and value the relationship. Many stores are focusing on the experience and while I believe that is very important I say focus on the relationship; that is what will keep your customers coming back.

Q: What tips do you have for dealing with the indecisive bride?

A: Five minutes in the seat beats an hour on your feet. The more you and your customer know about each other before the try-on process, the smoother and more successful the appointment will be. This quote emphasizes the importance of preparation before as well as in the first few minutes of the appointment.

Q: What is your business mantra?

A: Lead with kindness, celebrate with love. Also, this is my life, not just a business.



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