

Quilts – Fabric, Batting, & Know-How Don't Forget the Know-How!

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You own, manage, or work in a quilt shop. What separates you from the big box fabric stores and the other quilt shops? Add emphasis on books, patterns, tools, notions, and education to create a broad-based, more profitable business beyond fabric sales.

Introduction

I have traveled and taught in quilt shops all over the country as well as in a few other countries. Some shops are fabulous, full service quilt shops while others cannot seem to envision more than being a fabric shop. The “Know-How” is a big difference between them. I want shops to see how much more money they can make if they become more than a fabric store.

Beyond this, I have an inventory of 400+ bolts of fabric that I use to manufacture kits. I began keeping a fabric inventory a few years ago when I designed fabric lines. I thought I would sell kits and fabric via my internet site and when I traveled to speak at guilds. I find the labor, space, and money required to manage a fabric inventory far outweighs that of managing publications, notions, tools, etc. Shops who try to make an overwhelming amount of their profits from fabric sales need to reconsider.

Most likely, I will not be telling you very much that you do not already know. I am just here to remind you and help you organize your thoughts.

Only Game in Town vs. Competitive Market

Take a good look at your situation. Are you the only game in town or are you located in a competitive market? Your approach should be customized to your market base. In either case, or more likely one somewhere in the middle, you have some serious considerations and decisions to make.

If you are the only shop for long distances in all directions, you might think that you have to have it all, something for everyone. Even so, do what you do best. Start by buying and selling what you know and grow!

If you are in a competitive market, you have to find a way to stand out. One of my favorite sayings attesting to diversity in people is, “If two are exactly alike, one is unnecessary.” It applies to quilt shops, too. Why is someone going to make the trip to your shop? Here are some ideas to focus on in an effort to be unique. Remember, not only do you need to listen to the customers, but be true to yourself and do what you do best.

- Wearables
- Unique fabric collections, for example, ethnic, reproduction, batiks
- Traditional or art quilts
- Tourist or destination shop – What reflects your unique location?

What Does “Know-How” Encompass?

All shops should offer the following basics. We won’t dwell on these issues. They are part of another presentation.

- Customer service
- Well stocked (not overstocked) store
- Classes

The “Know-How” that I want to talk about is a product and service focus beyond fabric sales.

Beyond Fabric

How much space in your shop is dedicated to each product you sell? We all know that you pay for that space and you must make it work for you.

One bolt of fabric will generate approximately \$135 in gross sales. The same volume of space that is displaced by one bolt of fabric would accommodate the following examples:

- Twenty 80 page, full color books – gross sales \$480
- Sixty-eight triangle tools – gross sales \$816
- 240 full color *Classy Patterns* – gross sales \$2160

Now consider the space required by other products:

- Batting
- Thread
- Pins
- Pigma pens and marking tools

Finally, consider how much labor (\$\$\$) is necessary to order, stock, and sell products, and the amount of money you have tied up in inventory.

Selling fabric is the one indispensable part of being a quilt shop. However, fabric sales require lots of labor (\$\$\$) to do the following: ordering, receiving, stocking, helping customers select fabrics (“I want exactly the same as what is in the picture!”), cutting, reshelving..., counting

inventory, and think of the money invested in inventory on hand (Think of what is sitting in many shops' block of the month programs!), inventory taxes, cash flow... The list goes on.

Kits are good moneymakers, but making kits costs even more. In addition to much of what it takes to sell just the fabric, there is packaging, labels, and usually, the expense of making the model.

Balance the Effort

Focus on the sales of other items that will require less investment of your time, space, and money to generate sales. You can order just a small number of a specific notion and reorder easily and frequently. That approach is so much different than buying fabric.

- Books of all types – Recipe quilt books, technique and reference books, inspiration and idea books, and gift books to name a few
- Patterns – Find patterns from companies that are consistent sellers and look deep into their lines for other patterns (branding). If a quilter is happy with the first quilt she makes from that company, she is likely to purchase another.
- Notions and Tools – “Buying the line” and never looking at other options is not the best for your shop. Think of all those “one hit wonder” bands. What would our music have been without them? The same holds true for notions and tools. Sometimes only one from a specific company is worth a second look, but you can sell a boatload of that one.

Get out of the rut of purchasing the same routine, boring, narrow-minded scope of products. Do not fall victim to, “I know what is best for my customers.” Once while discussing the expense of coming to Market with one of my customers from the UK, she enlightened me with a very good reason. She came to see offerings firsthand instead of ordering from European distributors who glean the selection and only import part of what is available. By coming to Market, she finds unique items for her store. Go to Market frequently. Do not just wait for your reps or the local shows.

More Ideas to Make the Most of Your Space

Change displays frequently. You have heard the saying “Can’t see the forest for the trees”. Clean up your store. Allow customers to see what you have. Sometimes it is better to display fewer items with more space dedicated to them. Let your customers know how often you change models and displays so that they will come more frequently for fear of missing something.

Bring the customer all the way into your store. Arrange your store to invite them to complete the journey. Have you ever been to an Ikea store? Put arrows, footprints, or other information on the floor to direct them. Learn from your local supermarket. There is a reason that milk, bread, and bananas are not all on the same aisle.

Create a Buzz

Integrate classroom space within the store. Consider this, when we built our new home, as empty-nesters we decided two bedrooms are enough. However, we installed Murphy beds in my studio and Dan’s library. When we have many guests, there is no time for sewing or reading, so they become bedrooms. Make your store fixtures as moveable and multi-purposed as you can.

Your classroom space can extend to any open space in the shop when classes are held during closed hours. A shop can host “Quilt ‘til You Wilt” Saturday night classes.

If your shop is normally closed one day a week, choose that day to have a national teacher in your shop. You can have a larger class by putting tables throughout the store, and the students feel very special being the only ones allowed in the store. Renting tables and keeping the workshop in your store saves money and generates more product sales.

Customers can see a class in action and all of the models on the walls without imposing. They may be moved to sign up for a class by what they see.

Encourage customers to use your class area whenever there is no class in session. They may come to layer and baste a quilt because they do not have space at home. Remember, they are your customers. They will most likely spend some money while they are there. Customers can meet another quilter (customer) and sit and sew in your class area. Having open sewing time available will create activity in your shop, get customers in more often, allow happy customers to spread their enthusiasm to customers who wander by and want to know what they are doing, and by sewing more, they will complete more projects!

Education

Educate your customers, and by all means educate your staff! Share knowledge at your staff meetings. Make the staff aware of every product. Do a weekly posting of new items (or restocking of items that you have not had for awhile) in the store. Tell the staff where the products are and that they are responsible for knowing what they are about and how they are used. Have them sign the posting so that you can hold them responsible for knowing.

Teach informally every day to every customer.

Close the Sale

Here are two examples that I just experienced within the past week.

While checking out at Albertson’s Supermarket, the cashier pointed out the “Item of the Week”, which was stocked right at the register ready for my add-on purchase.

When I was buying reams of paper at Office Max, the cashier asked, “Do you need an ink cartridge for your printer?” Translated into “QuilterSpeak” it means, “Do you need new marking pencils or Pigma pens?”

The Bottom Line

To increase sales you must create a need.

We are happy to answer questions! Debbie and Dan Caffrey

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