

VOWS:

The VOWS Profile:

D’Royal Bride

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Puerto Rico powerhouse!**

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ongoing confusion...
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Damaris Díaz,
Andrea Damaris Santiago Díaz and
Andrés Santiago, owners D’Royal Bride



A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a strapless, form-fitting white lace dress with intricate floral patterns. She is standing in a doorway, with her right hand resting on the door frame. She is wearing gold drop earrings and a gold bracelet with a diamond-like detail. The background shows a classic interior with a marble column and a doorway leading to another room.

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Trending

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The VOWS Profile: D'Royal Bride

D'Royal Dazzles

From an unconventional start, D'Royal Bride rises to be one of the premier bridal shops in Puerto Rico.
by Daniel P. Smith **80**

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Credit: Jose Ruiz Photography, IG @joseruizphoto

The D'Royal alterations department in San Juan, featuring four fitting rooms and spacious lounges.

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On the cover

D'Royal Bride owners **Andrés Santiago** and **Damaris Díaz**, along with daughter **Andrea Damaris Santiago Díaz** (seated).

Credit: Jose Ruiz Photography, IG @joseruizphoto

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Why I Support the NAFAA

And urge you to do the same



Peter Grimes
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Personally and through VOWS I've endorsed and continue to endorse a number of organizations whose primary goal is support of our industry, whether through education, networking, community building, lobbying, or in response to misinformed media coverage about brides and the bridal and formal retail industry.

All are listed on **VOWSMagazine.com** with links to their individual info and membership pages.

I'm sometimes asked why we provide coverage, publicity and recognition at minimal or no expense to these groups and associations, though at times it costs us.

The answer is simple. . . working together with such a common goal achieves so much more than individually or as a singular effort. For 30+ years we have shared information, and information has been shared with us. To the betterment, I believe, of all.

And I can't stand on the sidelines waiting for others to do the work that ultimately benefits me and us all.

Which is the underlying reason for my support of the NAFAA. (In full transparency, VOWS is a dues-paying member. And I am a member of its board of directors.)

Formed just three months ago in June, NAFAA was established to primarily address the turmoil of tariffs through a lobbying effort at reclassifying formal wear into a more specific, appropriate and identifiable import classification.

Then, once accomplished, petition for an exemption of tariffs for the full category due to several important reasons: formal wear can not be domestically mass produced; and the added costs of tariffs may strain Americans' budgets for their milestone events thereby providing an additional opportunity for direct-from-factory non-US based sellers to put retailers and industry at risk.

A long shot. . . possibly. Yet worthy of the effort? Definitely.

To those generous few who have answered the call I thank you.

And ask that you take an additional step to further the impact of your efforts: talk to your peers and industry friends who may still be on the sidelines watching and waiting. The NAFAA is rapidly reaching a critical juncture where their support is critical for its continuing efforts.

And by the way. . . with retailer Sandra Gonzalez joining the board and boutique memberships, the NAFAA is truly an industry association.

NOTE: NAFAA fees are \$5000 for designer/manufacturer; \$2500 for accessory manufacturer, and \$250 for boutiques.

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Scrolling with My Nieces

The takeaway: you must hook them immediately or risk losing a customer.

I have two nieces, ages 12 and 8, whom I regularly spend time with on the phone, because they live out of state.

The older niece is about as close as one can come to the Gen Z/Gen Alpha cusp. Had she been born three days earlier, she'd be among the youngest members of Gen Z. As things are, she is one of the oldest Gen Alpha-ers. And she and her peers will be among your future prom and bridal customers before too long.

I have learned, by observing her behavior during our nightly screen-share scrolls through social media, exactly what captures her attention. And it's so interesting to me, because again and again the number-one thing that matters – beyond topic, creator/company, aesthetics or how much effort went into a post – is how quickly something captures her attention.

Literally, if a post or video (and she much prefers the latter) doesn't grab her in about two seconds she will tell me to scroll. It doesn't matter what it's about; she loses interest or gets hooked that fast. At her direction, we have bypassed a ton of potentially very interesting and clearly well put-together content simply because the intro is too slow.

The flip side is that if something DOES grab her attention, she will typically see the post through until the end, unless it is ultra wordy or boring.

This seems to be a habit among her peers – and it really has me reflecting on what is most important when creating content, especially for the younger generations.

Your audience decides in seconds – are you ready?

The article in this issue, Digital Courtship (pg. 68), mentions that brides won't wait around for a slow website, with about half clicking away if it takes more than two seconds to load. This same formula can be applied to social-media content, although rather than load time they are judging hooks that either grab attention or encourage them to scroll away.

Sure, there are exceptions, such as if it's a creator they love or they're particularly interested in a topic and willing to give it a bit more time. But generally speaking, and especially considering how saturated the internet is with countless posts on each particular subject every hour, your focus should absolutely center around creating a hook that grabs attention instantly.

Specifically focus on:

- **A bold, eye-catching photo,**

video or graphic. Bright colors, movement, unusual framing or expressive faces work especially well.

- **Clear, punchy hook.** The very first line must spark curiosity or emotion. It should be short, simple and either surprising, relatable or intriguing enough to make people want more. i.e. The truth about _____ nobody talks about” or “Three things you can do right now to _____”

- **Emotion.** People engage when they feel something. Humor, inspiration, relatability or even a little controversy can draw them in. If the post instantly answers “Why should I care?” you'll keep their attention. i.e. “POV: You finally _____ after waiting forever” or “Tell me I'm not the only one who _____”

These are just some examples; there are many ways to approach it. The universal truth, however, is that you must think of your hook as a dress in the window: if it doesn't turn heads right away, no one comes inside.

Boutique Contributors

(+ Instagram handles – give them a follow!)

D'Royal Bride - San Juan, Bayamon &

Rio Hondo, Puerto Rico @droyalbride

Dress Gallery - Wichita, Kan. @shopdressgallery

Grayce Bridal & Formal - Bangor & Portland,

Maine + Chattanooga, Tenn. @graycebridal

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

@modernbridenh

Sophia's Bridal and Tux – Indianapolis, Ind. (x2)

+ Louisville, Ken + sister store **With Love** in

Columbus, Ind. @sophiasbridalandtux

Weddings by Debbie, Houston, Texas

@weddingsbydebbie

The White Magnolia Bridal Collection -

Jacksonville, Fla. (flagship) + seven additional

locations in FL, GA, SC, TN

@whitemagnoliabridal

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a white lace wedding dress with long sleeves and a strapless bodice. She is standing on a balcony with a stone railing, looking slightly to the side. The background is a blurred view of a city or town.

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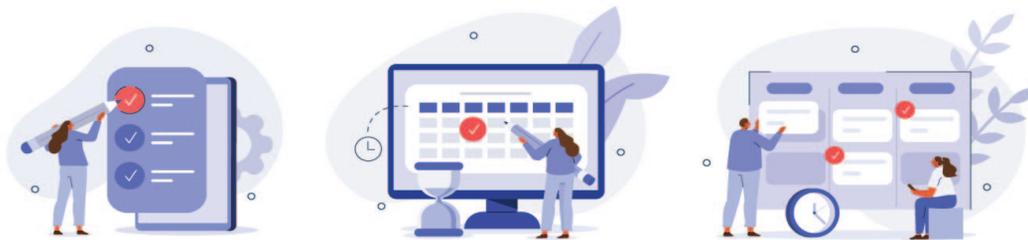
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Also check the VOWS online calendar for updates and additions:
<https://www.vovsmagazine.com/events>

2025 Market Dates

October 14-16

New York Luxury Fashion Week:
www.thebridalcouncil.com

October 14-16

Designers At The Essex Market - BRIDAL WEEK
 JW Marriott Essex House, NY
<https://www.designersattheessex.com>
 917-887-8316
bridal@designersattheessex.com

October 14-16

Melange de Blanc and Fringe Collective
 At one location:
 Center 415
 Manhattan, NY
www.melangedeblanc.com

October 14-16

One Fine Day Bridal Market
 601 West 26th Street New York, NY
<https://onefinedaybridalmarket.com/>

October 14-16

Union Square Couture Market
 455 Madison Ave,
 New York, NY
<https://www.unionsquarecouture.com/>

November 2-4

20th Annual Better Bridal Group Conference
 Rosen Centre, Orlando, Florida
<https://betterbridalgroup.com/events/list>

November 3-5

World of Weddings Conference
 Association of Bridal Consultants
 New Orleans, Louisiana
www.abcweddingplanners.com/2025wow

November 11-13

Wedding Merchants Business Academy
 Las Vegas Convention Center
 Las Vegas, NV
www.weddingmba.com

2026 Preliminary Dates

February 21-23

Sposaitalia Collezioni
 Milano Bridal Week
 Milan, Italy
<https://sposaitaliacollezioni.fieramilano.it/en/>

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/bridal-week-forms?DynamicFormScreen=EntryForm&ccs=4025&cl=67

March 22-24

Rome Bridal Week
 Rome, Italy
<https://www.romebridalweek.com/>

March 28-30

European Bridal Week
 Messe Essen, Germany
www.europeanbridalweek.com

March 30-April 1

AndMore Formal Markets
 Apparel Mart, Atlanta, GA
www.atlanta-apparel.com/Markets/Formal-Markets

April

TBA
 New York market programs, dates

April 22-26

Barcelona Bridal Fashion Week
 Barcelona, Spain
<https://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

TBA: Harrogate Bridal Week

October

TBA
 New York market programs, dates

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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 vendors 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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A bride is shown from the back, wearing a long, flowing white wedding gown with a long, sheer veil. The gown has a lace train and a fitted bodice. She is standing in a lush green garden with trees and bushes in the background. The lighting is bright and natural, suggesting a sunny day.

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Heard Around the Industry...

Products/Services

Casablanca Bridal launches "Casablanca Confidence" campaign with new collection debut

Casablanca Bridal proudly announces the launch of its newest brand initiative: the *Casablanca Confidence Campaign*, a celebration of beauty, empowerment and storytelling centered on a new generation of leadership and a deeper commitment to brides, retailers, and creative partners.

The campaign kicked off September 11 with the inaugural **Casablanca Confidence Workshop** led by renowned posing expert and influencer **David Suh (@davidsuhphoto)**, who has built a community of nearly seven million followers across Instagram, TikTok and YouTube.

This is the first in a planned series of confidence-themed workshops designed to extend the brand's vision into ongoing, meaningful experiences.

The campaign also serves as the of-

ficial debut of the latest **Casablanca Bridal Collection**, uniting the brand's confidence-driven vision with fresh, innovative designs for today's bride.

The campaign was architected with **Frost & Co.**, whose influence strategy continues to shape how bridal fashion connects with today's bride.

At the heart of the campaign is the unveiling of **Confidence Cove**, a private, family-owned coastal retreat in Newport Beach serving as Casablanca's first brand-owned experience venue.

This launch also marks a milestone for the Lu family. While founders **Kevin and Gloria Lu** dedicate more of their time to their nonprofit initiative, **Celebrate Forever**, their daughter **Crystal Lu** is stepping into a more visible leadership role as Creative Director. Building on her parents' legacy, Crystal is introducing a fresh narrative of confidence and empowerment, guiding Casablanca Bridal into its next chapter.

"It takes confidence to bring a family business into a new generation," said Crystal Lu, creative director of Casablanca Bridal. "This campaign is



Casablanca Confidence Workshop.

about more than gowns; it's about giving brides, our partners and our community experiences that inspire them to feel beautiful, empowered and confident in every step of their journey. That vision comes to life in our new Casablanca Collection."

"As Gloria and I dedicate more of our time to our nonprofit Celebrate

Tidbits continued on page 46

the knot

THE KNOT 2Q'2025 ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY

Since 2022, The Knot has been pulsing couples to understand how they're feeling and/or changing their behavior due to changing economic forces.

Beginning annually, and then moving to quarterly, The Knot spoke to couples getting married in the latter half of 2025 and beyond to understand how inflation and/or tariffs were already affected or anticipated to affect their wedding planning.

Fielded: May 22-28, 2025
N = 741

This document is for informational purposes only and does not constitute financial, business, or pricing advice.

IMPACT ON COUPLES

- While **three-quarters of couples** shared the current economy was impacting their planning, this is **down 10-points** from earlier waves; suggesting the economy is less disruptive.
- It's estimated 36% of couples made at least one change to their wedding:** This is a smaller impacted population than The Knot expected based on prior years of measurement.
- Only 22%** of couples surveyed have adjusted their budgets – and 68% of those increased budgets to meet rising costs, not to scale back.
- Couples are not yet feeling or seeing the impact of tariffs when planning; however, they are preparing by taking pro-active measures.**
 - 32%** of couples are choosing to make more purchases in advance.
 - Just 17%** planning to cut back or adjust their attire budget.

What this means for you: The disparity between a couple's initial budget and the reality of wedding costs not only persists but is more challenging due to tariffs. However, nearly 2 out of 3 couples report that their budget increased, with the majority admitting they set their initial budget lower than reality allows (69%). Use that knowledge to educate couples on what goes into pricing and consider sharing ranges to begin the conversation.

IMPACT ON VENDORS

- Half of vendors** feel unfavorable about the economic climate for wedding businesses
- The primary challenges** cited by vendors were:
 - Declining couple budgets (61%)
 - Higher costs overall (58%)
 - Inflation (39%)
- Tariffs and trade barriers fell further down at 16%.
- Professionals shared that they have had **more couples requesting budget friendly options** (67%), while vendors report **raising prices** (39%).
- Due to tariffs**, vendors report considering strategies such as price adjustments. Wedding professionals are also looking to minimize the impact of tariffs by adjusting product or service offerings (42%) or raising service fees (37%).

The above chart provides a snapshot from the **Knot's Q2 Economic Impact** study compiled in May of this year, and reported on in the blog post "How President Trump's Tariffs are Impacting the Wedding Industry, According to Couples and Experts," written by Hannah Nowack, the Knot's senior manager of

editorial brand content, and published September 5. A key point illustrated in the chart: two out of three couples reported that their budget increased, with the majority admitting they set their initial budget lower than "reality allows."



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Heard Around the Industry...



Crystal Lu, creative director of Casablanca Bridal.

Forever; it fills me with pride to see Crystal step into leadership with such vision," said Kevin Lu, co-founder of Casablanca Bridal. "For our family, confidence has always meant more than appearances – it is about faith, love, and the courage to carry a legacy forward. This campaign reflects that belief, and it is inspiring to see Casablanca embrace confidence as both a message and a mission."

Bridal Collective Expanding Retailer Resources

Bridal Collective continues to expand the resources it offers its retail partners to include virtual sales and product training, gown customization options, online ready-to-ship inventory, shorter delivery schedules, and a resource-rich Hub for images and marketing assets.

"At Bridal Collective, we're not just about beautiful gowns," explained Mary Nguyen, Bridal Collective CEO, "we're about supporting our retail partners with the tools, training, and services they need to succeed. We've built a range of resources to help streamline your experience and empower your business."

Specifically:

- **Virtual Sales & Product Trainings**
Bridal Collective's Brand Ambassador



Mary Nguyen

Karly Komoroske offers ongoing training sessions packed with insider knowledge and selling strategies tailored to the Bridal Collective collections.

- **The HUB: Go-To Resource Center**

The HUB is a centralized, self-serve portal for everything Bridal Collective offering:

- Access to images, line sheets, size charts and live inventory;
- Marketing assets and social media content;
- Customization information.

- **Gown Customizations: Personalize the Experience**

Bridal Collective offers customization options across many styles, so its retail partners can deliver exactly what their brides dream of.

- **Online Inventory Ready to Ship**

Bridal Collective's live online inventory enables its stores to browse styles that are in-stock and ready to ship to react quickly to a bride's timeline, reorder bestsellers without delay, and easily plan for last-minute appointments

- **Shorter Delivery Dates**

Bridal Collective offers shorter delivery dates on many of its most popular gowns and collections. With fast turnaround options available its partners can cater to shorter engagements, and offer last-minute solutions.

For additional information on any or all of these customer service options, contact Bridal Collective at info@bridalcollective.com.

Strategy

Tips and reminders to elevate your game

The following tips and reminders have been covered in VOWS periodically in the past... and yet considering today's business environment, each bears repeating!

- ✓ **Display a simple first act.** Acknowledge every customer who enters your doors, even if it's just a quick "hello."

✓ **Focus on the visit.** All your advertising, outreach and social media did its job: creating a desire for her to come through your door.

✓ **Create a welcoming and trustworthy first impression.** Let her speak first. Get to know her wants and needs before diving into any product-specific discussion. Key: Do you know her engagement experience?

✓ **Inspire confidence.** Speak with purpose and poise and discard those "ums" and "ahs." You know your product and are genuinely willing to help. Make sure she knows it, too.

✓ **Look the part.** Embrace a professional appearance.

✓ **Embrace positivity.** Ditch talk of the nasty weather or the city's overwhelming traffic. Instead, begin with a "good morning" and stick to the better things in life.

✓ **Use her first name often.** Using her first name confirms she has her own singular identity. The individual is not just another bride, but Mary or Michele with specific wants, needs and visions for her wedding day.

✓ **Work your hardest to be kind, respectful and personable.** Be friendly and outgoing, sincere and professional. Often her buying decision comes down to, "Do I like you more than the other stylist?"



Heard Around the Industry...

✓ **Toss prejudgments about her appearance and accessories aside.**

Though how she looks may show her personality, it may not accurately represent her budget or concerns.

✓ **Let the bride share her story.** Details about her fiancé, such as how they met and the engagement proposal, heighten the stylist-bride relationship, and help place her in an enthusiastic frame of mind.

✓ **Ask open-ended questions.** Closed-ended questions provide yes or no answers that rarely move the needle. In contrast, open-ended questions often produce new information.

✓ **Active listening.** Many sales experts tab effective listening as the most important skill for selling any product, wedding gowns included.

✓ **Mind your manners and be emphatic...** and remember that body language matters, too. Simple ways to project a more positive, welcoming persona: smile, shake hands and open your arms rather than crossing them.

✓ **Product knowledge is paramount.** Stylists must have in-depth knowledge about every item they sell with the ability to explain each as it relates to her desires.

✓ **Honor her budget.** Most brides have a budget window, though some might stretch that budget for the right dress. While it is possible she might toss budget aside for a more expensive dress, consistently showing gowns beyond her financial limit can also prove frustrating and disheartening, two feelings stylists should work to avoid activating during an appointment.

✓ **Identify the influencers.** In many cases, a bride leans on one or two individuals more than others during an appointment. Identify those influencers and understand the importance of winning them over as well. Learn about their relationship to the bride, and call them by their first names...

while gently reminding them that it is the bride's decision.

✓ **Be prepared to switch hats.** During an appointment, you might have to play a variety of roles. One moment you're the product expert; the next, you might be the referee. Have the awareness to recognize when you need to play a new role and then perform that part as best you can.

✓ **Show passion for your products.** When you show genuine enthusiasm for your gowns, accessories and other products, that energy rubs off on customers and increases the likelihood of a sale.

✓ **Link features to benefits.** Note the characteristics of a given dress and spotlight how those elements benefit the bride.

✓ **Steer the conversation toward value.** The more you can show the craftsmanship or elements that create value – the dress' construction or how it addresses specific desires, for instance – the better you position yourself to score the sale.

✓ **Leave talk of the competition behind.**

✓ **Think in terms of "Yes and..."** When a bride mentions how she likes the neckline of a particular dress, advance the conversation and inspire positive vibes by agreeing with her assessment – assuming you sincerely do – and

adding something else the dress does well, such as accentuating her figure or showing off her fit arms.

✓ **Ditch the sales pitch.** Sales pitches are data dumps and should be used only on an as-needed basis.

✓ **Illuminate your added value.** Anywhere you go above and beyond the competition and add value, make it known.

✓ **Smile!** Emotions can often overwhelm a bride. Smile yourself and don't be afraid to laugh. Ask her about something fun she and her fiancé recently did together. By working to maintain a lighthearted atmosphere, you minimize the risk of anxiety overrunning the appointment.

✓ **Embrace the silence.** Let the bride talk more. Remember this experience is about her, not you.

✓ **Share information.** You are a problem solver and solutions provider. Offer sound, well-educated and well-intentioned direction on what characteristics of a gown highlight her features or different accessories that can contribute to a more glamorous look.

✓ **Go the extra mile.** Do whatever it takes to show the bride she is your priority. Even if you don't sell her a wedding gown, she will still recall your efforts and likely relay a positive experience.

Tidbits continued on page 48



Continued from page 47

Heard Around the Industry...

rience about your store to others, which is the next best thing.

✓ **Minimize choices.** A stylist's job is not necessarily to show more dresses, but rather to narrow down the choices and remove dresses from view both physically and psychologically. Whenever possible, try to focus a bride on two options: Do you like this dress with the sleeves or without? Do you like this neckline or that neckline? Do you like the length of this dress or that one?

✓ **Document everything.** Brides have questions and planning a wedding – and, certainly, purchasing a dress – often ignites intense emotions and stress.

✓ **Ask for the sale.** Some stylists fear losing a sale or being perceived as pushy, so they resist asking for the sale.

One approach: ask questions with an A or B answer. For instance, "So will you be wearing dress A or dress B at your wedding?" Then, "Okay, did you want dress A with the white ribbon or the red ribbon?"

✓ **Show gratitude.** At the most fundamental level, a wedding gown and accessories are commodities brides can purchase anywhere. Whether she purchases a gown with you or not, thank her for letting you be a part of a memorable experience in her life.

✓ **Put pen to paper.** In the digital age, handwritten notes have gone the way of bottled soda – still around, but barely – a handwritten note stands out as a sincere and genuine gesture.

✓ **Reflect and grow.** Over the course of the appointment, you built a rapport. She was confident and comfort-

able throughout the process and you handled yourself with tremendous professionalism and class. Then, it happens: she leaves without buying a dress. You could be deflated, but understand this is the nature of the bridal retail game. Reflect on each experience, ask yourself what you could have done better and take that knowledge with you into the next appointment. And follow up with her!



Unreasonable hospitality?

I was intrigued with Will Guidara's book *"Unreasonable Hospitality: The remarkable power of giving people more than they expect."*

Though his book focuses on the extraordinary steps in customer service taken by his New York city restaurant team and the resulting success that made Eleven Madison Park "The World's Best Restaurant," his underlying message is that every business can choose to deliver that which every consumer desires: to be taken care of in authentic, individually-centric ways.

Which is the focus and goal of every bridal boutique.

His additional perspective is that such a hospitality-first approach works because "it extended beyond guests to their own team. They learned to deliver praise and criticism with intention; that the best way to build the bottom line is by giving more not less, and that magic happens when a busser is empowered to think like an owner."

What follows are the key points stripped away from the restaurant hospitality angle, directly from the subheads spread throughout his book:

- Service is black and white; hospitality is color
- People will never forget how you made them feel
- The power of a genuine welcome
- There's nobility in service
- Go above and beyond
- Enthusiasm is contagious
- Keep emotions out of criticism
- Set them up (staff) to succeed
- Thirty minutes a day can transform a culture
- Make it cool to care



- Don't try to be all things to all people
- Articulate your intentions
- Strategy is for everyone
- Know why your work is important
- "It might not work" is a terrible reason not to try
- Excellence is the culmination of thousands of details executed perfectly
- The way you do one thing is the way you do everything
- Finish strong
- Being right is irrelevant
- Share the spotlight
- Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent
- Keep the team engaged at all times
- Be present
- Hospitality isn't a transaction
- Giving more is addictive
- Luxury means just giving more; hospitality means being more thoughtful
- Creativity is a practice
- Serve what you want to receive
- Return to your first principles

An important point: "giving people more than they expect" is not about costly promotions or thank you gifts. Instead it is knowing all you can about your customers. . . what matters to them, their stories, their expectations, their concerns. . . and conveying a level of hospitality that make them feel truly seen and welcomed.

– Peter Grimes

"Unreasonable Hospitality: The remarkable power of giving people more than they expect," by Will Guidara, is published by Simon Sinek's Optimism Press, and was a recent NY Times bestseller. Guidara is the host of the Welcome Conference, a co-producer of the Emmy Award-winning series *The Bear*, and a recipient of the **WSJ Magazine's** Innovator Award.

De Minimis... then and now



The De Minimis exemption that allowed packages valued under \$800 to deliver to the US through international mail without tariff or duty ended August 29. Though primarily utilized by consumers purchasing online goods, some indie bridal and apparel designers shipped their goods to their accounts through international mail, thereby avoiding the average 16.5% duty and 20-50% tariffs on the value of the goods.

Consequently nearly a dozen countries have halted mail to the US as each struggles to determine the tariff amount, and how it will be paid, resulting in an 80% drop in postal deliveries since August, according to the USPS.

Where we are now:

According to an August 29 US Customs and Border protection document, all postal shipments will be subject to tariffs applied one of two ways:

- **Ad valorem duty:** A duty equal to the effective IEEPA tariff for the country of origin of the product, based on the value of the product. From China, for example, a product valued at \$200 will now have a tariff of approximately \$68 added;
- **Specific duty:** A flat duty ranging from \$80 per item to \$200 per item, depending on the effective IEEPA tariff rate applicable to the country of origin of the product. Specifically \$80 if the tariff rate is less than 16%, \$160 if the rate is between 16% and 25%, and \$200 if the rate is above 25%.

For goods imported from China, Myanmar, and India, for example, the rate is \$200 per item.

- The specific duty option will be available for six months; all shipments must use the ad valorem method beginning Feb 28, 2026.

What this might mean:

- Delays in shipping/receiving packages as tariff and duty requirements are worked through as both may need to be paid prior to mailing, and/or before release of shipment from customs;
- Online wedding and social occasion purchases may no longer be as cheap;
- Increased costs may encourage online consumers into stores, as price and convenience are the primary drivers of this consumer. Though the added costs may not equal retail prices, if the difference between the two is not as dramatic, we may see consumers returning to the joys of shopping in store;
- Potentially increased costs of goods from smaller, indie bridal houses and factory-direct resources;
- Tighter enforcement and scrutiny by Customs of stated value;
- Enforcement of valuation and classification rules;
- Penalties for non compliance (under valuing, etc) include seizure of goods, fines and penalties, liquidated damages
- Liabilities. If you are a buyer of direct from factories imported goods, you are also liable in receiving undervalued products due to your knowledge of market value, and involvement in accepting the undervaluation.

To protect yourself, know your supplier; its reputation, history, etc., verify with each that they are compliant with custom laws, and that their goods are at fair market value.

If they suggest that tariffs and duties will be paid by them, get it in writing.

Better Bridal GROUP



Connection. Leadership. Learning.
Growth. Support. Impact.

Empowering bridal store owners to lead boldly,
learn continuously, and grow profitably—together.



DAVINA



PEN·LIV

Contemporary Edge.

Edgy couture for the modern bride.

Presenting the ethereal **DAVINA** gown from the PEN·LIV collection -- a modern masterpiece crafted with exquisite floral embroidered lace and delicate Chantilly lace. This fit-and-flare silhouette sculpts the body beautifully, while a playful scoop neckline adds a touch of romance. **DAVINA** also features a dramatic cape and intricate beaded pearl strings, setting it apart with its captivating detailing.

The **DESTINY** gown from PEN·LIV is a dreamy bridal dress designed for the modern romantic bride. Crafted with delicate Chantilly lace and flowing organza, the A-line silhouette is both sculptural and effortlessly playful. The scoop neckline gracefully frames the collarbone, while the detachable long sleeves add a touch of versatility to this enchanting piece.

Crafted in sumptuous Mikado and Alencon lace, the regal **DYLLAN** ballgown enchants with its vintage-inspired charm. The high neckline exudes sophistication, while the star of the show is the exquisite long sleeve lace jacket layered over the dress, adding a sculptural element to the timeless ensemble.

<https://penliv.com/>



DESTINY



DYLLAN



ENZOANI

ENZOANI *Blue* love

Innovative Design.

Fashion-forward, artfully crafted bridal style.

1. VENICE

Introducing the ethereal VENICE wedding gown from the Enzoani collection -- a vintage-inspired dream crafted from pearl-beaded floral lace and corded lace. The A-line silhouette effortlessly glides across the dance floor, while the scoop neckline adds a touch of romance. Brides will stand out with the unique detailing of this 2-in-1 gown, featuring a detachable overskirt for a playful twist on tradition.

2. TEMINA

Discover the ethereal beauty of TEMINA, a breathtaking ballgown from the Blue by Enzoani collection. Crafted from luxurious Mikado or satin, this Hollywood glam silhouette features a dreamy scoop neckline that exudes sophistication. The gown's sculptural design is elevated by playful pockets and an exposed boning corset back, adding a touch of modern romance to this classic piece.

3. ELDORA

ELDORA features a romantic silhouette crafted from stretch satin and exudes a dreamy aura, perfect for the modern bride seeking both sophistication and comfort. The scoop neckline delicately frames the collarbones, while buttons trailing down the train add a touch of whimsy to this sculptural design.

<https://www.enzoani.com/>

ÉLYSÉE

PRIVÉ ÉLYSÉE ÉTOILE

Modern Bridal Glamour.

Timeless romance meets bridal glam.



FLOWER from the PRIVÉ collection is an ethereal ballgown silhouette crafted from luxurious silk organza to exude timeless elegance. The Queen Anne neckline adds a touch of regal charm, while delicate lace detailing cascades down the bodice, creating a sculptural look. The dramatic train flows elegantly behind for a dreamy walk down the aisle.



Indulge in the exquisite allure of the **GENEVA** wedding gown from the ÉLYSÉE collection. Crafted with sumptuous satin or Mikado, this ballgown silhouette exudes timeless elegance ideal for the bride seeking Hollywood glam. The scoop neckline frames the décolletage beautifully, while delicate 3D flowers cascade down the back, accentuated by a trail of buttons along the train.



Step into timeless elegance with the **FIANNA** wedding gown. Crafted from ethereal floral embroidered lace and luxurious satin, this fit-and-flare silhouette hugs the body in all the right places. The sweetheart neckline adds a touch of romance, while the exquisite detailing of buttons cascading down the train creates a sculptural and playful effect.

Portrait

Size-Inclusive Sophistication.

*Perfectly crafted bridal gowns to hug you
in all the right places.*



1. PORTRAIT X FABLE is a mesmerizing A-line silhouette crafted from luxurious Chantilly lace and dreamy tulle. The sweetheart neckline highlights the bride's radiance, while the enchanting details elevate the gown to sculptural perfection. Whether dancing the night away or gliding down the aisle, this romantic creation from the Portrait collection is ready to walk your brides down the aisle in pure elegance.

2.: Behold the enchanting **PORTRAIT X VERONIKA** wedding gown from the Portrait collection - made from ethereal Alençon lace and flowing tulle, this mermaid silhouette exudes a dreamy allure. The sweetheart neckline gracefully frames the décolletage, while the exposed boning corset back adds a sculptural touch.

3. Introducing **PORTRAIT X GENEVA**, a regal ballgown crafted in luxurious satin, enchants with its dreamy scoop neckline and ornate detailing of beaded accents and a row of buttons trickling down the train. The sculptural back adds a modern twist to this timeless piece, perfect for a bride seeking a playful yet sophisticated look.

<https://portraitbridal.com/en/>



Market Takeaway: *Tariff Confusion*



Breaking down the current tariff picture for bridal businesses.

My intent is to describe what I see as the reality of tariffs and their implementation

Tariffs were clearly on everyone's mind at the recent Atlanta and Chicago Bridal Markets, many asking about the current status and impact on industry, some assuming a pause was in effect on Chinese imported goods, and a few believing that exporting countries pay import tariffs.

Since those August events, tariffs continued to rock the news cycle, with a federal appeals court ruling August 29 confirming a lower court decision that President Trump exceeded his legal authority in implementing sweeping tariffs, but it allowed selected tariffs to remain in effect until October 14 to provide time for administration appeals to the US Supreme Court. . . which were filed September 4 for an expedited process requesting oral argu-

ments the first week in November.

It is not my role to judge the legality of tariffs, nor to predict what the Supreme Court may ultimately decide. My intent is to describe what I see as the reality of tariffs and their implementation today as they remain in place for the foreseeable future:

- **Tariffs on apparel imported from China continue to be charged at 37.5% of the stated value of goods.**

This 37.5% is broken down as follows:

- 7.5% established during the first Trump administration and carried forward by the Biden administration
- 20% applied to address the Fentanyl

Story continued on page 57
Sidebar on page 56

20 YEARS BRIDAL COLLECTIVE

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- *Serial Shoppers*

Quick Tips That Hit:

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- *Serial Shoppers – Help brides choose confidently when stuck between two favorites*

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- *Five Secrets About Gen Z Brides – What really earns their trust*
- *Scarcity Doesn't Scare Them – How to talk timelines without panic*
 - *Less Pressure, More Power – Guiding Gen Z brides to say “yes” without pressure*

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For more information, please contact info@bridal-collective.com.

Update on North American Formal Apparel Association



Sandra Gonzalez, vice president of the **National Bridal Retailers Association** and owner of **Sparkle Bridal Couture**, Sacramento, Calif, has joined the Board of the **North American Formalwear Apparel Association**.

Gonzalez joins existing board members **Kelly Crum, Allure Bridals; Justin Warshaw, Justin Alexander; Steve Lang, Mon Cheri Bridals; and Peter Grimes, VOWS magazine**.

“At this pivotal time for the entire industry, the NBRA remains committed to fighting for policies that positively impact our businesses and the brides we serve,” Gonzalez said. “As a united voice for bridal retailers, we stand ready to collaborate with the NAFAA to advocate and champion fair trade policies that protect our future and uphold the values of our industry.”

NAFAA was created in June with a primary mission to develop a strategy to lobby for tariff relief for the formal wear industry by petitioning elected officials and the appropriate governmental offices for a reclassification of wedding/formal occasion apparel and related accessories under an established category that better reflects their cultural, economic and ceremonial significance. . . regardless of the country of origin.

Central to the association’s and industry’s reasoning and position:

Classification problem: Current classification as synthetic “daywear” is economically and functionally inaccurate, and imposes a disproportionate penalty on milestone celebrations across all American communities.

Ceremonial formalwear is currently classified under HTS 6204.43.40 – the same code used for everyday synthetic dresses. This imposes a combined tariff burden of up to 53.5% (16% base duty, 7.5% Section 301, and 30% China-specific surtax).

This classification is economically and functionally inaccurate. These garments are:

- Handcrafted, highly embellished with ornate details, long trains, fragile fabrics, labor-intensive and easily damaged;
- Worn once, preserved as heirlooms or discarded – not reused or resold;
- Impractical as daywear and irrelevant to seasonal fashion cycles;
- Traditional festive attire and has no realistic function beyond the ceremony.

Consequently NAFAA’s position is that the current sys-

tem imposes disproportionate penalties on milestone celebrations that are deeply rooted in American family life: weddings, proms, Quinceañeras and other rites of passage that mark the most meaningful moments across all our communities.

High tariffs dramatically drive up retail prices, threatening access for low and middle-income families wishing to celebrate their most precious moments.

No domestic manufacturing option: There is no viable “on-shoring” solution. US apparel factories are not equipped for formalwear production, and skilled labor does not exist at scale. Cost comparisons show US-made gowns would retail for \$11,000–\$17,000 versus today’s \$700–\$2,500.

Affordability matters: Affordability for families purchasing ceremonial garments are essential to life milestones. High tariffs drive up retail prices dramatically – threatening access for low- and middle-income families.

Preserving small businesses and jobs: More than 90% of bridal and formalwear retailers are small, family-run businesses. Misclassification and corresponding tariffs are threatening their survival. Though garments are made abroad, the US economy benefits from a robust domestic ecosystem – boutiques, tailors, seamstresses, preservationists, planners and more.

Trade fairness: Current classification fails to distinguish between fashion apparel and ceremonial garments. Families celebrating weddings, proms and Quinceañeras should not face penalties designed to target fast fashion or mass-produced apparel.

American businesses first: The current tariff regime excessively impacts American businesses vs. Factory Direct Sellers that under-declare merchandise value. The industry is under siege as brides and retailers seek lower-priced merchandise and opt for factory copy-houses that employ no Americans and have no concern in risking penalties with no US presence.

To join in this effort, visit <https://nafaa.com> for NAFAA details, and <https://nafaa.com/join> for membership application.

Continued from page 54

crisis implemented in early April of this year

– an additional 10% applied to all countries as a universal tariff during trade negotiations with each, also implemented in April.

Important note: This tariff rate of 37.5% does NOT include duties (approximately 16% for dresses and accessories). Duties plus the 37.5% tariff account for a current TOTAL impact of 53.5%

Note: Duties and tariffs are different types of fees imposed on goods entering the US to generate revenue for the government and/or to protect domestic industries.

Duties are based on specific product characteristics and are generally permanent and set by international trade agreements. *Tariffs* cover a broader category of taxes or restrictions on imports and exports, and may change relatively quickly as we have experienced recently.

- **There is no pause on tariffs applied to apparel and goods imported from China.**

This according to President Trump's August 12 executive order entitled "Continuing the Suspension of Heightened Tariffs on China."

President Trump extended the tariff truce between the US and China in place since May that prevented rates as high as 125% from taking effect during a negotiation timetable that now ends November 10 (but yet may be impacted by pending court decision).

Potential outcomes after November 10 depend on negotiations and court rulings: deadline could again be extended; an increase or decrease in rates; a locking in long-term of existing tariffs.

Tariffs and duties now push total import costs to 53.5%.

Regardless of the outcome of these ongoing negotiations and court rulings, one thing seems clear just based on the trade deals already finalized with specific countries... tariffs are here for the long term.

Consequently both our

brides/customers and every segment of the supply chain will need to adapt to this "new" normal. For the industry, this means carefully assessing pricing strategies, looking for steps to improve operational efficiencies, and possibly evaluating alternative supply sources all while considering the long-term impact of price increases on consumer demand and market position.

Note: sourcing formal apparel

NOW IS THE TIME TO JOIN NBRA

- ✓ Strength in Numbers
- ✓ Have your Voice Heard in Washington
- ✓ Support your Fellow Bridal Shop Owners

NBRA's Mission

EDUCATION
ADVOCACY
EMPOWERMENT



NBRA is a 501(c)6
trade association for
independently-owned
brick & mortar bridal
shops in the US.



Visit our website for more details and to join for free:

nationalbridalretailersassociation.com

and accessories from other countries may not be much of an option beyond the possibility of Vietnam, as there is no tariff relief in India with current rates at 50% or with Myanmar with current tariffs of 40%.

- **Current tariffs on other formal apparel producing and exporting countries:**

Brazil: 50%	India: 50%
Myanmar: 40%	Mexico: 25%
Canada: 25%	Taiwan: 20%
Vietnam: 20%	

- **US consumers to soon see impact of tariffs on the price of their goods and services.**

US importers across all industries have mitigated consumer prices by absorbing increased costs in the short term, but are increasingly raising prices to protect their margins and businesses.

Shoppers, not exporters, ultimately pay escalating tariff taxes.

According to a recent report by **Jan Hatzius**, chief economist of the investment bank **Goldman Sachs**, US businesses have so far shouldered most of the financial pain from tariffs, with the share picked up by consumers expected to rise sharply in coming months.

Fortune magazine, quoting from the report, stated that as of June, consumers had absorbed 22% of total tariff costs, with that number projected to increase to 67% by October. Hatzius was also quoted as predicting that the burden of tariffs for businesses will shrink from 64% down to 8%.

There are parallels in formal apparel industry: brands and private label apparel and accessory com-

panies initially absorbed some or all of additional tariff expenses, but as evidenced at recent markets are steadily increasing prices.

Retailers initially did the same... and appear to be moving to increasing prices by a certain percentage overall, and moving away from tariff surcharges on invoices to their brides.

- **Exporting countries do not pay import tariffs... consumers ultimately do.**

Simply put, a tariff is a tax on imports, which is charged to the importer at the border before release of imported goods. Those fees may be absorbed to a certain extent by the importing company, often based on the amount, but are generally passed through to their distributors/retailers, who then price the goods to the consumer accordingly.



We need you!

**MILESTONE FASHION
IS BEING MISCLASSIFIED
AND UNDERREPRESENTED.
HELP US FIX THAT.**

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Reclassify milestone fashion from "daywear" to "one-time wear."

This small change will have a massive economic impact.

It's the first step toward fair standards, proper recognition,

and a stronger future for our entire industry.

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FOR THE ENTIRE INDUSTRY.**

nafa.com for more information

NAFAA

North American Formal Apparel Association



Behind the Desk

Retailers show how their private workspaces reflect their style, strategy and success.



Some offices feature battle-tested systems to spur productivity and ensure organization.

Among bridal store owners and operators, the office serves many purposes and takes on many forms.

It can be a place of solitude, a barrier from the hustle and bustle of the sales floor, as well as a meeting spot with staff and vendors. It can be a place of inspiration and serenity as well as a venue to practice operational diligence.

Some have bare-bones offices with few adornments, a nod to keeping the focus on work. Others fill the space with personal and professional mementos reflecting their personality and business mindset.

Some offices feature battle-tested systems to spur productivity and ensure organization. Others carry their inhabitants' own self-invented methods to create order, even amid perceived chaos.

VOWS recently asked bridal retailers to take us into their offices – and a number opened the door and welcomed us in.

She is. . . Jillian Forsberg, owner of Dress Gallery in Wichita, Kan.

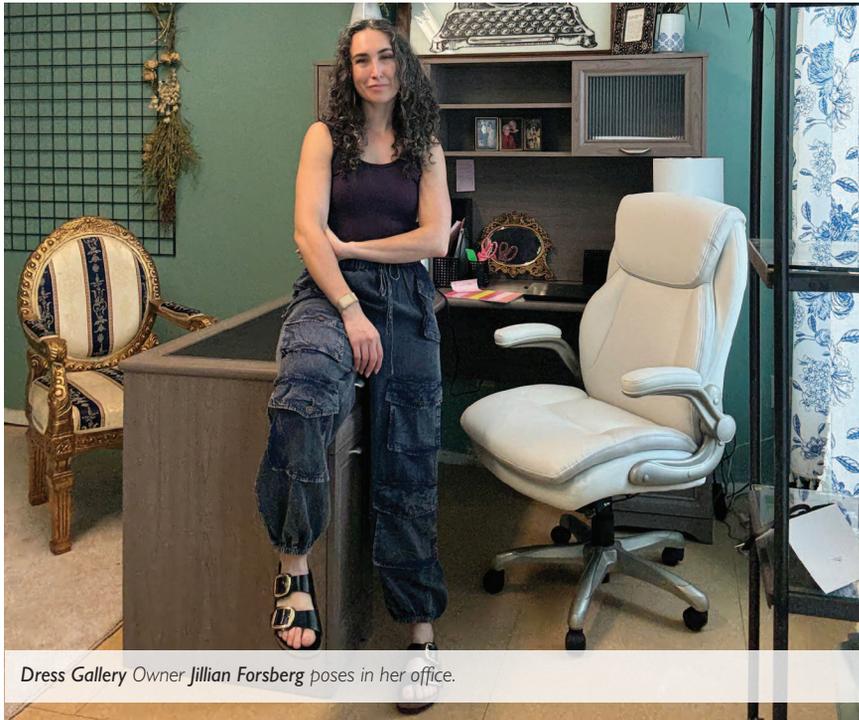
Her office is. . . new. Formerly an apartment, then a storage area for clearance gowns above Dress Gallery's historic Douglas Avenue storefront,

Forsberg and her staff recently converted the upstairs space into a dedicated place for learning, staff development initiatives, payroll, meetings and more. "In the nearly 20-year history of the store, there has never really been a functioning office," she says. "It's my first year having one, and I feel like I have the freedom to grow the business without standing at the front desk."

She spends. . . up to 10 hours a week in her office, largely doing payroll and paperwork as well as taking important calls with vendors, employees and retail colleagues. "Being far away from the sales floor was really important to me," she says.

Still, Forsberg is careful not to. . . seclude herself in her office. In fact, she's strategic about the private things that need to take place in her office and what might happen at the front desk to show her employees she's actively with them. "Any conversations with sales reps go upstairs, but as long as there are no customers in the store, I find having tough conversations with upset customers in front of my staff helps them know how to problem solve in the future," she says.

Her office includes. . . an arrange-



Dress Gallery Owner **Jillian Forsberg** poses in her office.

She spends. . . about 20-30 hours a week in her office working on business areas like inventory, marketing, communication, accounting and planning.

Her office must-haves are. . . natural light, a laptop for flexibility and double computer screens. She also invested in a walking pad and a sitting/standing desk, which enables her to “switch things up” and move while working.

She shares. . . her office with her husband, which means the office features an interesting juxtaposition of his military awards, photos and memories with her bridal memorabilia, family items, inspirational pieces and hefty collection of color-coded books lining a built-in shelf.

She resists. . . clutter in the office. “If something doesn’t serve a purpose, I am quick to get rid of it,” she says. Limeberry also takes advantage of a connected closet to store things she doesn’t use on a regular basis.

Continued on page 62

ment of dried florals and plants, which adds delightful smells and textures to the office, as well as a piece of art she made from Dress Gallery’s discontinued bridesmaid swatches.

Her office is not. . . hers alone. “I share my office with my manager or any other staff who wants to have a private place to do paperwork or training,” she says. “The culture of my store is one of shared space, goals and morals and by allowing anyone who needs access to the office to have that, I put my money where my mouth is.”

She is. . . **Jessica Limeberry**, owner of **Sophia’s Bridal and Tux**, which has two locations in Indianapolis, one in Louisville and a sister store called With Love located in Columbus, Ind.

Her office is located. . . at her home in suburban Indianapolis. With four locations, Limeberry’s strengths are in the backend, communication and growth plans. “I am lucky to have an office in my house and an amazing team of managers who work in the stores

running the day to day,” she says.

She credits her home office. . . with propelling the growth of her business, allowing herself time and space to think big picture and dream up pie-in-the-sky goals. “As an owner/leader, having some time to remove yourself from the day to day and work on the business instead of in the business is key,” she says.



A walking pad helps **Jessica Limeberry** stay active and get work done at the same time.

Continued from page 61



Brian Fortin's office provides much-needed privacy, allowing him to focus on important tasks.

He is... Brian Fortin, the owner of Modern Bride & Formal Shop in Bedford, N.H.

His personal office is located... in a mezzanine space in the rear of Modern Bride's warehouse. As the shop's 10,000-square-foot building sits on a busy road, this back-of-the-property location provides Fortin distance from the constant activity outside. Previously, Fortin's desk sat in the back of the warehouse in a shared space with the gowns and seamstresses – and it was less than ideal. Fortin eventually created an office with insulated walls and a locking door for privacy. "Best thing we ever did," he says.

He spends... approximately 20 hours each week in his office.

He calls his office... a spartan-like space – basic with no windows and a metal roof. He has, however, added two creature comforts: air conditioning for a space that can get toasty during the summer months and two plush chairs to relax in while enjoying downtime or having meetings with staff.

The office includes... several tables so Fortin can spread out

paperwork. The walls, meanwhile, feature awards from Kiwanis, sports sponsorships and advertising campaigns celebrating Modern Bride's accomplishments and community involvement over the past 70 years.

He enjoys his office... as a "hideaway" from the daily routine. With distance from staff and customers, he can focus on what needs to be done, such as paying bills and reviewing sales reports.

She is... AJ Ruley, the president of Weddings by Debbie located in Houston. She is also co-host of the popular Bride and Gloom podcast alongside Erica Janke of Blush Bridal Lounge in Austin, Tex. **Her office sits...** in the back of the 12,000-square-foot bridal store. It resides in a main hallway sandwiched between the consultants' office, main sales floor, alterations and break room.

She is in her office... "at least 50 percent" of her weekly working hours in the store. "I like to be in and out of the departments around the store to keep the pulse of what is happening with clients and the staff," she says.

Tailor your workspace for focus and comfort.

Her must-have office features include... a Nespresso machine for her caffeine needs as well as tequila when caffeine will not do the trick. She also has photos of her dogs – "They are my happy place" – as well as two computer monitors, something she never thought she would have needed. "They help with the being productive, so I can do multiple things at once like checking stock and emails or analytics," she says.

She calls her office... "a weird one, for sure." Its bright chili pepper walls aren't the only oddity. Ruley's office also features: a drive-thru window into the consultants' office so she and staff can communicate throughout the workday; a Chucky doll to remind her that crazy comes in all packages; and a swear jar on her desk when consultants need to vent. "If they don't swear, they have to put money in the jar!" she says.

The office also sports... gifts from brides and staff as well as mementos from Ruley's travels to markets and fashion events.



Bright chili pepper walls are a distinguishing feature of AJ Ruley's office.

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“There’s usually a story behind each one of them, and that’s why they are here – so people can ask, and I can tell a story,” she says.

Her office door is... open. “My staff knows they can come in and talk to me about anything – business or personal,” she says. “I am here to help them as much as they are here to help me.”

She is... Kerrie Hileman, the founder and owner of **The White Magnolia Bridal Collection**. In addition to its flagship boutique in Jacksonville, Fla., White Magnolia has seven additional locations peppered across the southeastern U.S. as well as a spin-off retail concept called Magnolia Laine with seven U.S. locations.

Her office is located... in the rear of The White Magnolia flagship in Jacksonville. She is typically in her office about 20 hours each week.

She prefers an office... close enough to everyone where she can answer questions as needed. However, she does enjoy having the option to close her door and dig into the day’s to-do list. “Typi-



Cozy décor and a cute officemate help Kerrie Hileman stay motivated and inspired.

Decorate with meaning and share the stories.

cally, I keep my door open unless I am working on something that needs my undivided attention,” she says.

Hileman packs her office with... flowers and candles to set the ambience. “It makes diving into

work a little lighter when you have cozy aspects to your office,” she says. Natural light, meanwhile, helps to brighten the mood and keep everyone, Hileman included, feeling fresh and positive.

Additional office must-haves include... a dry erase board to jot down ideas and comfortable seating for guests. She also loves having pictures of her family in the

Say “Yes” to a Productive Office

The head of SOHO Productivity Solutions, a Houston-based organizing and productivity consulting firm, Karen Baker shares these tips for creating an efficient, inspired office space.



Declutter. Remove unnecessary items no longer serving a purpose. Outdated paperwork, old promotional materials and excess samples consume space and can overwhelm office inhabitants, triggering anxiety and making it difficult to focus. In extreme cases, excessive clutter can also be a safety hazard.

Design functional zones for specific tasks. Division of space helps with maintaining order and transitioning between tasks. Make sure each zone has easy access to necessary tools and materials. For example, an area for client consultations would feature comfortable seating near natural light, an area for inventory management would provide easy access to storage and an area for administrative work would have office supplies within an arm’s reach.

Utilize vertical and mobile storage options. Vertical storage will keep floor space open and ensure everything has a dedicated home. Use wall-mounted shelving to store reference materials and supplies or pegboards for frequently accessed items like measuring tapes or swatches. Mobile drawer units and shelves can roll between zones as needed, which allows the office space to be quickly reconfigured for different activities.

Use labels. Creating a labeling system with text, color coding or graphics will give specific items, such as office supplies, fabric samples or client files, a defined home to maintain organization. Labels will also help employees find items when necessary.

Make it an enjoyable space. A beautiful and fun workspace can help boost productivity, so choose décor and design elements reflective of your personality or brand. This might include desk or office accessories in favorite colors, personal photos, meaningful quotations, décor inspired by pop culture favorites or natural elements like small potted plants. Remember, though: less is more, especially in a shared workspace. Excessive personalization can create a frenzied or cluttered environment distracting from the productivity and efficiency the office needs to deliver.

Schedule regular reviews to reset. Establishing a daily or weekly review schedule to clear the desk, file paperwork or return items to their designated spots will keep the office organized and prevent small organizational challenges from snowballing into chaos. A visible checklist can help build and reinforce this important habit.



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Surround yourself with reminders of goals and success.

office as well as awards and accolades The White Magnolia has received over the years. "It reminds me of where I have been and provides me with the motivation to continue to strive for success," she says.

She recently incorporated. . . an inspiration board. It reflects what Hileman wants life to look like over the next 5-10 years. "It allows me to keep my eye on the prize and keeps me driven to my goals," she says.

A fixture on her office desk is. . . a planner called a "Day Designer." The planner allows Hileman to break down days in 30-minute chunks and create a prioritized checklist for each day. "This lives on my desk as I move through my workday," she says.

To keep her office organized, Hileman. . . has different baskets for "things going in, things going out and things on hold." It helps when organizing orders and receipts and ensures a tidy workspace where everything has a place. "Sometimes I find I have multiple things spread across my desk and the feeling of clutter can immediately mess up my workflow for the day," she says.

She also has an officemate. . . her golden retriever, Birdie. "She can't help with orders or organization, but she sure does help with morale," she says.

She is. . . Courtney James, the founder of **Grayce Bridal & Formal**, which operates two stores in Maine (Bangor and Portland) as well as a location in Chattanooga, Tenn. James is also the head of Grayce Leadership Solutions, a leadership coaching firm she launched earlier this year.

Her office is located. . . at her

home in Chattanooga. "Ever since I started running multiple locations, having a home office is key," she says. "I need the separate space to ensure I can be productive and serve all my teams as well as my clients for Grayce Leadership Solutions. We stay connected with consistent communication rhythms, but the separate space ensures I spend more of my time working on the businesses, not in them."

She spends. . . about 25 hours each week in her office.

She calls herself. . . "spatially sensitive," meaning she's heavily influenced by her surroundings. As such, it was important James have a calm and well-designed office space.

Her office staples include. . . a big desk with great storage, filing cabinets and ample space for books and photos of her children. A to-do list and notebook are always handy, too. "I utilize many digital systems for organization now, but I always have lists at my fingertips," she says. "It's the only way I keep track of ideas that pop up,

things I need to delegate or follow up on or smaller to-dos."

Her office perks include. . . natural light from an oversized window and an en suite bathroom. "It may sound silly, but efficiency matters when you're trying to maintain a great work-life balance," she says.

Daily inspiration comes from. . . a gallery wall sharing her core values, personal mission statement and motivational quotations. The wall is directly beyond James's computer screens to serve as "a constant reminder of why I do what I do and the way I want to live my life and run my business." James also placed an hourglass on a side table to remind her of the importance of how she spends her time. "We all get the same 24 hours in a day; the difference is what we do with it," she says.



A gallery wall provides motivation, while an hourglass reminds of the importance of how time is spent at **Grayce Bridal & Formal**.



Grayce Bridal & Formal owner Courtney James wanted her home office to be calm and well-designed.

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Digital *Courtship*



How to optimize your online presence
for authenticity, trust and visibility.

The winning
formula:
personalization
plus inspiration!

As you know, today's brides live online. Whether scrolling TikTok for dress inspo, browsing your website for styles carried or checking Google reviews, their first impression of your boutique often happens digitally – long before they ever step through your front door.

So, what are they really looking for today? And what digital missteps might cause them to click away? While the details vary by platform (a short-form Reel is different from a website page), the fundamentals remain the same: what they want is authenticity, responsiveness, personalization and transparency. They expect clear information, seamless navigation and a sense of connection with your brand.

The following takes a fresh look at each of those fundamentals showing how to elevate both your social presence and website as we prep for 2026 to capture attention, build trust and turn

browsers into booked appointments. And while much of this advice may be a necessary reminder, the age of AI has reshaped all of these fundamentals – especially when it comes to search, personalization and content strategy (refer to our July/August 2025 article, “AI Enters the Chat”, for an overview of this technology).

Social Media: The Hook

Sites like Instagram, TikTok and Pinterest are the first place many brides find you. Typically, they scroll dress photos for inspiration, and, if something catches their eye, visit your website to learn more.

Your main goal here is to inspire and form an emotional connection – essentially the beginning of a relationship. They want to see:

Authenticity. Brides expect a genuine

representation of your brand and its values so they know exactly who they're dealing with. They want real, not overly polished, scripted or fake. There are many ways to do this including:

-showcase the people and pets behind your shop (make videos telling their stories and talking about why you love helping brides!)

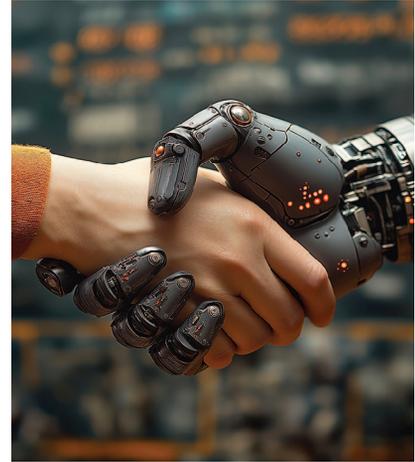
- post candid moments (unboxing product, setting up for a VIP appointment, etc.)
- use behind-the-scenes clips, not staged photos
- feature real brides, not just models (remember to use a variety of races, ages and body types)
- use honest and relatable language
- admit realities (sticking to a budget can be tough, bridal sizing catches many off-guard, etc.)
- share your boutique's story
- highlight community involvement
- share funny and relatable real-life moments
- engage genuinely

Remember: Brides don't expect perfection, they expect honesty. If your feed includes a balance of polished gown photos plus authentic, unfiltered glimpses of life in the boutique, it will feel both inspirational and genuine.

Personalization: Brides love content tailored directly toward them, but when you have thousands of followers, it's impossible to do one-to-one personalization for everyone. The trick is to create scalable personalization – content that feels tailored without requiring you to custom-create

Making Your Social & Website Search AI-Friendly

Brides can't book with you if they can't find you. Both AI tools and search engines reward content that is clear, consistent and easy to understand. Here's how to make sure your boutique shows up when and where brides are looking:



On Social Media

- Keep your handle and business name consistent across platforms
- Use a mix of **local + niche hashtags** (#DenverBride, #DenverWeddingDress, #ColoradoBridalShop) to catch regional searches
- Tag designers, venues, photographers and other partners to expand reach
- Write captions the way brides actually search ("Denver bridal shop with size-inclusive gowns" vs. "New arrivals")
- Naturally work location into posts ("This lace gown was a hit at our Denver boutique this weekend!")
- Encourage UGC – ask brides to tag you in their photos (AI and search prioritize real people)
- Update your Google Business Profile with photos, reviews and an appointment link
- Repurpose content across social platforms, but tweak captions for each
- Blog or create content answering common questions ("A-line vs. ball-gown: what's the difference?")
- Always cross-link social posts to your website (and vice versa)

On Your Website

- Use keyword-rich titles for gowns and products ("Mon Cheri Lace Fit-and-Flare Wedding Dress" vs. "Style D1234")
- Add alt text to every image describing what's pictured (helps both search and accessibility)
- Write FAQs + blogs in Q&A style, perfect for AI overviews and voice search
- Keep load times under three seconds (compress images and use modern hosting to help with this)
- Design mobile-first (70%+ of brides browse on phones)
- Use clear page titles (Denver Bridal Boutique – [Shop Name]) and descriptions brides would actually click
- Link everything internally. For example, "view matching veils" or "book an appointment now"

For AI Specifically

- Write FAQs in natural language ("How far in advance should I order my wedding dress?") and answer conversationally ("We recommend 9–12 months before your wedding...")
- Ensure every gown listing includes: designer, style name, price range, silhouette, fabric and color options
- Keep your contact info - name, address, phone, e-mail - consistent across all platforms
- Use your About Us page to state your location, specialty and story in plain terms
- Create blog posts around AI-friendly queries ("Best wedding dress silhouettes for plus-size brides")

Spark loyalty by speaking brides' language online.

for every single bride. Using real brides' stories with names tagged, posting polls or questions followers can respond to, talking to bride "types" (i.e. glam bride, minimalist bride, etc), sharing UGC and responding publicly to comments can all help followers feel seen and recognized. It's worth pointing out that doing these things also contributes to engagement, another crucial must. Social media should always feel more like having a conversation than giving a lecture.

Also, language matters. Using phrasing like "you" "your big day" or "when you're shopping" on your posts will help your feed feel warm and personal, even if you're speaking to thousands.

Responsiveness. If a bride sends a direct message or comments on a post, you must respond promptly. Fair or not, they will assume your attentiveness or lack thereof is an indication of the care you will provide their dress. While many shops use AI-enhanced autoreplies for DM, intended as an acknowledgment meant for follow-up later, one danger is that those messages can get marked as read and responded to, and thus overlooked.

Therefore, it is crucial to have a system in place to regularly check and follow up on them. As for comments on posts, this is a great time to engage in fun, lighthearted conversations, share important details and, if someone has a complaint or concern, acknowledge it publicly while inviting them to contact you privately for a resolution.

Inspiration. One main reason brides check out your social media is to get an idea of the designers, styles, sizes and niches you carry. Therefore, you must show them – via photos, videos, collages, carousels, posts, etc. While it's fine to use models and polished content, it's also important to mix in real people and USG content as well.

Video. While your content should include multiple formats, there's no denying video is a top-performer and should constitute a bulk. In particular short-form content works wonders. Not only is it engaging, but it's also prioritized

by algorithms, allowing your boutique to potentially reach more brides organically without a big ad spend. Generally speaking, anything under two minutes is considered short-form video, although the sweet spot tends to be around 10-45 seconds.

One fun way to participate is to adapt current TikTok/Instagram trends for bridal. For example, at the time of this article's publication, "Asking my strict parents hypothetical questions" videos were trending on TikTok. A boutique could play off this concept and film a video called, "Asking my strict boss/storeowner hypothetical questions" (and those questions would be "what would you do if" scenarios that brides often run into). This would not only be fun and educational for your audience, but showcase you are up to date with trends.

Transparency. While social media isn't the place to reveal all the details, brides do expect you to be forthcoming with basic info like designers carried, sizing and pricing. This is particularly true if they ask a direct question. Don't talk around it; just give them the facts.

Practicality. Make sure your contact info (store name, hours, location, phone number, etc.) is up to date and featured in the appropriate spot. As well, there should be a clear link to your website and any important posts pinned. When appropriate, designers should be tagged or links provided to website galleries or booking pages. You want to make the process for taking the next step as seamless as possible.

Consistency. How frequently are

Boost Visibility with Smart Keywords

Using SEO and AI-friendly keywords in your captions makes it easier for brides in your market to discover you – whether they're searching on Google, Instagram or TikTok. Incorporating these phrases is a simple, low-cost way to expand visibility and draw brides in:

- "[City] bridal boutique"
- "[City] wedding dresses"
- "Plus-size wedding dresses in [city]"
- "Best bridal shop near [city]"
- "Bridal alterations in [city]"
- "[Designer name] wedding gowns [city]"
- "Where to buy wedding dress in [city]"



you posting and when was your most recent post? If brides see your page go dormant for days or weeks at a time, they'll assume you will apply the same lack of attentiveness to their dress order. As a general rule, you want to post a minimum of three times a week on each site, adjusted for each platform's best practices.

Your Website: The Conversion Tool

Once a bride clicks through to your website, she's no longer just browsing she's deciding whether or not to trust you with one of the biggest purchases of her life. This is (hopefully!) where inspiration shifts into action. To keep her engaged and moving closer to booking, your site needs to be practical, seamless and confidence-building. Focus on:

Speed & First Impressions. Brides won't wait around for a slow site. Nearly half of consumers expect a page to load in two seconds or less, and most will leave if it takes more than three. A fast, clean homepage with your value front-and-center (an eye-catching image of a real bride in one of your gowns plus a "Book Appointment Now" button above the fold) is essential.

Mobile First. Around 70% of brides shop on their phones first, so your site must be optimized for every screen—think quick load times, tappable buttons, simple navigation and galleries that scroll smoothly on mobile.

Easy Navigation. Confusion kills conversions. Keep your menus simple, organized and intuitive so brides can quickly find what they

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need: designers, dresses, services and booking info.

Dress Galleries. Brides expect robust galleries with filtering (by size, style, silhouette, price, etc.). Bonus points for AI-powered search that responds to natural language requests like “lace ballgown under \$2,000 in size 14.”

Transparency. Be upfront about what you offer: price ranges, size availability, alteration options, appointment policies, etc. FAQs are a great place to cover these details, but don’t talk around them – give direct answers.

Seamless Booking. A big, bold, easy-to-find appointment button should appear throughout your site. Integrate it with your calendar, send confirmation texts and include a “what to expect” guide so brides feel supported before they

Craft an online experience brides can't wait to visit.

even walk in the door.

Inclusivity. Representation matters. Use real imagery that celebrates different sizes, body types, cultures and LGBTQ+ couples. This sends a clear message that every bride is welcome in your shop.

Guides & Education. Add value with blog posts or FAQs answering common questions (when to order, what to bring, how to prepare, etc.). This positions you as a trusted expert, not just a sales pitch.

AI Support. Chatbots or dress-finder quizzes can offer instant help, whether answering inventory questions or suggesting gowns

based on preferences, making the experience feel more personalized.

Trust Builders. Reviews, testimonials with photos and even short staff bios help brides connect on a human level. Showing real feedback and friendly faces reassures them they’re in good hands. Your “About Us” page is a great place to showcase personality and reveal fun facts about staff members.

Contact & Connections. Keep your phone, email and address easy to spot on every page (and make sure they’re up to date!) Link your socials clearly so brides can continue exploring your brand across platforms.

In today’s bridal market, your digital presence is your storefront long before a bride ever steps foot inside your boutique.

Social media provides the first spark – an authentic, engaging and emotional glimpse into who you are – while your website must validate that impression with clear information, seamless navigation, fast performance and easy booking. Together, these platforms shape first impressions, build trust and inspire action.

Brides expect personalization, transparency, responsiveness and inclusivity at every touchpoint, and meeting those expectations online is no longer optional – it’s essential. By approaching your socials as the “hook” and your website as the “conversion tool,” you create a powerful, cohesive digital experience that not only attracts today’s brides but also turns them into your future customers. 🔄

Reviews: Your Secret SEO Weapon

Your reviews are a gold mine for content ideas that both resonate with brides and boost your website/socials’ visibility. Each month, take time to read reviews across all platforms and jot down recurring themes.

For every theme you spot, create two pieces of content:

- A quick, visual social post (like a Reel or carousel)
- A blog or website article that dives deeper into the topic

Make sure to cross-link the two so they support each other.

For example, if the theme is plus-size bridal, create a Reel showing someone trying on plus-size samples and highlighting the fact you carry gowns in sizes 8–28. Pair this with a blog post explaining how bridal sizing works and why it differs from street sizing.

Or, for a theme of inclusivity, share a Reel spotlighting LGBTQ+ couples or diverse brides you’ve worked with, paired with a blog outlining your inclusivity values and your boutique’s commitment to welcoming all.

This strategy makes your content both authentic and discoverable: the social post captures attention quickly, while the blog/article strengthens your SEO and AI findability – together reinforcing what real brides care most about.





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Spring 2026 Bridal Market Updates

Elegance,
innovation and
resilience
defined this
season's
momentum.

From the August Spring 2026 markets, the industry saw plenty of energy – strong buying activity, expanded product categories such as quinceañera and private label, and new exhibitors for both prom and bridal. Retailers and exhibitors also shared candid conversations about the growing impact of tariffs, focusing on smart strategies to protect margins and keep expenses in check as costs (and prices) continue to rise.

(See Tariff Update article on page 54.)

For fashion, Spring 2026 runways were packed with equal parts drama, elegance and versatility all showcasing a focus on sparking excitement and helping brides find a look that feels unmistakably theirs. Trends (some of which were seen in last season's collections), include:

- **Big, Bold and Romantic:** Volume is back in a big way. Picture bubble hemlines and grand sweeping skirts that command attention. Add in corsetry, swingy shapes and regal embellishments straight out of Victorian romance or 1950s glamour. These are the gowns for brides who want that unforgettable “wow” moment.
- **Classics with a Twist:** Traditional elements are getting a glow-up. The basque waist is making a strong comeback, giving brides a beautifully sculpted silhouette. Layered lace and ex-

posed boning add strength and structure while keeping the gown soft and feminine. Perfect for brides who love tradition – but want it with a little edge.

- **Bow Love:** Bows are everywhere – from oversized showstoppers at the back of a gown to dainty accents on straps, waists or veils. They're romantic, versatile and totally customizable. Try spotlighting a “bows of Spring” display in your boutique to inspire brides.

- **One Dress, Two (or Three) Looks:** Brides want options. Convertible gowns with detachable skirts, sleeves or overskirts let them shift effortlessly from ceremony to reception. And separates – like chic jackets or tailored pants – are becoming must-haves for multi-event wedding wardrobes. Flexibility is the name of the game.

- **New Takes on Silhouettes:** The mermaid silhouette is back with a glamorous, red-carpet vibe. At the same time, designers are playing with sculptural shapes like drop waists, peplums and structured hips. Stocking both classic and modern versions will help you

meet brides wherever their style lands.

- **Color & Florals:** Brides are more open than ever to color. Expect shades like blush, powder blue and lavender; often layered subtly. And bold floral designs – from oversized 3D appliques to embroidered motifs – are making gowns feel fresh and unforgettable.

- **Texture & Shine:** This season is all about detail. Pearl accents add quiet luxury to gowns and veils, while 3D lace and layered fabrics bring texture and dimension. Brides are craving gowns that feel unique, artisanal and camera-ready.

- **Sleeves & Necklines with Personality:** Necks and sleeves are getting special attention. Halter necklines deliver clean, modern lines, while puffed, bishop and detachable sleeves give brides room to play with different looks. These touches add both style and practicality.

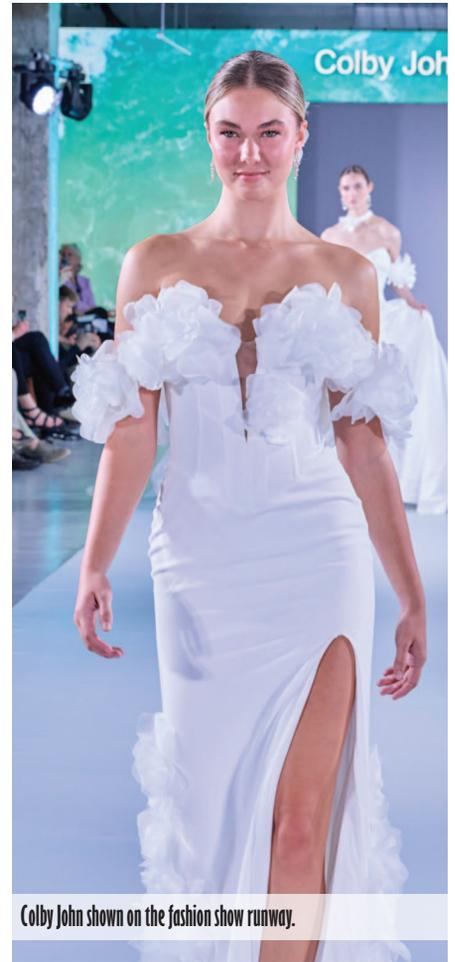
In short, designers showed timeless beauty, but also designs dramatic, playful, modern or a little bit of everything.



Busy aisles at National Bridal Market Chicago



Casablanca Bridal booth.



Colby John shown on the fashion show runway.



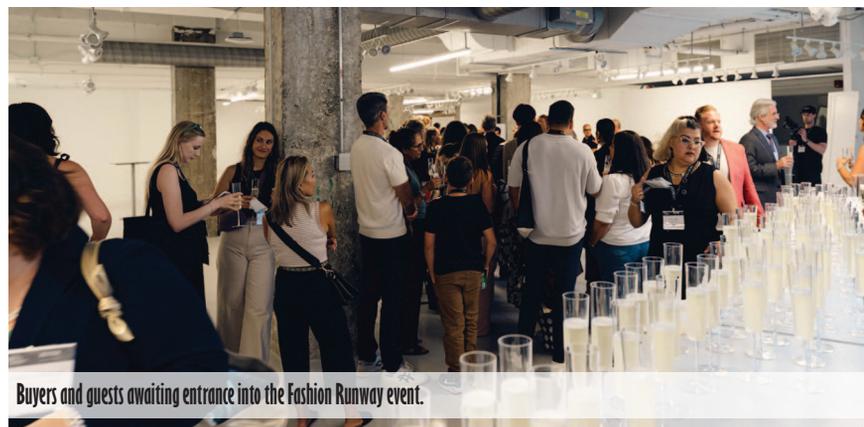
Elissar Bridal booth.



IDAN by House of Idan showcased during the Fashion Show.



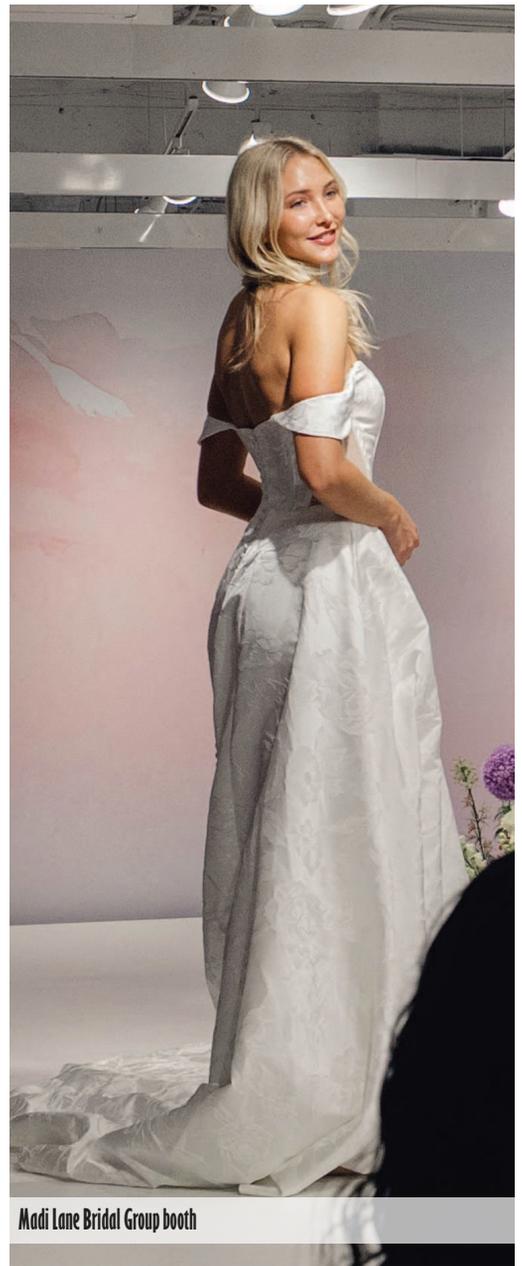
Joelle Olivia by La Femme.



Buyers and guests awaiting entrance into the Fashion Runway event.



Oksana Mukha



Madi Lane Bridal Group booth



Ricca Sposa



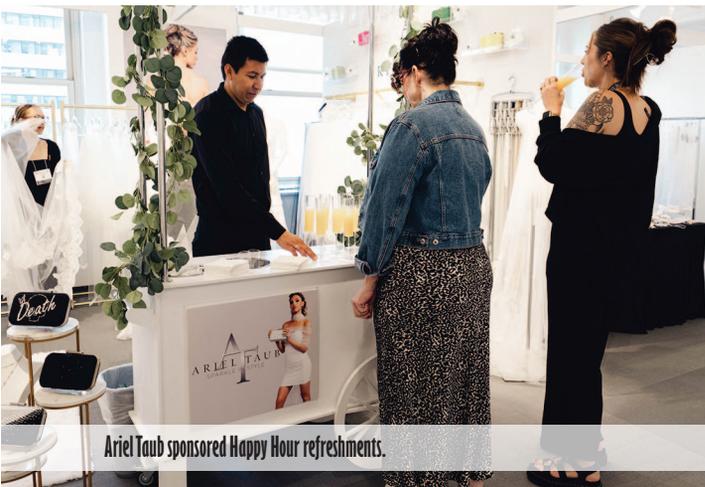
Princesa by Ariana Vara



Bridal and apparel vignettes were displayed in several high-traffic areas of the floor.



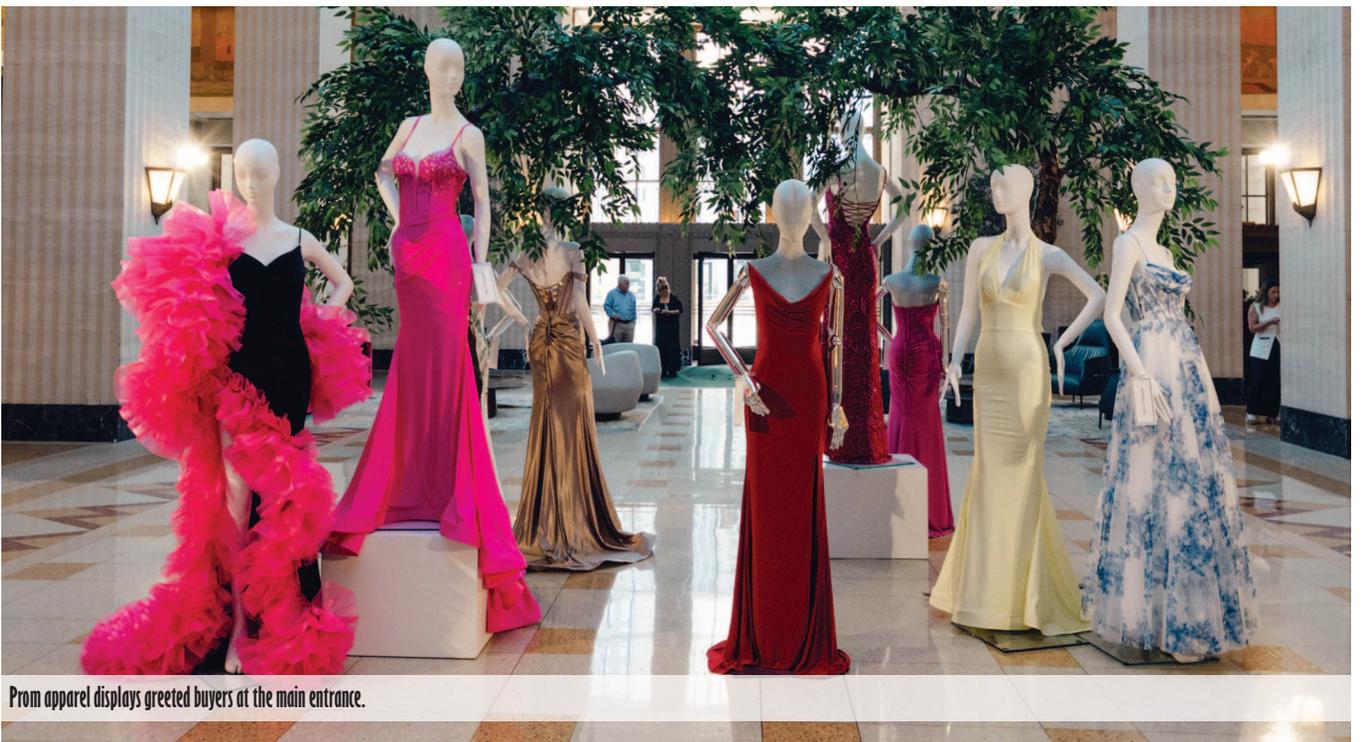
Maggie Sottero booth presentation



Ariel Taub sponsored Happy Hour refreshments.



National Bridal Market provided buyer amenities, including a popular lounge.



Prom apparel displays greeted buyers at the main entrance.



Rhea private label booth.



The NBC team from left: Kim Claridy, Katerina Kamberis, Jane Heflin, Monique Kielar.



The IDAN by House of Idan team, from left: Sandra Chung, Idan Cohen, James McAlvanah.



Designers Sophia Tulli and Martin Thornburg were on hand to present their collections.



Activity in the Ava Presley showroom during ANDMORE's Formal Market Atlanta.



Johnathan Kayne, active in his Atlanta showroom.



Formal Market hospitality was extended to buyers through special events and afternoon breaks.



Portia and Scarlett showroom.



Ava Presley wows the crowd at the event.



Also presented in Formal Market's runway event: White Lumiere by Belle Fare.



Sydney's Closet showcased during Formal Market's Runway show and reception.

D'Royal Dazzles



From an unconventional start, D'Royal Bride rises to be one of the premier bridal shops in Puerto Rico.

D'Royal Bride's flagship location in San Juan.

Where Is It?

D'Royal Bride's flagship store is located in San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico and the nation's largest city with some 350,000 residents. The other two D'Royal Bride locations sit in Bayamón, about a 15-minute drive from San Juan.

The majority of D'Royal's customers come from Puerto Rico, though the company's three stores also attract brides planning destination weddings in Puerto Rico as well as clients from other Caribbean islands, where on-hand inventory can be scarce and brides often purchase from catalogs or websites.

"Visiting D'Royal offers many of our clients a completely different experience," sales and marketing director Andrea Damaris Santiago Díaz says, adding that brides naturally find their way into the D'Royal store best meeting their specific needs, whether it's couture, rentals or outlet shopping.

Among the Puerto Rican brides representing the bulk of D'Royal's clientele, Santiago Díaz says they favor style and taste.

"They love curves, drama and detail," Santiago Díaz says. "While some choose traditional looks, most want intricate designs and gowns that fit beautifully."

At the age of 12, Andrea Damaris Santiago Díaz began working at D'Royal Bride, the boutique her parents, Andrés Santiago and Damaris Díaz, owned and operated in Puerto Rico.

She started with simple responsibilities like cleaning and organizing gowns before graduating onto more advanced tasks like running the point-of-sale system and checking out customers. Eventually, she became a stylist on the floor. Today, she's the three-store operation's sales and marketing director, helping to power the performance of one of Puerto Rico's most renowned bridal shops.

But Santiago Díaz is something else as well: a new bride. She married Jesús Emmanuel Vázquez on August 30, 2025.

As the only daughter of the founders and the future of the D'Royal brand, Santiago Díaz's wedding delivered a special event for the family and, it turns out, the family business.

"It feels surreal. I've dreamed of this moment since I was a little girl watching brides at our store," Santiago Díaz says. "Now, I understand our brides more than ever."

And that spirit is fueling D'Royal Bride, bringing added meaning and purpose to a business long focused on help-

ing brides craft their dream wedding.

An unconventional start

D'Royal Bride's origins are humble – and a touch unorthodox.

In 1992, and with three young children at home, Díaz and Santiago launched Party Decoration Center in their hometown of Vega Alta, Puerto Rico. While Díaz possessed the entrepreneurial energy and business plan – the result of a final project for her business administration degree – Santiago's creativity, design skills and business experience strengthened his wife's enterprising vision. Together, the couple began coordinating and decorating events and conventions for US pharmaceutical companies in Puerto Rico.

Then, something unexpected happened. Party Decoration Center started planning weddings for friends and family. And then more. And more.

"People saw the corporate events we were doing in hotels and then asked my parents if they could do weddings, too," Santiago Díaz says.

The steady shift from corporate gatherings to weddings stirred a new entrepreneurial idea in Díaz and Santiago: including a bridal gown as part of the company's wedding event packages to

offer wedding customers a more comprehensive solution.

The couple purchased a wedding dress from a cousin who had recently gotten married, a gown they then rented out as part of Party Decoration Center's packages. Needing more dress inventory, Díaz and Santiago ventured to New York, where they managed to purchase past-season samples from Eve of Milady.

"That was the humble beginning of what would become D'Royal Bride," Santiago Díaz says.

As the business's bridal gown inventory grew, so, too, did the number of its wedding clients. Gradually and organically, Party Decoration Center became a trusted name for local brides, which stirred additional action from Díaz and Santiago. In addition to renting bridal gowns, they began selling bridal gowns to cater to a more upscale market as well as renting quinceañera dresses to

Hard work and passion turned this shop into a sensation.

capitalize on a milestone event for young girls and families around Puerto Rico. Then, came mothers' dresses, evening gowns and prom dresses.

A full turn to bridal

By 2000, with weddings and bridal fashion representing the bulk of Party Decoration Center's overall business, Díaz and Santiago

decided to go all-in on weddings. They rebranded as D'Royal Bride and embraced a mission to offer every bride a regal experience.

"They wanted a new revenue stream that offered more flexibility while building on their passion for fashion," Santiago Díaz says of her parents.

Soon after, Díaz and Santiago relocated their business to Bayamón, a larger city on the outskirts of San Juan, and focused on offering a full-service bridal experience. Offering all-inclusive pack-

Most Memorable Moment

When the Covid-19 pandemic

halted the regular cadence of life in Puerto Rico in early 2020 and injected rampant uncertainty into the nation's consciousness, D'Royal Bride leadership feared the worst. The three-store operation had its boutiques filled with stock and more dresses on the way. Governmental leaders, meanwhile, had instituted a curfew and ordered non-essential businesses, including bridal shops like D'Royal, to close.

"We thought it could be weeks or months before we sold anything," says Andrea Damaris Santiago Díaz, the daughter of store founders Damaris Díaz and Andrés Santiago.

Yet, D'Royal leadership trusted its resilience and ability to adapt. Two years earlier, after all, D'Royal had lost its location in Bayamón when Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico.

"It was chaos," Santiago Díaz recalls of the December 2017 natural disaster. "We had clients from the US and the Virgin Islands who still needed their gowns, but our stores had no power."

D'Royal leaders responded by serving customers in a local hotel with water and power and then opening a temporary location in Plaza Las Américas, Puerto Rico's largest mall. They also invested in generators to keep their two other retail locations running.

"It was a long road to recovery, but thanks to structure, organization and our savings, we came out stronger," Santiago Díaz says.

That experience gave D'Royal leadership confidence it could survive the Covid-induced turmoil.

And sure enough, D'Royal discovered opportunity when a bride messaged Santiago Díaz on Facebook saying she wanted to get married and needed a dress. As it turns out, many couples began choosing smaller, more intimate – and budget-friendly – weddings. In doing so, local brides shared a greater willingness to spend more on their dream dress.

As the nation eased its most restrictive pandemic-era guidelines, D'Royal established safety protocols, installed appointments with limited party sizes and started marketing off-the-rack dresses. Sales at D'Royal soared.

"We sold more off-the-rack gowns than ever because orders were delayed, and brides didn't want to wait," Santiago Díaz says. "It was a reminder that we could reinvent ourselves no matter the circumstances and had the power necessary to overcome the unexpected."



D'Royal Bride's San Juan staff.



D’Royal Bride’s Bayamón location.

Credit: Jose Ruiz Photography



D’Royal Bride’s outlet store in Rio Hondo.

Credit: Jose Ruiz Photography, IG @joseruizphototax



D’Royal Bride’s Bayamón staff.

Credit: Jose Ruiz Photography, IG @joseruiz

ages combining bridal fashion with expert coordination and full-scale wedding décor positioned D’Royal Bride as a one-stop destination for unforgettable celebrations.

“This was rare,” Santiago Díaz says of the comprehensive, all-inclusive packages. “In Puerto Rico at the time, brides had to hire all these services separately. Offering everything in one place set us apart and attracted clients from across the island.”

As D’Royal’s brand recognition accelerated, so, too, did its growth. In 2009, Diaz and Santiago opened a couture bridal shop in San Juan, bringing the most prestigious designers from the Americas, Europe and Asia to Puerto Rico’s capital city. Five years later, the couple opened the first bridal outlet store in the Caribbean with a value-oriented boutique in Bayamón.

“All three stores operate under the D’Royal Bride name, but each serves a unique client,” Santiago Díaz says. “Filtering clients to the right store based on needs and budget has been key to our success.”

A new generation pushes D’Royal

As much as Santiago Díaz loved the family business as a young adult, she initially envisioned a different life for herself. She studied journalism and digital television production as a college undergraduate and began preparing for a career in law. But then, as many twentysomethings do, Santiago Díaz changed course after some deep soul searching.

“I couldn’t picture a life without D’Royal,” she says.

Santiago Díaz decided to pur-

VIP tactics turned a sample sale into a destination event.

sue an MBA in fashion business management at ISEM Fashion Business School in Spain. Calling it the best decision of her life, Santiago Díaz traveled to the world’s fashion capitals, experienced luxury markets firsthand and returned to D’Royal in 2012 with that knowledge in tow. She enlivened D’Royal’s digital presence, including introducing social media, elevated the store’s branding and worked with her parents to enhance D’Royal’s customer service.

Moving in unison over the last 13 years, the two generations have fueled D’Royal’s rise. Today, D’Royal hosts Puerto Rico’s largest selection of bridal, quinceañera and formalwear gowns.

On the bridal side, specifically, D’Royal has successfully positioned itself as the island’s foremost destination for every bride. Its now-annual sample sale, first held in 2016, proves the point. Over five days, hundreds of brides – eight per hour – flood D’Royal’s San Juan boutique to land their dream wedding gown at an enticing price. Held every Memorial Day weekend, it is arguably the most prestigious bridal sale anywhere in the Caribbean.

D’Royal, meanwhile, has strategically added elements to the Sample Sale over the years to further bolster results. There is, for example, a special VIP event on the Wednesday before the Sample Sale for top wedding planners, each of whom can invite up to three brides to pre-shop the sale, as well as \$50 pre-access passes for Thursday so particularly eager brides can secure day one appointments.

“It’s the most exciting madness you can imagine – but beautifully

structured,” Santiago Díaz says.

D’Royal has also devoted more emphasis to staff training, an intentional effort to stay ahead of client expectations. Streamlined and transparent processes, with clear rules applied equally to all, have strengthened customer care and responsiveness at D’Royal, according to Santiago Díaz.

“If there’s a specific color or dress cut that’s in high demand and we don’t have it, we make it a priority to source it,” she says. “We focus on delivering extraordi-



Andrea’s quinceañera dress is presented in a museum-style display at the San Juan location.

Credit: Jose Ruiz Photography, IG @joseruizphotox



In The Spotlight:
D’Royal Bride

Established: 1992 (as Party Decoration Center), rebranded as D’Royal Bride in 2000
Size: 12,100 square feet (San Juan), 5,000 square feet (Bayamón) and 1,000 square feet (outlet)
Number of Dressing Rooms: 18 (San Juan), seven (Bayamón), three (outlet)
Price Range of Gowns: \$2,000-20,000 (San Juan), \$800-4,000 (Bayamón), \$200-2,500 (outlet)
Average Bridal Sale: \$3,500 (San Juan), \$1,500 (Bayamón), \$1,000 (outlet)
Percentage of Sales from Bridal: 68
Other Niches Carried: Quinceañera, Evening Gowns, MOB, Gala, Jr: Prom, Prom, Bridesmaids Dresses, Short and Midi Dresses, Resort Dresses, Jump-

suits, Women Business Suits, Evening Accessories, First Communion Dresses, Flower Girls

Total Bridal Lines Carried: 21
Staff: 28

Compensation: Hourly with individual commission and group incentives

Database Management System: BridalLive

Alterations: six in-house seamstresses, all of whom set their own prices yet conduct all work on-site

Marketing: social media, influencers, Google campaigns, annual fashion show

Website: www.droyalbride.com

Social Media Stats:

Facebook – 230,000 followers

Instagram – 69,000 followers

Influencers: Leading retail operations like Inditex and Kleinfeld Bridal as well as bridal designers such as Rosa Clará and Pronovias

Goodwill Causes: D’Royal supports two annual awards at local schools recognizing young women of limited resources who demonstrate leadership and academic excellence. The award winners receive a full prom look from head to toe, including their gown, professional hair and makeup styling as well as prom night transportation.



D’Royal Bride’s outlet store in Rio Hondo.

Credit: Jose Ruiz Photography, IG @joseruizphotox

nary quality paired with a personalized, excellence-driven service that transforms shopping into an elevated experience.”

Leadership has also invested in experiences for its staff, collaborating with local film, theater and concert producers to offer outings for employees.

“We celebrate outside the store and create a sense of family,” says Santiago Díaz, whose parents remain active in the business and are regularly in the stores interacting with staff and customers.



D’Royal Bride’s Rio Hondo staff.

Credit: Jose Ruiz Photography, IG @joseruizphotox

Building on the foundation

Over recent years, D’Royal has continued marching ahead with a blend of passion and purpose, strategy and smarts.

To mark a new era in high fashion bridal service at D’Royal, the family renovated and expanded its San Juan flagship on Avenida Roosevelt in 2022. Now inhabiting more than 16,000 square feet across two floors, the San Juan boutique is the largest bridal boutique in the Caribbean.



The area where brides try on their gowns. D’Royal features eight spacious lounge spaces, each with sofas and mirrors.

Credit: Jose Ruiz Photography, IG @joseruizphotox

Online upgrades will expand D’Royal’s bridal reach.

The business has also expanded its inventory, bringing world-renowned designers like Zuhair Murad and Pnina Tornai to the Puerto Rican market in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

This year, meanwhile, D’Royal introduced VIP appointments as well as commissions for team members alongside monthly group goals. If the team meets the collective goal, then stylists’ individual commissions double. The store also unveiled three different levels of VIP appointments, including an exclusive three-hour, \$500 VIP experience involving ownership, champagne, a 20 percent discount on accessories and more.

“We need to adapt to the new generation, both clients and employees, so we’re constantly thinking about how we train our employees, reduce staff turnover and create a richer experience at the stores,” Santiago Díaz says.

Perhaps most notably, D’Royal is preparing to debut its re-vamped website this fall, a significant project inspired by Santiago Díaz’s own adventures shopping for her bridal gown. Before purchasing her dress – a stunning design by Korean designer Cho Jae Hoon – Santiago Díaz poured over styles and details online. In doing so, she realized

many of D’Royal’s clients wish to do the same. The new D’Royal website will allow visitors to peruse D’Royal’s entire inventory and directly purchase dresses from the D’Royal outlet, in particular.

It’s a shift, Santiago Díaz acknowledges, yet a necessary one as D’Royal works to meet contemporary consumers where they are and push the family-owned, three-store operation into a new era.

“My role now is to carry my parents’ legacy forward, modern-

izing the business while maintaining what makes it unique,” Santiago Díaz says. “It’s a huge responsibility but also an honor.”



Andrea Damaris Santiago Díaz with her parents, store owners Damaris Díaz and Andrés Santiago, on her wedding day.

Q&A with Andrea Damaris Santiago Díaz, sales and marketing director at D’Royal Bride



What attitude and approach do you take toward market buying?

We carefully study our purchases – tracking how many dresses we bought and sold from each designer; analyzing what worked, what didn’t and what was missing – so we can make better decisions for the next season.

What do you look for when investigating new designers?

We want what nobody else has. We work with companies that respect and admire us as a business because ... good communication, admiration and respect are essential. Without them, problems always arise eventually and they’re evident in the service you receive. I want suppliers who truly take care of us: staying attentive to our clients’ orders, pampering us as partners and maintaining constant communication.

Another key: fit and size inclusivity. Every bride deserves to see herself in at least one gown in her size. While most of our inventory is in standard bridal sizes 8–12, we also carry sizes 0 through 32. Confidence begins the moment a bride feels her size is not an obstacle, especially since most brides already aim to slim down for their big day.

What’s your advice for dealing with an indecisive bride?

I tell her, “If it’s not here, it’s nowhere.” Then I ask her what’s missing from the dress or what she’s still hoping to see – and I find it for her. We also charge for second and third appointments (\$150 for the second, \$300 for the third) to ensure commitment, as the first visit is free.

An indecisive bride often brings challenges, so I prefer she takes a break, grabs a coffee and comes back the same day instead of buying impulsively and calling us the next day with regrets.



Looks & Lines

Bridal: Allure Bridals, Atelier Pronovias, Calla Blanche, Eva Lendel, Eve of Milady, Kitty Chen, La Premiere, Madam Burcu, Maggie Sottero, Milla Nova, Mon Cheri, Morilee, Oksana Mukha, Pnina Tornai, Pronovias, Rosa Clará, Sophia Tolli, Vera Wang, WONÁ Concept, Yolancris, Zuhair Murad

Time for a National *Try-on Fee Policy?*



Service has worth — and recognizing it is vital for the future of this industry

During conversations at the recent bridal market, one concern came up repeatedly: bridal parties often come in with large groups, try on multiple gowns, and then leave to purchase something similar online. This trend places a heavy burden on retailers who invest significant costs in carrying samples, maintaining inventory and providing a personalized fitting experience.

This is not a new issue – try-on fees have been mentioned and discussed among retailers before, but no consistent industry standard was ever formed. I believe it is worthwhile to revisit this conversation now, as more and more retailers are being hurt by providing free try-on services. Some

It's time to put real value on the personalized fitting experience.

have even dropped their bridesmaid departments altogether for this reason. My concern is that if we do not establish a fair, industry-wide policy, the impact will spread further and begin to hurt our bridal and mother-of-the-bride business as well.

As part of this conversation, several of you pointed out the distinction between deposits for no-shows and service fees for try-on appointments. This feedback is

very helpful, and I want to further emphasize a broader point: **service income is now an essential part of sustaining retail businesses across the U.S.**

In today's market, product sales alone are no longer enough to keep many businesses healthy. Most industries now rely on service income alongside product sales:

- **Restaurants** earn from service charges and gratuities, not just food. In fact, tip expectations have risen from 15% in the past to 20%-25% today, reflecting both higher costs and the recognition that service has value.
- **Salons and spas** depend heavily on service fees in addition to

*Your service carries
real costs –
set fees reflecting
that reality*

product sales.

- **Hotels and airlines** now charge separately for services that used to be included, such as early check-in or extra luggage.

Consumers have grown accustomed to paying for services – because they understand that services have real value.

For bridal shops, **the in-store try-on experience is your unique service**, and unlike product sales, it cannot be replicated by online competitors. Brides come to you for your professional expertise, the fitting environment and the chance to try on sample gowns that cost real money to provide and maintain. These services are at the heart of why a bride chooses a boutique over the internet.

Addressing store concerns about try-on fees:

One concern raised is that some stores are hesitant to be the only ones charging for try-on services. The first step is to see if the industry **agrees that a try-on fee is reasonable**, based on the actual costs of the services provided.

The second step is to explore whether the industry can **come together to establish a cohesive policy or best practice** that is fair to all retailers.

That is why it is so important for our industry to begin recognizing service income, not just product sales, as part of a sustainable revenue model. Online sellers cannot compete with the personal service you provide – and charging fairly for that service strengthens your business while reinforcing the value you bring to brides.

As a reminder of my earlier

suggestion, here is a possible framework for discussion across the industry:

Bridesmaid Try-On Appointments:

Group size limit: five people
Try-on limit: up to eight dresses (about one hour)
Suggested fee: \$50–\$100, with higher fees if more guests or dresses are involved

Bridal Gown Try-On Appointments:

Group size limit: five people
Time: about 1.5 hours
Suggested fee: \$100. Retailers may decide whether this fee can be applied toward a gown purchase

In both cases, each store may decide whether these try-on fees can be applied toward a purchase.

This approach reflects the reality that try-on services carry real costs – staffing, upkeep of gowns and the dedicated time consultants provide. Just as in many other industries, where service fees or gratuities are expected, bridal boutiques should not be expected to offer unlimited service for free when there is no purchase intent.

By beginning to align around guidelines like these, we as an industry can better support the sustainability of brick-and-mortar bridal retailers while continuing to provide brides with the personalized, high-quality service they deserve. But ultimately, it will only be possible if **retailers take the lead in initiating and uniting around these standards.**



Kyle Yin is CEO of Jasmine Bridal. He can be reached at design@jasminebridal.com

Sample Message to Brides
(for retailers to share)

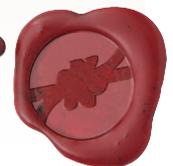
Dear Brides and Bridal Parties,

When you step into a bridal boutique, you are entering a space where retailers have invested in sample gowns, trained consultants and personalized fittings – all to help you find the perfect look for your wedding day. These services are not without cost, and historically, they were offered free of charge at a time before online shopping even existed.

Today, many brides try on gowns in-store, only to purchase similar styles online at a discount. While we understand the importance of budgets, this practice places real financial strain on small bridal businesses – some of the last specialty retail shops still thriving in the U.S.

To ensure our boutique can continue providing the high level of service you deserve, we are now introducing modest try-on service fees. These fees reflect the time, expertise and resources devoted to your appointment, and in many cases may be credited toward your purchase.

By supporting your local bridal boutique, you are not only choosing a gown – you are investing in service, expertise and peace of mind on one of the most important days of your life.



To get your classified ad into VOWS' online and print magazine, e-mail info@vowsmagazine.com with the subject line "Classified", or call 949-388-4848.

Work Available

Midwest territory available for experienced rep

Leading bridal manufacturer is seeking an experienced traveling sales representative to cover and grow the Midwest territory. Candidates must have established relationships with retail stores and a proven track record in bridal wholesale sales. To apply, please submit your resumé and cover letter to: sellingforever2025@gmail.com.

National representative opportunity

Bianco Evento, European designer and provider of an extensive collection of bridal and social occasion dresses and accessories with no minimum order; no customs fees, delivery in 4-6 days with 95% of its collections in stock, is seeking an experienced individual to act as its US national representative. Duties would include acting as primary contact between US accounts and Germany-based headquarters. Please submit resumé to Bartosz Wodecki, bw@biancoevento.de. View the collections at www.Bianco-Evento.com; or call 347-609-4951.

Experienced representation for innovative bridal collection

Seeking an experienced brand representative for a well-established bridal company that embodies innovation and sophistication through its custom designs.

Become part of a company that aims to create the perfect gown for brides by breaking the boundaries of traditional bridal fashion.

To submit resumé or responding correspondence, e-mail info@vowsmagazine.com with the subject line Bridal Collection Rep Ad.

Jasz Couture territories available

Jasz Couture prom, pageant, evening wear is seeking representation in the following territories: Southwest, Southeast, Midwest. Contact Pam Nierenberg 561-722-6189 or e-mail Pamelasfashions@gmail.com for details

Private label bridal collection seeking traveling rep

Affordable luxury private label **Bliss Bridal** seeking experienced Traveling Sales Reps for three distinct regions: Midwest, Northeast and Southeast. Join our team and represent our exquisite collections to bridal boutiques. Experience and established retail relationships required. Competitive commission rate. Serious inquiries to: blissbridalus@gmail.com.

Couture bridal designer seeks global sales rep

Amoretalla designs timeless, opulent wedding gowns using hand-sewn haute couture techniques. Fabrics, laces, pearls and genuine Swarovski crystals, including precious stones, are curated from around the world.

Amoretalla Bridal seeks successful sales representation for national and international markets. Commission-based position. The right candidate must have extensive experience and relationships in bridal markets. View the collec-

tions here: <https://www.amoretalla.com>. Serious inquiries to g.atallah@amoretalla.com and 603-685-8478.

Adornato Couture Bridal seeking representation

Adornato Couture Bridal collection is a bespoke, made-to-measure, customized experience for the bride.

As bridal retailers are searching for bridal lines with low minimums and primary market education, inquiries to carry Adornato Couture are increasing. As a result, we need more commissioned sales reps to service retailers.

Contact Marie Adornato at info@Adornatocouture.com or 315-263-1712.

Opportunity for established reps

Bridal gown designer is seeking experienced reps for all US territories. Experience and established retail relationships required. Competitive commission rates. To apply, e-mail resumé to occasiondesigner2000@gmail.com.

West Coast territory rep opportunity

Major bridal manufacturer seeking experienced sales representative for the West Coast territory. Qualified candidates must have a minimum of five years' experience and established relationships in the bridal industry.

Please submit resumé and introductory letter to info@vowsmagazine.com.

Bridal haute couture brand seeking reps

Bridal haute couture brand is looking for reps or distributors for multiple territories. Two to three years of bridal market experience with established contacts is preferred. E-mail your CV to ashleymccartney759@gmail.com.

Seeking Work

Evening wear designer available

Experienced designer in evening wear, bridesmaids, MOB and prom. From concept design, detailed sketches, fabric selection, tech packs, draping thru final garment. 25 years' experience in these areas for several companies in Europe and USA. Based in USA. Pvt label options as well. E-mail occasiondesigner2000@gmail.com.

Experienced designer seeking opportunity

Bilingual, talented young designer with 10 years of experience in fashion design and four years in bridal sector is looking for a new exciting opportunity. Native speaker German + Italian, business fluent English, proficient Spanish and intermediate Dutch. Very flexible in relocation and open to travel to US. Or China – freelancer position possible as well. riccardoserravalle@icloud.com

Opportunity

Donate your excess samples and support women's causes!

Brides for a Cause accepts wedding gowns and bridal accessories within the past five years! Donate your discontinued and underperforming samples to Brides for a Cause to help raise funds

for women-focused charities! We pay shipping! Simply box up your gowns and e-mail box info to info@bridesforacause.com for UPS shipping labels! Your donation is tax deductible!

Visit www.bridesforacause.com or call 503-282-4000 for details!

Need a designer?

Paula Varsalona, renowned Seventh Ave. fashion designer of bridal and social occasion has been an Adjunct Professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in NYC for many years. After each FIT school year she helps to place her top students into design positions in the industry. If you have a need for a bridal, bridesmaids, cocktail, prom or social occasion designer, please contact Paula Varsalona at her NYC Showroom at 212-570-9100 or via e-mail at askpaula@paulavarsalona.com.

Beloved Couture Bridal seeks designer wedding gown donations

We would love to be considered for your next bulk gown donation. **Beloved** is a Foundation located in Redlands, California that helps local families of terminally ill cancer patients receive the financial assistance they need to be there and care for their loved ones during this difficult time. Because of generous donors like you, Beloved Foundation has been able to provide more than \$500,000 in grants to families caring for a loved one with terminal cancer. If you would like more information about our foundation or our bridal boutique, please e-mail Chante at chante@belovedcouturebridal.com or call our boutique 909-792-3191.

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A promotional photograph for Christina Wu. Three women are posed in a room with a large, ornate gold mirror on the wall. The woman in the center is wearing a white, lace-trimmed, off-the-shoulder gown with a full skirt. She is flanked by two women in dark, elegant, floor-length gowns. The room is lit with warm, golden light from a spherical chandelier and a larger, multi-tiered chandelier. The floor is made of dark wood.

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