VOWS:

The VOWS Profile:

Mon Amie Bridal Salon

A 50-year legacy poised for future success.
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What today's prom shoppers desire. . .
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Menswear. . . an overlooked revenue stream?
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Experiences brides rave about!
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The leader your boutique needs next
PAGE 92

Laurel Mungo
CEO - Mon Amie Bridal Salon



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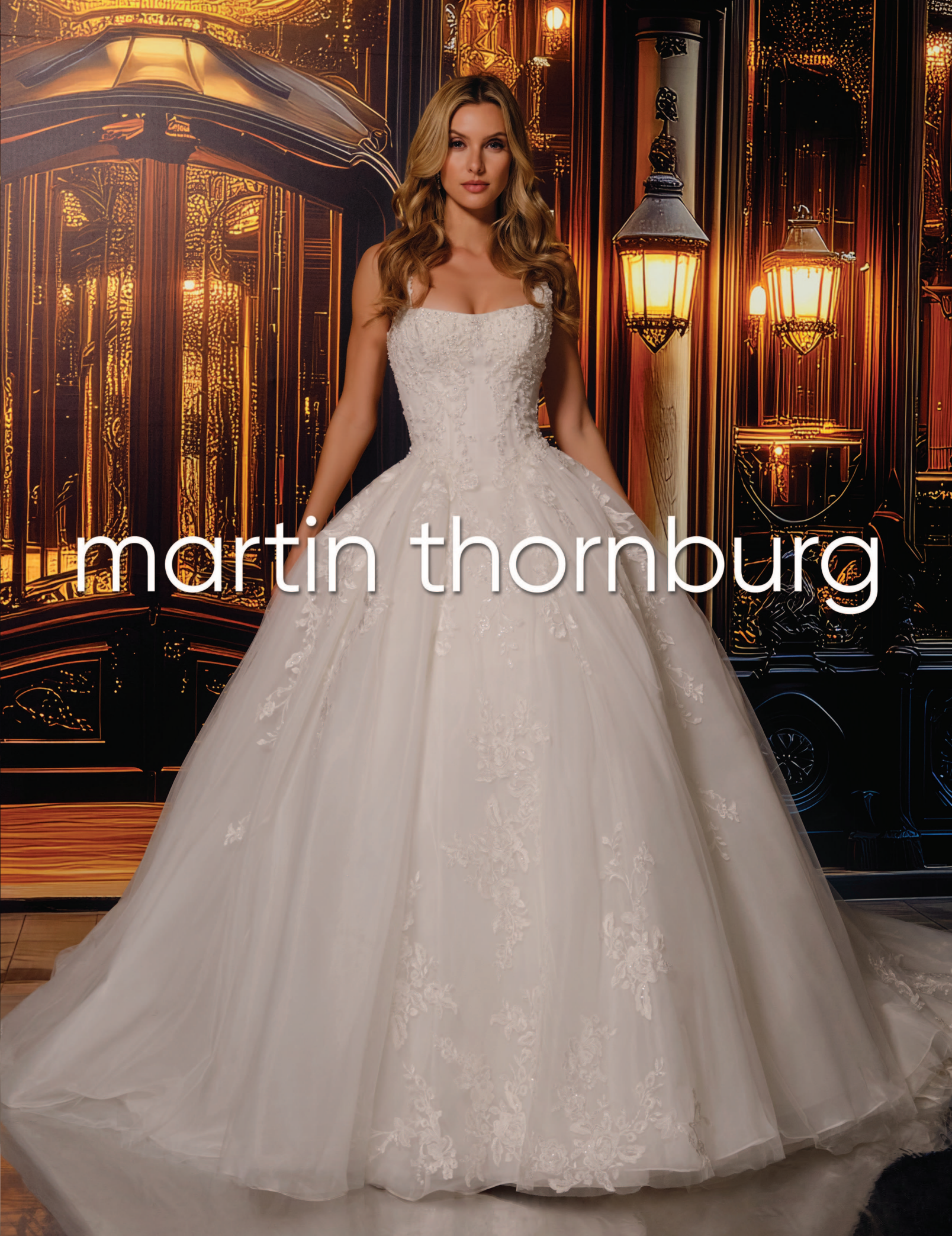
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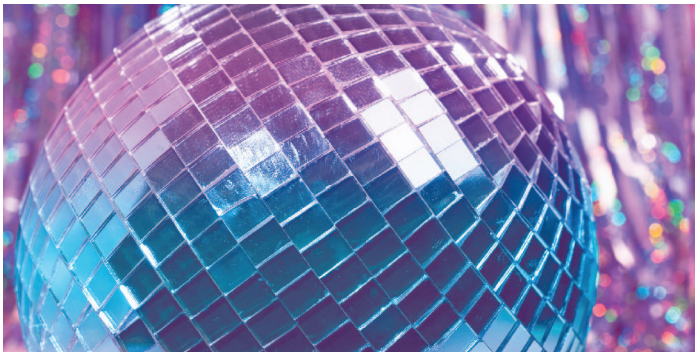









Getting to Yes

Decoding Today's Prom Customer
Understanding how she's influenced by social media, peers and family will help you win the sale – and create future bridal customers.
by Amanda Baltazar **58**

The Menswear Opportunity
How stores are increasing revenue, boosting loyalty and creating memorable experiences for grooms and groomsmen.
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Creating Core Memories
Intentional design, hospitality and service can transform any bridal appointment into a standout experience.
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Management

The Owner in Waiting
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by Libby Basile **92**

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Keeper of the Legacy
How Laurel Mungo turned a part-time job into a life-long mission – and helped guide Mon Amie into its 50th year.
by Shannon Hurd **104**

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MADI 10 YEARS LANE

The art of becoming
10 years on, awakens the beginning of something beautiful



RENAISSANCE

Just as it is for Madi Lane, this is our bride's next era, as we stand on the threshold of a great RENAISSANCE of romance and the spirit of renewal. Our Spring 27 collection is emotionally transformative as we look to the wisdom, art and philosophy of our first 10 years, to now create anew.

Let this sneak peek tempt you to experience Madi Lane Bridal's RENAISSANCE of design, *live on the runway*. Register your interest at **salesusa@madilane.com**.

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Volume 37 No. 4 July/August 2026

VOWS:

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Mon Amie Bridal Salon officially marked 50 years in business on April 15, 2026.

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On the cover
Mon Amie Bridal Salon CEO Laurel Mungo in her Costa Mesa, Calif. boutique.

Credit: Louis Sanchez, @RenegadeIndiefilmmakers

Noting the Passing of Ray and Tina



Peter Grimes
Publisher
peter@vowsmagazine.com
949 388-4848

It is with sadness that I note the passing of two of our peers who in their own way not only contributed significantly to this vibrant bridal community, but were exceptionally kind and gracious individuals throughout their too-short careers: **Khosrow "Ray" Alimohammadi**, **Panache Bridals**; and **Tina Campbell**, **Sophia & Camilla Private Label Collection**.

Ray's impact extended throughout the industry beyond that of the network of exceptional stores he created and developed in Southern California through a vision of service and dedication to excellence combined with a personal and authentic graciousness to all in which he interacted.

Described as a true industry icon, his legacy continues through those he mentored, advised and assisted through the years.

Elise Rosenbaum, in a post through the Bridal Council's memorial page, summarized her feelings and those of the industry:

"Ray will be remembered not only for his remarkable achievements, but also for his integrity, kindness, and the genuine relationships he cultivated throughout his life. He will be deeply missed and fondly remembered by all who had the privilege of knowing him."

Tina Campbell was a talented gown designer and owner of Sophia & Camilla who understood the need for and opportunity of private label collections as integral to the health of bridal stores and an industry she so loved years before it was fashionable.

But it was how she conducted business, how she joyfully interacted with all that will be deeply missed. Her husband and business partner Charles Campbell summed it up best for me and the entire industry:

"She had the rare gift of making every person feel loved, seen, important and capable. She always saw the best in people, even when they could not see it in themselves. She encouraged others constantly, spoke life into everyone around her, and pushed those she loved to become all they could be. Her positivity never wavered, even during life's hardest moments. No matter what she faced, Tina continued to choose joy, faith, compassion and love."

Though Ray and Tina have physically left us, their imprints on our hearts will linger for years to come.

Rest in peace my friends.

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The Power of Intention

Small decisions shape memorable experiences, loyal customers and lasting legacies.

One of the things I enjoy most about putting together each issue of *VOWS* is discovering connections between stories that weren't planned.

Each article is assigned independently. Different writers interview different retailers in different parts of the country. Yet somehow, by the time the issue comes together, a common thread almost always emerges.

This issue, that thread is intention.

The strongest boutiques don't leave much to chance.

They don't assume today's prom customer shops the same way she did five or 10 years ago. Rather, they take the time to understand what influences her, how she makes decisions and what matters most to her. They recognize that a successful prom appointment isn't just about selling a dress, it's about creating a customer who may return years later as a bride.

They don't treat menswear as an afterthought, either. The storeowners you'll meet in this issue have intentionally created experiences that make grooms and groomsmen feel just as welcomed and valued as brides. In doing so, they've uncovered an opportunity to increase revenue while strengthening relationships with couples from the very beginning of their wedding journey.

They're equally intentional about the experience they create inside their boutiques. Every greeting. Every fitting room. Every reveal. Every design detail. Every conversation. Together, those moments become something far greater than a shopping appointment. They become memories for the bride.

As I worked on this issue, I found myself thinking about something Mon Amie CEO Laurel Mungo told me while reflecting on her now decades in this industry.

She didn't talk about one defining moment or brilliant business decision that ensured the store's longevity. Instead, what stood out was the steady commitment to evolving: embracing change while remaining true to the values that built the business in the first place.

That feels especially relevant today.

Retail is always changing. Customers change, technology changes, expectations change.

The boutiques that continue to thrive won't necessarily be the biggest or the flashiest. They'll be the ones that continue asking thoughtful questions, paying attention to their customers and making intentional decisions, big and small.

Because even those small decisions have a way of adding up. They shape memorable experiences, they build loyal customers, they create future leaders and, over time, they become lasting legacies.

I hope this issue inspires you to look at your own boutique through that lens. Maybe it's rethinking your approach to prom. Maybe it's exploring the untapped potential of menswear. Maybe it's making one small change to elevate your customer experience or beginning to mentor a stylist who could one day lead your boutique.

Whatever it is, remember that the future of your business is rarely built through one monumental decision.

More often, it happens one intentional choice at a time.

Happy reading!

Boutique Contributors

(+Instagram handles – give them a follow!)

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Hello Beautiful Bridal & Formal Wear, Kearney, Neb. @hellobeautifulbridal
Hitched Boutique, Statesville, N.C. @hitchedboutique
J&B Bridals, Chambersburg, Pa. @jbbridals
Kleinfeld, New York City, N.Y @kleinfeldbridal
La Boutique de Bridal & Tuxedos, Melbourne, Fla. @laboutiquedebridal
Mac & Clay, Lexington, Ky. @macandclay
Modern Bride & Formal Shop, Bedford, N.H. @modernbridenh
Mon Amie Bridal Salon, Costa Mesa, Calif. @monamiebridalsalon
Peaches Boutique, Chicago, Ill. @peaches_boutique
RashawnRose Bridal & Prom, Davie, Fla. @rashawnrosebridal
Roselily Bridal, Richland, Wash. @roselily.bridal.tuxedo
Sash + Bustle, Toronto, Ont. @sashandbustle
She Said Yes Bridal, Rogers, Ark. @shesaidyesbridal
Something Bleu Bridal, Saratoga Springs, N.Y. @somethingbleubridal
Stacey's Bridal, Prom and Formalwear, Urbandale, Iowa @staceys_bridal_prom
The One Bridal Salon, Charlottesville, Va. @theonebridalsalon
The White Dress by the Shore, Clinton, Conn. @thewhitedress



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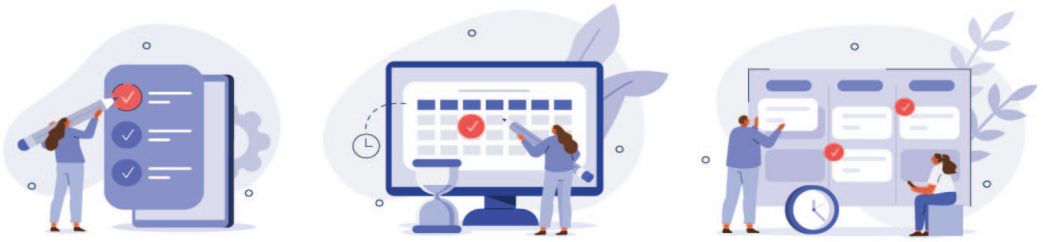

VOWS: Industry Calendar
Postings from brands, boutiques and reps
Also check the *VOWS* online calendar
for updates and additions:
https://www.vowsmagazine.com/events

2026 International and Domestic Market Dates

July 13
Mon Cheri Academy virtual session
www.nationalbridalmarket.com/mca

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

August 16-18
Justin Alexander
Showing National Bridal Market Chicago
Merchandise Mart, Chicago, IL

August 16-18
Allure Bridals
Showing National Bridal Market Chicago
Merchandise Mart, Chicago, IL

August 17
National Bridal Market
50th Anniversary Masquerade Gala
7-10:00 PM
Formal evening of skyline and lake views, dancing, live music, an open bar & exquisite cuisine.
Tickets are limited.
https://www.nationalbridalmarket.com/store-2/p/national-bridal-market-chicago-50th-anniversary-masquerade-gala

September 13-15
Harrogate Bridal Week
Harrogate Convention Centre, Harrogate, England
www.bridalweek.com

September 23-25
Mon Cheri Academy live in-person event
Held in conjunction with National Bridal Market
The Mart Chicago, Illinois
www.nationalbridalmarket.com/mca

October 13-15
NY Luxury Bridal Fashion Week
Check with individual designers for their schedule of events and shows
www.thebridalcouncil.com

October 13-15
Designers at the Essex House
JW Marriott Essex House NYC
160 Central Park South, New York, NY
www.designersattheessex.com

October 13-15
Melange de Blanc NY Bridal Market
Starrett-Lehigh Building, New York, NY
www.melangedeblanc.com

October 13-15
One Fine Day Bridal Market
Starrett-Lehigh Building, New York, NY
https://onefinedaybridalmarket.com/pages/our-events

October 13-14
The Fringe Collective
in conjunction with Melange de Blanc
Starrett-Lehigh Building, New York, NY
www.melangedeblanc.com

October 13-15
Union Square Couture
The Towers at The Lotte New York Palace Hotel
New York, NY
www.unionsquarecouture.com

October 19
Mon Cheri Academy virtual session
www.nationalbridalmarket.com/mca

November 2-4
Better Bridal Group Conference
The Rosen Centre, Orlando, Florida
www.betterbridalgroup.com/products/live_events/better-bridal-group-conference-2026

November 2-5
Association of Bridal Consultants
2026 World of Weddings Conference
Marriott Cancun, An All-Inclusive Resort
www.abcweddingplanners.com/schedule

November 17-19
Wedding Merchants Business Academy
Las Vegas Convention Center, Las Vegas, Nevada
www.weddingmba.com

November 23
Mon Cheri Academy virtual session
https://www.nationalbridalmarket.com/mca

December 14
Mon Cheri Academy virtual session
https://www.nationalbridalmarket.com/mca

VOWS: The Business of Bridal

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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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Heard Around the Industry...

Products/Services

AWGS Celebrates 40 Years and Looks to the Future

As the **Association of Wedding Gown Specialists** (AWGS) prepares to celebrate its 40th Anniversary in 2027, the organization is also marking an important leadership transition.

After years of dedicated service to AWGS and the wedding industry, Executive Director **Sally Conant** has announced her retirement. Her leadership has helped strengthen AWGS's reputation as the world's leading network of specialists in wedding attire care, restoration and archival preservation.

Nadine Rana, a longtime AWGS board member and former Vice President, has been selected to succeed Conant as Executive Director in February 2027. She views the transition as an opportunity to honor the organization's history while advancing its future.

"It is an incredible honor to follow in Sally's footsteps and build upon the foundation she has helped create," Rana said. "As AWGS enters its fifth decade, we remain committed to education, innovation, sustainability and strengthening our partnerships



throughout the bridal and formalwear industries."

Founded in 1987, AWGS is an international association of independent specialists committed to preserving wedding attire, formal wear and cherished heirloom garments. The organization is recognized for its museum-quality preservation standards, proprietary restoration techniques and commitment to ongoing education.

"Serving AWGS has been one of the greatest privileges of my career," Conant said. "I am incredibly proud of the community we have built and the impact our members have made within the wedding industry."

AWGS will commemorate its 40th anniversary in 2027 with a special celebration honoring its members, industry partners and the shared commitment to excellence that has defined the organization for four decades.

For additional details visit **https://weddinggownspecialists.com**.





Lights. Camera. Action. ***Paparazzi*** *is back on the scene! Electric energy, red carpet glamour and sultry-sweet styles are turning up the heat for 2027 proms, pageants and parties. The 2027 collection debuts in Atlanta, August 3–6.*



Mother of the bride style ***26315****, featured in* ***Stella Couture****'s Spring 2027 collection.*



Offered in ***Stella Couture****'s* ***Platinum*** *bridal collection for Spring 2027.*

Stella Couture's Spring 2027 Collections Reflect the Company's Continued Commitment

With the introduction of its **Spring 2027 Collections**, Stella Couture continues to demonstrate the philosophy that has defined the company since its inception: **reinventing the buying experience for independent bridal and special occasion retailers.**

The Spring 2027 collections showcase not only timeless, feminine designs across bridal, mother-of-the-bride, prom and quinceañera categories, but also Stella Couture's unwavering commitment to

Tidbits continued on page 46


The Allure
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Discover Allure in Bloom — a season of beauty unfolding across the Spring 2027 Collections from the Allure Family of Brands.

Continued from page 44

Heard Around the Industry...

helping retailers succeed. By combining fashion-forward styling with competitive pricing, low opening minimums, exceptional quality, U.S.-based in-stock inventory, special-order availability, real-fit sizing and outstanding customer service, Stella Couture enables boutiques to refresh their merchandise with minimal investment and maximum profit potential.

"We believe our success is directly tied to the success of our retail partners. Every collection we introduce reflects our commitment to making Stella Couture an easy, profitable and dependable partner for boutiques across the country," explained Stella's **Beth Easly**.

For information on Stella Couture, call **212-244-1013**, and visit **www.StellaCouture.com**.

Phone Clarity Optimizes Calls Built Specifically for Bridal

In an era defined by DMs, web chat, e-mail and text, one channel continues to outperform the rest for bridal retailers: the phone call. When a bride chooses to call your boutique you have her undivided attention, making that moment the most critical opportunity to convert a high-intent lead into an in-store appointment.

Phone Clarity, a communication platform built specifically for the bridal industry, founded by **Briand Spaulding** and **Nathaniel Dubasik**, son of the owner of historic **Evaline's Bridal**, is helping retailers transform how they manage and optimize calls, turning overlooked conversations into measurable revenue growth.

Unlike generic call analytics platforms, Phone Clarity's AI is trained specifically on bridal retail interactions ensuring insights are relevant, practical and revenue-focused.

"Using Evaline's Bridal, our family company, as a test case on a random week we discovered four missed opportunities," Dubasik explained. "Thanks to Phone Clarity's daily call review the boutique recovered over $5,000 in revenue that would have otherwise been lost due to gaps in call handling: missed callbacks, incomplete information and inconsistent follow-up."

"Even as our shop has set record sales, it's crucial to be aware of where opportunities slip through," added **Lori Dubasik**, owner of Evaline's. "Seeing the live view from anywhere plus the daily report ensures follow-ups are not missed."

The platform centers on two core areas:

– **Smart Call Routing:** Directs high-value inquiries to top-performing sales team members in real time.

– **Actionable Call Insights:** Including detailed call breakdowns (who called, who answered and what happened), and AI-generated summaries with performance ratings based on professionalism and customer experience.

A daily e-mail digest provides a concise, 60-second overview of key opportunities, issues and wins.

Phone Clarity emphasizes a partnership-driven approach with no upfront costs, no long-term contracts and tailored solutions that evolve as retailers grow.

For additional details, contact Nathaniel Dubasik, **216-485-2170** or mobile **602-818-7619**, and visit **www.PhoneClarity.com**.

A New Price Point for Eve of Milady

Eve of Milady is launching a new addition to its **Boutique Collection**, built to help retailers reach more brides at a more accessible price point without stepping away from the fit and craftsmanship that resonates with the brand.

Beginning at a $3,000-$4,200 retail price, this collection covers the silhouettes brides ask for most: romantic ball gowns, soft A-lines and elegant mermaids. Every gown carries the same construction, fabric quality and fit that Eve of Milady has built its reputation on.

"For retailers, this is a way to widen your assortment and welcome a broader range of brides," explained **Judie Ulberg**, director of sales, "without changing what your customers expect the moment they put one on."

Contact Eve of Milady to learn how becoming an authorized Eve of Milady retailer can help your store stand out in a competitive market:

Judie Ulberg, **516-857-3920** or e-mail **eveofmiladyamalia@gmail.com**.



***Bartosz Wodecki**, CEO, **Bianco Evento**, with **Janet Fuldner**, the company's new national sales representative.*

Personnel

Industry Veteran Joins Bianco Evento as U.S. National Independent Sales Representative

Bianco Evento has announced the appointment of **Janet Fuldner** as the company's new U.S. National Independent Sales Representative.

With an extensive career representing respected bridal and special occasion brands, Fuldner brings decades of industry experience and strong retail relationships to support Bianco Evento's continued expansion throughout the United States.

"I am incredibly excited to begin this new chapter with Bianco Evento," Fuldner said. "Having had the opportunity to visit the company's headquarters near Berlin, Germany, meet CEO **Bartosz Wodecki** and his outstanding team, and tour one of their manufacturing facilities, I was immediately impressed by the quality, organization and vision behind the brand. It became clear to me that Bianco Evento offers something truly unique for today's bridal retailers."

For additional information, contact Janet Fulder, **janetfuldner@gmail.com**, **425-770-6411**, and/or visit **https://bianco-evento.com/en**.

Tidbits continued on page 50


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Continued from page 46

Where Are All the Brides?



That Might Not Be the Full Question

For years, the industry's familiar response when wedding numbers soften has been simple:

Are fewer people getting married?

The immediate answer is that according to forecasts, the number of weddings in the U.S. has declined to 1.9 million in 2026 from the 2.01 million weddings estimated in 2025.

But a more useful question for today's bridal market may be the one quietly building beneath it:

Where are the brides?

The answer is not that they have disappeared.

Certainly, a growing percentage are purchasing gowns online, shopping resale platforms or exploring nontraditional options. But the majority are still out there. They are simply arriving later, moving more deliberately and navigating a more complex set of economic decisions before they ever step into your store.

At the same time, economic realities are reshaping both the bride and the bridal marketplace in ways many retailers are already experiencing.

The Emerging Two-Tier Market

One of the most significant shifts in bridal today is the emergence of a two-tier market.

At the upper end, financially secure couples continue to marry and spend. Luxury weddings remain remarkably resilient. These consumers are often older, established in their careers and willing to invest in personalization, designer fashion and elevated guest experiences.

At the middle of the market, affordability pressures are creating longer planning cycles, greater price sensitivity and more comparison shopping.

For many boutiques, the challenge is no longer simply attracting brides. It is understanding deeply what segment of the market they serve and adjusting inventory, pricing, service models and marketing accordingly.

Boutiques that once relied on a broad middle-market customer base increasingly find themselves serving one of two customers: highly value-conscious shoppers or premium consumers seeking luxury experiences. The middle ground is becoming more competitive.

What This Means for You

Across both tiers, the patterns are becoming familiar.

Brides are older.

Appointments take longer to convert.

Purchases are more deliberate.

Expectations surrounding service, expertise and personalization are higher than ever.

This is not a shrinking desire for weddings.

It is a shifting timeline.

And that shift requires a different strategy - one built less on volume assumptions and more on customer depth.

The most direct impact is simple: fewer weddings create a smaller customer pool.

If there are fewer weddings, there are fewer brides shopping for gowns. Every bride becomes more valuable and competition for her attention intensifies.

A boutique that once relied primarily on walk-in traffic now requires stronger digital marketing, strategic partnerships, referral programs and a clear brand position reflecting the marketplace it serves.

The pressure is not simply on sales.

It is on customer acquisition.

The New Bridal Reality

These market shifts are translating into several operational realities:

- **Brides are marrying later.** Many enter the market with greater financial independence and clearer expectations regarding value, often resulting in fewer gown sales but higher average ticket prices.
- **Sales cycles are longer.** Extended engagement periods mean brides may begin shopping earlier but take longer to purchase, requiring stronger relationship-building and follow-up.
- **Every appointment matters more.** With fewer brides overall, each consultation carries greater weight. Experience, expertise and personalization continue to be critical differentiators.

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Where Are All the Brides?



- **Value matters more than ever.** Even affluent consumers are increasingly deliberate. The conversation has shifted from aspiration alone to justification and **value.**
- **Personalization continues to outperform.** Customization, styling services, alterations and curated experiences remain powerful drivers of both differentiation and profitability.

So Who Wins?

The strongest businesses in today's market are not necessarily those with the largest inventory.

They are the ones that understand their customer best.

Winning boutiques tend to offer:

- Exceptional in-store experiences
- Designer exclusives
- Strong alterations and customization programs
- Effective up-selling of services and accessories
- A digital presence that educates and drives appointments
- Deep understanding of local demographics and buying behaviors
- Merchandise assortments aligned with their specific market

These are the businesses that will continue growing revenue even in a flat wedding market.

The most vulnerable retailers are often those competing primarily on:

- Selection alone
- Traditional styles only
- Walk-in traffic
- Price discounting

As online options and resale platforms continue to expand, those advantages become increasingly difficult to defend.

Employment Is No Longer the Full Story

At face value, the labor market appears relatively healthy. Most men in their prime marrying years are employed, and unemployment remains below levels typically associated with major declines in wedding activity.

Yet engagement formation continues to slow.

The reason is becoming clearer.

Employment is no longer the primary constraint.

Readiness is.

Many prospective grooms are employed but still navigating significant financial hurdles, including housing affordability, debt burdens, rising living costs and delayed wealth accumulation.

The result is what might be called a groom readiness gap - not a lack of income, but a delay in feeling financially prepared to move forward.

And that delay shows up first in engagements.

Household Formation Still Drives the Wedding Pipeline

The traditional sequence – employment, housing, engagement, wedding – has not disappeared.

It has simply stretched.

Housing affordability has become one of the strongest factors influencing when couples feel ready to formalize a commitment. As household formation slows, engagement timelines lengthen, and the effects eventually work their way into bridal retail.

This is where much of today's "missing demand" actually resides.

Looking Ahead

Which brings us back to the question that opened this article:

Where are the brides?

They are in the same place they have always been – just earlier in a different journey.

They are building savings before they build registries.

They are thinking about housing before they think about guest lists.

They are taking longer to feel financially ready before they feel emotionally ready to move forward.

And that creates opportunity.

Because delayed demand is still demand.

The boutiques that thrive in this environment will be the ones that adapt to the new rhythm of the market. They will invest in experience over transactions, relationships over foot traffic, and market intelligence over assumptions.

Most importantly, they will recognize that fewer brides at any given moment does not necessarily mean fewer brides overall.

It simply means a longer runway to reach them.

So where are all the brides?

They're still coming.

They're just taking a different route to get there.

– Peter Grimes

etcetera


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by Amanda Baltazar

Decoding Today's Prom Customer



*Prom is double the work, double the labor, double the energy. . . and totally worth it, for **J&B Bridals**.*

Understanding how she's influenced by social media, peers and family will help you win the sale — and create future bridal customers.

Prom 2026 is a wrap.

And for many stores, it was an excellent season. But the 2026 prom shopper is a distinct customer, and the more you understand about her, the more successful your next prom season will be.

Yes, in some ways she's like every teenager who's ever gone to prom, wanting a beautiful dress and the approval of her family and friends. However, she also has some specific attributes, largely due to the technology she grew up with.

After all, today's juniors and seniors are part of Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012. And, in addition to being digitally savvy, Gen Z will be the wealthiest generation ever. According to a report from market research company NielsenIQ, these consumers will have the fastest growth in spending power and by 2029 – in just three years – their spending will overtake that of Baby Boomers.

For Jackie Moore, owner of J&B Bridals in Chambersburg, Pa., "prom is double the work, double the energy, double the manpower for five months, but very much worth it."

Prom is around 65% of the revenue at Stacey's Bridal, Prom & Formalwear in Urbandale, Iowa, and takes up about half of the business's 12,500-square-foot building.

"It's a very condensed season but prom is where you see the massive revenue growth and see the money coming in in a short amount of time," says owner Cassidy Marks. "Bridal, meanwhile, sustains us through the year."

To encourage early shopping, stylists at the store give homecoming girls in the fall a "pro tip" to start prom shopping in December.

While today's teenagers still want the same thing prom shoppers have always wanted - a dress that makes them feel confident and beautiful – the way they discover, evaluate and purchase that

dress has changed dramatically. Social media influences expectations before they ever walk through your doors, friends often have as much or more influence than parents and authenticity matters more than traditional sales tactics. Understanding these shifts can increase conversions today while building relationships that may lead to future bridal sales tomorrow.

Social Media Starts the Conversation

Today's teens have never known a world without technology and instant access to it through a computer, tablet or phone. They have grown up with social-media lives that are as relevant as their real lives.

In fact, what they see online can have a bigger influence than what they experience in person. NielsenIQ reports that Gen Z ranks online reviews from other shoppers as the most important factor when shopping, including reviews by social-media influencers.

And according to market research company Datassential, 30% of this age group buy something because they saw it on social media.

When high schoolers arrive in your store looking for a prom dress, they already have a good idea of what they'd like to wear because they've seen it on social media. However, that's often not what they end up with and it's in your hands to redirect a girl who's chosen something unflattering or not available in-store.

"Being able to try gowns on makes all the difference," says Lindsay Eccleston, director of e-commerce for Peaches Boutique in Chicago.

Turn social-media inspiration into in-store sales.

Because teenagers have seen so many prom dresses online and on social media before they come in, and because they have short attention spans, it can be hard for them to make decisions. J&B Bridals tries to hone in on a few styles at the very beginning so stylists can eliminate others.

It's the job of stylists to listen to teenagers' preferences and review their favorite dresses from social media, then encourage them be more open-minded. Searching for a specific style can lead to a lot of anxiety, so the more stylists can pull comparable dresses and point out the similarities to those the girls chose before coming in, the more acceptance they'll meet.

Getting teenagers into the dresses is key. When a girl can see the style she liked actually doesn't suit her but that another one the stylist has pulled does, this builds



***Peaches Boutique** explains details like fabrics and beading to prom shoppers to show why it's worth shopping at the store.*

trust. Stylists who can analyze both a body type and a personality tend to have the most luck finding the perfect prom dress.

"Social media has changed everything," says Lori Dubasik, owner of Evaline's Bridal in Warren, Ohio, though at the same time, prom shoppers love it when you look at their suggestions and show them something different but similar, she adds.

Build trust before the group chat decides.

Her Friends May Matter More Than Her Mother

For today's prom shopper, the buying journey doesn't stop when she enters the fitting room. In many ways, she's shopping alongside dozens of people at once – friends in group chats, peers on social media and even other girls trying on dresses nearby.

Authenticity is a top value for teens and NielsenIQ points out that they're more interested in relationships with social-media influencers and brands than Hollywood celebrities.

What's also highly important to teenage girls is the opinions of their peer group. This carries much more weight than what mom thinks. They often send photos to their friends from the dressing rooms before they even show their mothers.

Wallace from RashawnRose has noticed that girls will add pictures to a group chat "and that can be brutal," she says, because the angle or the lighting might not be great, or if a friend says she was going to wear the same color of dress.

Ideally, Wallace and her staff try to get the girl to narrow down her options to two or three gowns before she starts sending them to the group, to keep things moving quickly.

"I know the influence of their

Continued on page 64



***Evaline's Bridal** doesn't require appointments for prom dresses but it does recommend them.*











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SCHEDULE APPOINTMENT



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friends is key but we try to help them make their decisions," she says.

But influence doesn't come only from phones.

Stacey's has 24 prom fitting rooms and appointments last for 90 minutes. The teenagers like seeing the other girls their age coming out of their rooms to look at dresses in the mirror.

"The girls are like mannequins because they see the dresses on each other," Marks says.

They all come to a central area because there are no mirrors in the dressing room.

"We sell way more dresses because of the fear of missing out," she says. "Why risk losing the dress because it's in a different dressing room?"

Mom is often paying so make her your ally.

Mom Pays, Daughter Decides

Mothers can be enemies or allies when it comes to prom dress shopping, since most of the time they control the purse strings.

And if a mother's not supportive of her daughter, it can be difficult because it can make or break the sale. Often, mothers balk at dresses that are too revealing or too expensive. So the more you can connect with the mother, the easier the process is likely to be.

"Connecting with the mom during the sale is very important," Moore says. "She needs to feel included in the process, so it is important for the stylists to make the mom feel comfortable and heard. Older stylists can definitely help make that connection with the mom a little easier."

Stylists at Peaches really try to listen to what both the mother and daughter are saying, then pull a style that works for both.

However, it can be difficult if prom shoppers come to the store without their mothers since mom's usually paying. If a girl walks out without buying a dress, the chance of closing the sale plummets.

Price is also a major consideration. According to Datassential, price is the top purchase motivator for Gen Z (48%), followed by brand familiarity (43%) and the novelty/cool factor (42%).

Despite the fact that their parents are usually buying their prom dress, teenagers do tend to be price-conscious. Often they've had a conversation before shopping so they understand how high their parents are willing to go.

And they like to pay in installments. Datassential research shows that 64% of Gen Z find flexible payment options appealing.

It's important to understand how today's teenage girls view money because the price of prom dresses is up. J&B Bridals this year sold an $800 Sherri Hill dress "over and over again," Moore says. Even though they're very price-conscious, once a teenage girl finds something she wants, she



*Staff at **RashawnRose Bridal & Prom** are young at heart and find it easy to connect with prom shoppers.*

typically will make it happen.

"If these high school girls want a specific look, they'll figure out how to pay for it, whether they call grandma or they'll work for it," she says. "It's such an important thing to them."

This is especially true if you have the styles that are "in."

"The popular styles are already worth the value in the girls' eyes, but when you add service to the experience, it makes them even more confident in their decision," she says.

Eccleston from Peaches shows why her dresses are worth the investment.

"We show customers the fabrics and details on the dress [and] you can always see the value in the fit of the gown – the construction of the bodice and how well the style lies on the figure."

Dubasik from Evaline's sees the same thing.

"When they love it they just want it," she says, "and they don't care about what their parents can afford; it's just what they want."

Building Trust Through the Right Team

Having young staff members goes a long way in having a successful prom business since teenage girls place a lot of trust in their peer group and those slightly older.

This year J&B Bridals had some high school seniors and college freshmen on its prom team.

"The customers trust them more," Moore says. "They like to shop with peers who look at the same things on social media."

Prom shoppers trust recommendations from younger staff members.

"They can relate to them more than the older employees but they also feel the older ones are really honest with them," Dubasik says. "They want that approval, even if their moms were already saying it."

Connection closes more sales than age does.

But youth isn't necessarily about age.

Staff don't have to be young but they have to be young at heart, says Sherika Wallace, owner of RashawnRose Bridal & Prom in Davie, Fla.

Her mom, who works in the store, is very youthful, she says, "so it's never about the age but more the state of mind. Customers trust you when they see you are having fun with them and the recommendations you make. It's all about the connection. Emotional connections are key."

Today's Prom Shopper Is Tomorrow's Bride

While it's tempting to focus on the immediate sale, the strongest stores recognize that prom is often the beginning of a long-term customer relationship.

Booking appointments for bridal gowns is the norm these days but it varies more for prom season.

Continued on page 68



The fear of missing out on prom dresses in other fitting rooms encourages a lot of young shoppers to make a decision at ***Stacey's Bridal.***



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Turn one prom sale into years of loyalty.

Continued from page 65

Dubasik says prom appointments are important because they introduce young girls to how they should be treated during a retail experience and it shows them how to purchase.

Hopefully, she says, "later on, when they become brides, they want to come back to us because that was a great experience."

J&B Bridal requires appointments, though accepts walk-ins if the boutique isn't busy. Appointments tend to bring a more serious customer, however, with more intention of purchasing.

Evaline's doesn't require appointments for prom but it does recommend them. But the girls are also welcome to come and look around with their friends.

"They browse the inventory and see what they love, then come back later and bring their moms," Dubasik says. "Walking in under any circumstances makes their experience better."

The more you can cultivate your prom shoppers, the more likely they are to return – for homecoming dresses, bridal gowns and perhaps even prom dresses for their own daughters one day.

Social media may shape a prom shopper's expectations, but relationships still shape her final decision. By understanding how Gen Z discovers dresses, seeks approval and defines value, you can create an experience that earns not just a prom sale, but a customer for years to come.




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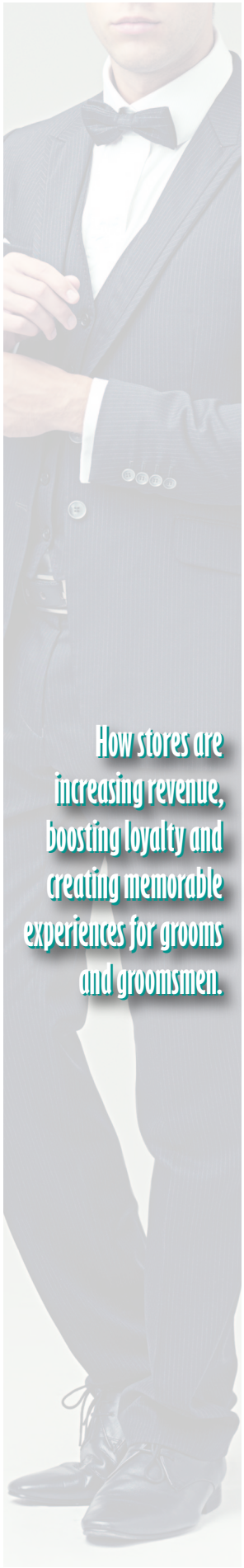

by Amanda Baltazar

The Menswear Opportunity



Hitched Boutique has a separate area for menswear, designed to give grooms their own experience.

How stores are increasing revenue, boosting loyalty and creating memorable experiences for grooms and groomsmen.

Bachelor Hour at Roselily Bridal in Richland, Wa., is extremely popular and "really gives guys a moment to shine," says owner Elaina Halverson.

In an industry where brides are typically in charge, men sometimes get a little forgotten and a little ignored.

But not at Roselily. This store and many others across the country see strong revenue from their menswear departments and strive to cater to their gentlemen customers.

"We want to give them that luxurious appointment where they can bring their groomsmen and the father-of-the-bride, father-of-the-groom, for a private and comfortable space to relax and hang out and get dressed up," Halverson says.

As stores look for ways to increase their average sale, improve customer retention and stand out from online competition, menswear represents a significant – and often underutilized – opportunity. Yet dedicated menswear spaces, specialized appointments, proactive marketing and strong service can drive substantial revenue while strengthening relationships with brides, who often decide where the groom and his groomsmen will shop.

Following are practical strategies for making your menswear department more visible, creating experiences that appeal to male customers, reducing stress throughout the process and turning what is sometimes viewed as an afterthought into a profitable, loyalty-building niche.

Creating an experience men actually enjoy

Whether it's a dedicated menswear area, a group fitting event or a more relaxed atmosphere, creating an environment where grooms and groomsmen feel comfortable can increase participation, improve conversion rates and generate additional revenue.

Roselily Bridal's Bachelor Hour is a two-hour appointment, with complementary drinks, snacks and mini golf. A stylist calls the guys for their fittings one by one while the others hang out and have fun.

"It's for them to have a special little

memory and it's made things a lot less stressful for the guys; having drinks and snacks really takes the edge off things," Halverson says.

During this time the entire menswear space is reserved and 80% of male customers opt for this experience.

"It's really hard to get grown men together but this helps them show up and it makes it so much easier for us, too," Halverson says. "They're distracted and they're all in one space. It's good one-stop shopping."

Bachelor Hour costs $100 but is free if the bride has bought her dress at Roselily (and grooms receive $50 off their purchase or rental). Before the appointment a staff member calls the groom to give him a rundown of how Bachelor Hour will go.

Design an experience men actually enjoy.

The other option for grooms is a simple tuxedo/suit appointment, which grooms tend to select if they don't want the fuss of a big group or if a lot of their groomsmen are out of town.

Before either appointment typically the bride and groom come in and talk with a stylist about what they're looking for. Halverson prefers it if the bride comes "because every time she doesn't, I end up on the phone with her anyway," she says.

To make grooms and groomsmen feel comfortable La Boutique de Bridal & Tuxedos in Melbourne, Fla., designed a dedicated menswear space with a half-moon shaped bar and bar seating, drinks and snacks, and separate dressing rooms that are intentionally free of the traditional bridal look.

"It creates a more relaxed, masculine atmosphere where grooms and groomsmen can genuinely enjoy the experience together," says menswear specialist Tom Lammon.

Hitched Boutique in Statesville, N.C., has a separate area for menswear, in a loft space that looks down on the bridal area.

Owner Lindsay Hester likes to have it separate "so men can each have their own experience," she

Customizing Menswear: A Growing Opportunity?

More men are looking for ways to personalize their wedding-day attire, creating growing demand for custom suiting. Indeed, custom menswear offers an opportunity to increase average transaction values while delivering a highly personalized experience that helps customers feel confident and unique.

Mac & Clay in Lexington, Ky., offers rentals, purchases and custom products, and the latter are the most popular and expected to stay that way according to owner Matt Guarnieri.

When men customize their suits they can choose every detail, from the fabric to the lining, special embroidery and buttons. Guarnieri is seeing some unusual requests too: Pinstripes, tweed, lots of texture, linens and even older styles making a comeback like double-breasted suits, pants with pleats and cuffs. There have also been requests for floral lapels and specialty linings with picture collages featuring the bride, their dog or even hobbies.

Mac & Clay is menswear-only so Guarnieri offers a laid-back environment and serves bourbon and champagne to those who want it, as well as shows sports on TV.

"Men have been an afterthought for a long time but we try to make it a memorable experience and to take the stress off," he says.

And service is always at the forefront.

"Mac & Clay has been built on the experience of coming in store," he says. "We have tried to differentiate by having educated stylists who care, so we go through every little detail: that the cuff is showing precisely outside the jacket sleeve, so they don't have to worry about anything."



*Service is key at **Mac & Clay** and employees aim to guide men through their custom suit options.*

And the Mac & Clay staff do all they can to make men feel comfortable.

"There's an art to what we do and we want to make men feel confident in what they're wearing. So if they're a bit big around the midsection, we know we don't want anything that's hugging too tight. Or if you're tall, we want to make sure everything fits well – no one wants pants to be too short," Guarnieri says.

Custom suits have become more important, he says, because many men are working out, so standard suits don't fit them. They need significant alterations, which can cost a lot, so it can be better value to get a customized outfit, which is unique and fits perfectly.

"Men now want their day in the sun," Guarnieri says.

says, even though men typically don't care about an experience. That space is specifically decorated to appeal to men, painted dark colors, with a dartboard and beer fridge.

Menswear constitutes 30% to 40% of sales at Bridal Images & Mr. Tux in Helena, Mon., which only started offering it 18 months ago. Sales have climbed steadily, says retiring owner Linda Campbell. Menswear is featured on 10 mannequins through the store and currently is split between two floors, with rentals on the first floor and the sales department upstairs. However, the store is planning to move the mother-of-the-bride and bridesmaid dresses upstairs and group all the menswear downstairs "so it's more obvious," she says.

Market to grooms with the same enthusiasm as brides.

Making menswear impossible to miss

Successful retailers consistently market and merchandise their menswear departments throughout the customer journey. By keeping suits and tuxedos top of mind – in-store, online and during bridal appointments – you can capture business that might otherwise go elsewhere.

La Boutique dedicates significant space to tuxedos and formalwear with styled mannequins and coordinated displays that help couples envision the complete wedding party. It also features menswear mannequins in the windows, paired with bridal gowns, and rotates them weekly, and has posters featuring menswear throughout the store.

Digitally, La Boutique showcases real weddings, groom styling inspiration, trending looks and before-and-after fittings on social media.

"We intentionally feature grooms and groomsmen in our marketing so men feel included in the wedding-planning process instead of secondary to it," Tom Lammon says.

Modern Bride and Formal Shop in Bedford, N.H., features its 16 menswear options on mannequins throughout the store as well as features a mixture of posts on social media. Some are reposts from Jim's Formal Wear or owner Brian Fortin likes to show photos of weddings, and reminds brides to not forget the men in the wedding party.

You can't miss the menswear department at Roselily as it's on the right as soon as customers walk into the store. If staff aren't quite ready for the bridal party, they welcome them to explore the menswear department.

"We'll implant the idea that they'll be doing this next," Halverson says.

Then, when a bride's selected her wedding gown, a stylist will hold a suit next to her "so she can



La Boutique de Bridal *keeps menswear in its own area to create a more relaxed, masculine atmosphere.*



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It's important to create trust with the bride and show you're listening, Halverson says, so she's keen to come back for her groom's outfit. And, Halverson adds, it's easier for both the bride and store to do it all in the same place.

Hitched Boutique makes it clear that it offers menswear with mannequins throughout the store and a large poster that hangs down from the loft area. It also leaves the suit rental catalogs in the bridal seating area for moms to flip through while their daughters are changing.

And while brides are trying on dresses, stylists chat with them about what they envision their bridesmaids and groom wearing.

"We start that conversation there, then we give her some catalogs before she leaves," Hester says.

She also passes on a timeline to encourage the bride and groom to not leave menswear to the last minute. Sending them away with those materials really helps, she says, because typically brides and grooms don't know what to expect.

And if you can get a groom in for a consultation, she says, "there's a 99% chance they are going through with the rental and placing the order because they don't care to shop around."

Sell service, not just suits

Competing on price alone is difficult when customers can purchase suits online with a few clicks. Succeeding in menswear requires





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"You have to provide a level of expertise, personalization and accountability that cannot be replicated online," Tom Lammon says.

That means paying attention to the details that truly matter: proper fit, accurate measurements, last-minute adjustments, color coordination and making the customer feel confident.

"We guarantee our customers will look exactly the way they looked standing in front of us during their fitting, with the sleeves hitting at the perfect spot and every detail properly tailored," he says. "That confidence and consistency are what create trust, referrals and long-term success in menswear."

And because today's men are mostly used to wearing fairly casual clothing and formalwear can fit and feel very different, education is part of that service.

"(It's) essential," Halverson says, "and men often find it uncomfortable because they're not used to that tight fit. We put them in the size they want but we often recommend going a size smaller. We let them know how it should look and feel and let them know they're only going to wear the coat for an hour or so."

Most modern suits and tuxedos are cut in a slimmer silhouette, "so we often have to explain the difference between a properly fitted formalwear coat and a ca-

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sual sport coat," says owner of La Boutique de Bridal Valerie Lammon. "Educating clients in a comfortable, confidence-building way is an important part of the process."

Help him feel like the star, too

Brides aren't the only customers who want to look and feel great on the wedding day. Grooms often need reassurance, guidance and encouragement throughout the formalwear process. Making men feel seen, valued and confident can create a more enjoyable experience while building trust and loyalty.

"I like let him know he's important and he's getting photographed as much as the bride," Halverson says.

And putting so much focus on the menswear in the Bachelor Hour appointments definitely improves men's confidence, she adds.

"We treat the groom like the other half of the wedding, because

Simplify the process to reduce every groom's stress.

he is," Valerie Lammon says. "From the moment he walks in, we focus on making the experience personal, fun, and focused on confidence. We involve him in styling decisions, help him create a look that reflects his personality, and make sure he feels celebrated."

La Boutique also understands that many men are not used to formalwear fittings, so it creates a relaxed and welcoming environment where they feel comfortable asking questions and exploring options.

Keep in mind that men often expect a very different bridal experience than women.

"Brides often come in expecting an emotional, immersive shopping experience, while many grooms initially approach the process more practically," Tom Lammon says. "We adapt to that by making appointments efficient, approachable and low-pressure while still creating excitement around the experience. We focus on confidence, fit, style and convenience for men while still highlighting the emotional significance of the wedding day."

Streamline the process and reduce stress

For many men, wedding attire is not something they think about until they absolutely have to. Clear communication, organized systems and proactive follow-up can remove uncertainty and keep the process moving smoothly. Simplifying menswear appointments means fewer mistakes, fewer last-minute issues and happier customers.

To keep grooms' stress levels low, La Boutique has created organizational systems specifically for that side of the wedding. Its menswear form tracks the groom, best man and each groomsman individually, outlines exactly what each member of the wedding party is wearing, tracks changes and approvals throughout the



Mannequins around the store at ***Modern Bride & Formal Shop*** *let brides know there are plenty of clothing options for their grooms.*


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Great systems create exceptional customer experiences.

process, and includes sign-offs on any updates to ensure accuracy.

"At any point in the process, the groom can call us for a real-time update on who has and has not completed their order," says Valerie Lammon says. "When we begin filling out this form with the groom, it immediately makes him feel like a well-planned and equally important part of the wedding process. It keeps everything organized step-by-step while making sure every detail is addressed clearly and professionally."

This makes the whole process so much easier, she says. If it's starting to get too close to the wedding and someone hasn't yet been measured, he can ask the groom to remind that person.

"They appreciate that we do that," she says.

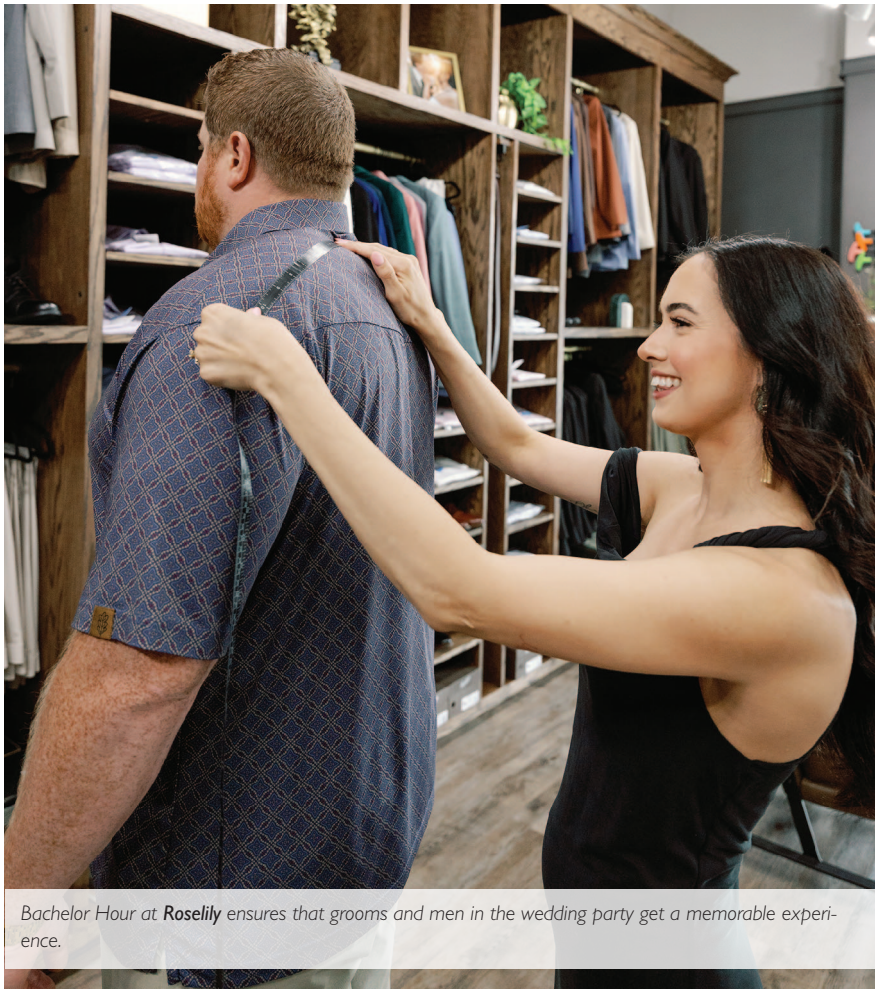
Men generally want a streamlined process, "so we focus heavily on communication, organization and convenience," Tom Lammon says. "Our team walks each customer through every step so there are no surprises."

Before the men's appointment, to alleviate on-the-spot decisions, La Boutique sends couples a link to its catalog featuring more than 100 coat styles.

"We have found that giving grooms and couples the opportunity to browse styles ahead of time helps them feel more relaxed and makes the appointment move much more smoothly once they arrive," he says.

Hitched Boutique makes it as easy for the men as possible.

"We give them instructions during their in-store fitting and we follow up with them via text once their suit has been delivered with instructions on how to try it on and let us know if they need any replacements," Hester says.



Bachelor Hour at ***Roselily*** *ensures that grooms and men in the wedding party get a memorable experience.*

Staffing for success

Menswear requires a slightly different skill set than bridal sales. Staff needs confidence, attention to detail and the ability to manage groups of men who may be unfamiliar with the formalwear process. Having the right personality in the department helps create a professional experience while keeping appointments productive and enjoyable.

It doesn't have to be a man working in the menswear department, Modern Bride's Fortin says, "but it does need to be someone with a strong personality. Some men can be pigs and you've got to be careful that they don't try and take advantage of a female employee."

It's extremely rare, but occasionally he has to ask men to tone down their language or stop horsing around. However, 99% of them behave.

"It doesn't happen often and we need someone who won't put up with that," Fortin says.

Very few men cause problems, says Campbell, although when they come in with their groomsmen "they might be peacocking all over the place and the language can get a little off."

But she just lets it go because it's so rare.

Halverson finds that having



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structure to the Bachelor Hour cuts down on the boisterousness and inappropriate comments of the men visiting her store. It's rare that they misbehave, she says, "and when guys have structure they listen better. Especially in a bridal store, which out of their comfort zone."

Occasionally there will be some fruity language or just loud behavior at Hitched Boutique, says Hester, so she advises the men in the wedding party to come upstairs one at a time. Luckily there's a brewery next door so she encourages them to hang out there before and after their fittings.

"So they're getting to have their guy day but they're not doing it in my store," she says.

Rentals, purchases or both?

As rental prices continue to rise and suit options become more fashionable and affordable, many stores are finding success with a hybrid approach. Understanding

Hybrid menswear strategies maximize every opportunity.

the advantages of both rentals and purchases allows you to meet a wider range of customer needs while maximizing revenue opportunities.

Indeed the most successful retailers are offering a hybrid, says Kellie Burch, executive director of the International Formalwear Association in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

Rentals are a little easier for a store to deal with, she says, because there are lots of sizes available and all the clothing - from the shirt to the cufflinks and shoes – comes together as part of a package.

However, Burch has seen sales increase as rental prices go up.

"It's very expensive to produce a rental garment. They are constructed completely differently: The fabric is better, the fusing is better, it has to withstand the rigors of rental – so it costs two or three times more than a suit you would sell," she says. "Because rental prices have continually increased, you started seeing retail suits get somewhat close to the price of the rental."

And suits are currently more in vogue than tuxedos.

"There's much greater trend to a suit – it's re-wearable and it's in fun colors," she says.

When it comes to suits, unusual colors like chocolate brown and sage green are trending at Roselily Bridal right now.

"The warmer tones give a nice contrast to people's skin tones," Halverson says.

Black-tie tuxedos, along with suits and tuxedos in grays, tans, greens and browns, are popular at La Boutique.

"We have also seen growth in fashion-forward formalwear featuring textured fabrics, statement jackets and elevated accessories that help personalize the overall look," Valerie Lammon says.

Menswear can be a fun and exciting department to work in.

Hitched Boutique's Hester loves working menswear, sometime more than bridal appointments.

"You have to be meticulous with menswear, especially when it comes to measurements and style codes. Therefore having trained employees who are attentive to detail helps tremendously," Hester says.

Once you have the trust of a bride and she's bought her gown, menswear is easy, according to Burch.

"The bride is the decision-maker on where he goes – she is almost the only factor in deciding where he shops," she says.



***Mac & Clay** has found success with a hybrid approach of rentals, purchases and custom products.*

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by Daniel P. Smith

Creating Core Memories



How intentional design, hospitality and service can transform a bridal appointment into a standout experience.

The human mind is a complex biological machine, especially when it comes to memory.

While some think of human memory as an ongoing video recording in which, much like a Hollywood film, some moments resonate and stand out more than others, neuroscientists largely agree that the brain primarily retains information that is emotionally charged, personally relevant or distinct from the norm.

And that, it's worth noting, puts bridal boutiques in prime position to create memorable moments and stand out as a memorable venue. Bridal shops, after all, thrive in a high-emotion world that prioritizes creating personalized experiences transcending traditional retail.

By and large, boutiques are in the business of creating memories as much as selling dresses and, in fact, fostering a memorable experience and being a memorable host is arguably as important as the in-store inventory – and particularly so in the digital age when key bridal experiences are regularly documented and shared on social channels.

In bridal, memories sell. Brides seek an experience that feels rewarding, not routine, a visit packed with meaningfulness, not mediocrity, and an appointment grounded in thoughtful personalization, not predictability.

Your boutique elevates its "memorability quotient" when it makes the bride feel comfortable, understood and celebrated while also mixing in some dynamic retail flair. The most lasting impressions usually come from a blend of a carefully curated atmosphere, thoughtful hospitality and genuine care.

Here are six ways to make your boutique more distinctive and memorable:

1) Lean into Authenticity. According to an extensive series of studies conducted by academic researchers Michael Tuan Pham of Columbia Business School and Jennifer J. Sun of Yonsei University in Korea, a memorable experience isn't necessarily about extravagance or luxury. Rather, it's about unique, meaningful and authentic experiences. Fortunately, boutiques are well positioned to deliver on each point.

Small touches create unforgettable experiences.

For most women, visiting bridal boutiques is not a regular affair, so the novelty of the endeavor is distinctive to them.

Unique? Check.

As appointments are preparing brides to celebrate a monumental day in their life, and brides try on gowns with close family and friends at their side, their time at your shop is personally significant and purposeful.

Meaningful? Check.

Now, the final pillar of a memorable experience – authenticity – means crafting an emotionally real, not contrived, experience. This is where friendliness comes into the equation – interactions that feel personal, genuine and earnest.

You can create this by greeting brides immediately upon their arrival – and by name, if at all possible. (On the back end, some stores will pair an image of a bride with her name alongside the appointment time to facilitate a personal greeting.)

Staff, then, continue to call the bride by her name while also getting to know those in her party as well. Addressing individuals by their names will help transform the retail experience from transactional to personal.

You can create an authentic experience for brides in other ways, too, particularly by employing hospitality touches and little surprises to make the visit feel unique and worth remembering. Comfortable seating built around the bride's reveal. Offering beverages like sparking water or espresso as well as small bites. Small celebratory touches like a champagne toast when the bride finds her dress.

Together, these elevated touches show you care for the bride's experience and that of her party. The appointment isn't a chore but a milestone – and a memorable one at that.

2) Singular Design Touches. The traditional retail touchpoints we have – think big-box stores or even restaurant chains – can feel mass produced and static, even if they are clean and bright. First and foremost, many retail outposts are designed to maximize the operation's goals – a higher average ticket or efficiency, for instance.

It's why so many independent stores and restaurants, in particular, stand out and stick in our minds. Maybe it's the lively, party-oriented restaurant with an oversized throne at the front door inviting photos or the trendy shoe boutique with a unique art installation of monochromatic colored sneakers marching up the wall. These unique design touches function as visual anchors and precisely because they are so singular, they are more likely to be remembered.

Many retail environments are built on repeating grids and predictable patterns. Unique design elements like a hand-painted mural disrupt the norm, which heightens a shop's memorability and evokes emotion in a way a plain white wall never will. Yet



Courtesy of The White Dress by the Shore/Liz Cox Photography

An emotional touchpoint when a bride finds her dress, such as a champagne toast with friends and family, creates a memorable conclusion to a bride's appointment.

Engage every sense to create lasting memories.

more, custom or unexpected design features often create "Instagrammable" moments. When customers take a photo in front of a store's custom neon sign with a catchy phrase or its original art installation, they not only capture the memory in real life, but the moment also endures in their digital channels.

Boutiques across the country have invested in special design details that stand out and help foster a memorable experience for both brides and their guests.

In Charlottesville, Va., for instance, The One Bridal Salon features an original three-dimensional paper flower art piece crafted by artist and former bridal customer Camberly Pearson. Up in Toronto, a Sash + Bustle fitting room includes an 11-foot gilded antique gold mirror in front pink Chinoiserie wallpaper. And at The White Dress by the shore in Clinton, Conn., the crisp, white mantle sitting above the 18th century home's fireplace hosts framed black-and-white photos of owner Beth Chapman's family.



Credit Jennifer Nichole Photography (@jenniferncholephotography)

A helpful stylist possessing knowledge, a professional demeanor and an earnest heart contributes to a memorable experience for brides.



Courtesy of The White Dress by the Shore

Inside the 18th century home occupied by ***The White Dress by the shore*** *in Clinton, Conn., a mantle over the historic home's fireplace features black and white framed photos of owner Beth Chapman's family, which adds an elegant and memorable design touch to the store.*

3) Sensory Details. The senses are key to creating memories. In fact, the senses act as the brain's data-collection system and routinely convert sensory touchpoints into long-term memories. It's why the whiff of an apple pie sparks memories of grandma and her kitchen or hearing a song on the radio immediately brings us back to a cherished moment from our youth.

With this in mind, you can leverage the senses to create memorable experiences. (Importantly, the senses can also influence the perceived quality of a retail experience, too. A foul smell or furniture with worn, thin upholstery, for example, can diminish guests' perception of your boutique, including the quality and value of the gowns.)

Smell is the most powerful sensory trigger. Many boutiques diffuse calming, light fragrances – perhaps notes of soft florals, vanilla or clean linens – throughout their spaces. Some even partner with scent-marketing firms to curate a signature fragrance for their store. A subtle fresh aroma or pleasant signature scent hovering in your boutique can enhance appointments, inspire confidence and, even more, lead brides to connect your store to something appealing and refined.

As for sound: While it might be fun to play the latest top 40 radio hits in your store, fast-paced music increases heart rates and can accelerate movement. By contrast, a curated playlist of low-tempo ambient music, classical covers of modern love songs or soft jazz will

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Great stylists listen before starting to style.

usher in a more serene environment and encourage clients to relax. It facilitates comfort and calm, thereby fostering a more relaxed and memorable experience.

Similarly, anything a bride touches can subconsciously speak to your shop's quality and value. When visiting a boutique for a premium experience, brides will likely remember the coarseness of chair fabric or a broken door handle – and not necessarily in a good way. On the other hand, the plushness of velvet seating, the silky feel of a robe and the sturdiness of dress hangers all speak to craftsmanship. By employing more substantial physical touchpoints, your boutique sets itself a part from traditional retail and perhaps competitors as well with its intentionality and investment in a more sophisticated experience.



When boutiques pair a personalized greeting with other hospitable elements, such as food and drink, it delivers an elevated experience for brides and their parties.



Credit Jennifer Nichole Photography (@jennifernicholephotography)

At ***The White Dress by the Shore*** *in Clinton, Conn., a mirror placed over a decorative wall reads: "Dream On, Dress Up!" The vivid design and whimsical verse make for a memorable sight.*

4) High-Touch Service. At the end of the day, the relationship between the bride and her stylist often dictates the success – and memorability – of the appointment and your boutique. If a stylist is a knowledgeable consultant who practices empathy, honesty and inclusivity, then it is likely to be a positive and memorable experience for the bride. If the stylist is curt, judgmental, hurried or "salesy," then your boutique is likely to be forgettable – or memorable for all the wrong reasons.

By incorporating high-touch service alongside intentional emotional touchpoints, your boutique puts itself at the center of lively memories and cultivates an occasion as opposed to a transaction.

Savvy stylists, for example, do not rush into trying on dresses, even if the shop has done a pre-interview and collected a curated selection of gowns for a bride. Spending the opening minutes of the appointment to actively listen to the bride discuss her wedding vision, preferences and concerns helps to build trust and validate the bride's feelings. In this way, she feels heard rather than managed, which is the norm in the vast majority of retail environments, even specialty shops like bridal.

As a bride tries on dresses, then, stylists craft a more memorable experience by making the bride feel seen, confident and celebrated. Stylists can offer supportive, reassuring guidance during emotional moments, which can run from joy to doubt to anxiety. Demonstrate compassion. Offer compliments. Be open and truthful. Brides will remember those

who showed empathy, genuine concern, patience and a sincere willingness to help them find their wedding gown.

5) A Collective Experience and Shared Emotional Touchpoints. Few brides enter a boutique solo and select their wedding gown without the input of trusted family or friends. Part of the dress-shopping experience, in fact, is sharing the adventure with others.

Now, the presence of others can breed its share of challenges. Family friction and conflicting opinions, for example, can derail an appointment, and a bride can easily feel overwhelmed by her entourage, whether big or small. Standout stylists behave as a shield of sorts. They prioritize the bride's voice, honor her feelings and protect her personal style preferences and budget boundaries. The ability to navigate entourage dynamics and keep the bride at the center of the appointment promotes a more memorable experience.

At the same time, the collective experience of wedding dress shopping naturally sparks treasured memories, and especially so if your store creates shared emotional touchpoints. Do you have a signature celebration when a bride finds her gown – an energized moment she can share with others?

For some stores, it might be ringing a bell or a champagne toast. For others, it's taking a photo with a store-branded sign. At Hello Beautiful Bridal & Formal Wear in Kearney, Neb., a bride would sign one of the two white-painted brick walls located inside the store's windows after selecting her gown.

Put the bride at the center of every moment.

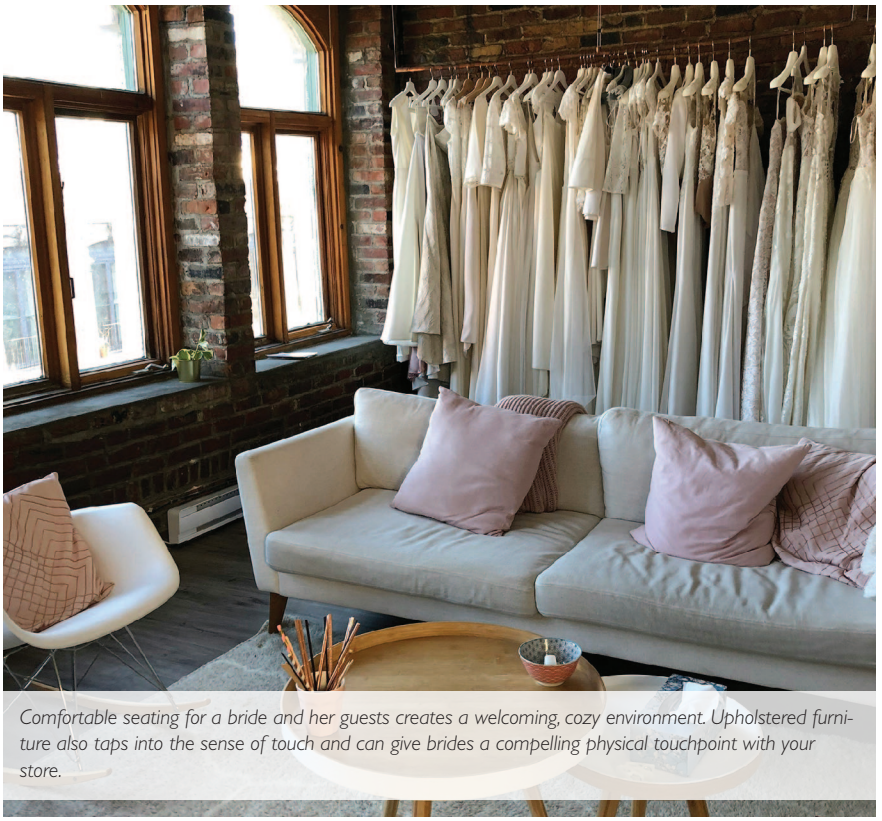
Shared with others, these ritualized moments solidify the day in your boutique as a core memory in the bride's wedding planning journey. They are also captured and posted on digital media, further cementing their importance and relevance in the bride's life and those of her loved ones.

6) The Spatial Atmosphere. The layout of your boutique should not simply be beautiful; it also needs to be thoughtfully created to reduce anxiety, build anticipation and deliver a more lively, one-of-a-kind experience. The spatial environment of a boutique helps to foster an immersive experience.

With clean, comfortable fitting rooms providing ample space for movement, a separate viewing area with a raised pedestal literally elevating the bride and soft, tailored lighting to spotlight the bride and the gown she's wearing, it's important to celebrate this unique shopping experience. These spatial elements heighten the importance of the moment and position the bride as the star of her show.

Fans of TLC's *"Say Yes to the Dress"* will note that the dressing room is decoupled from the viewing area at New York's famed Kleinfeld Bridal. As a bride walks from her fitting room to a centralized pedestal on the showroom floor, each dress reveal carries a theatrical moment with the bride's guests playing the role of attentive and engaged audience members.

Add in beautiful, full-length mirrors and warm lighting, and the bridal boutique creates an environment that illuminates the moment and empowers brides to make confident choices.



Comfortable seating for a bride and her guests creates a welcoming, cozy environment. Upholstered furniture also taps into the sense of touch and can give brides a compelling physical touchpoint with your store.

By Libby Basile

The Owner in Waiting



How to spot, develop and empower your boutique's future leader.



The strongest succession plans are built over many years.

There comes a time for all boutique owners when they begin to think about retirement. And while some may prefer to close down or sell their boutique to a stranger, the reality for many is that this is a highly emotional business with deep community ties and you want to make certain your legacy continues.

Succession planning is about more than retirement. It is also about protecting the value of your business, preserving the culture you've built and ensuring your customers and employees continue to thrive long after you step away. Whether retirement is five years away or 20, identifying and developing future leaders can make your boutique more resilient, more valuable and easier to transition when the time comes.

In that case, you'll need a successor – and many boutiques have found success hiring a new owner from within.

When Linda Campbell, long-time owner of Bridal Images and Mr. Tux in Helena, Mont., planned to retire, former employee Amanda Mulcahy was ready to step in. Mulcahy had worked in the store as a part-time bridal consultant from 2018 to 2020.

"I was needing a career change and wanted to work in an industry that was fun," Mulcahy says. "My background is in business operation and marketing and I knew I could use these skills in this business."

Myka Lyles began working part-time at She Said Yes Bridal in Rogers, Ark. in 2009, before being quickly promoted to full-time manager and eventually becoming the owner.

"It came up over a conversation during lunch," Lyles says. "Would I be interested in buying the business? She said 'this is something I can see you doing' and that got my wheels turning."

A passion for the industry is what sparked these two former employees to pursue ownership. And due to the deeply-personal nature of the industry, internal succession makes a lot of sense. Whether it's a family member, past employee or long-time manager who feels like family, hiring someone familiar who knows the business is how many store-owners ensure future years of success for the business they founded.

Of course, the process of grooming your replacement begins long before

Your next owner may already work for you.

the final sale. From training tactics to legal matters, here are some of the ways you can begin to shape the future of your boutique while you're still in it.

Why Hire from Within?

We all know that owning a boutique means doing far more than selling wedding gowns. You're also building community and relationships that span generations, which can make it difficult to hand over the business to an outsider. Just like new parents searching for the right babysitter for their children, finding the best candidate to replace you as owner takes a lot of trust, thoughtfulness and understanding. Current staff often make great natural successors because they already understand your culture, customer base, designer partnerships and day-to-day operations. They know how appointments flow, how inventory is managed and what makes your boutique unique in your market.

That familiarity can provide comfort and confidence that the business you've spent years building will continue to serve brides in the same spirit long after you step away.

Lyles says her years of experience working at She Said Yes Bridal have helped her to learn many different perspectives of the business.

"I've served customers, led a team and I know what it's like on



Credit: Miles Witt Boyer Photography

***Myka Lyles** worked in **She Said Yes Bridal** prior to becoming the owner in 2014.*

From Coworker to Boss: How to keep things from getting weird

When an employee becomes the employer, there is always the chance that it will cause tension and strain among the team. Handling the shift strategically and with a little bit of grace can help create a unified staff.

Here are some tips for approaching new ownership with an existing staff.



Schedule a team meeting. Make this one of the first things you do as the new owner. Myka Lyles, the current owner of She Said Yes Bridal in Rogers, Ark., wanted to put her team at ease quickly. "We wanted to let them know that we weren't going to fire people," she says. "That was something we wanted to address right away."

Honor what already works. Resist the urge to change everything immediately. Spend time understanding why systems and processes exist before introducing major operational changes.

Communicate often. Keeping everyone in the know will go a long way toward squashing jealousy and awkward feelings that may arise during an ownership shift. Define how you will communicate with the team, too. It could be regular in-person meetings, weekly e-mail round-ups or post-work happy hour drinks.

Set clear boundaries. When you're the boss, it's important to distinguish the difference between "friend" and "leader" amongst staff. Avoid venting and gossiping, focus on being inclusive and don't play favorites.

Make decisions confidently. Employees may look to the former owner for reassurance during the transition. Establish yourself as the decision-maker early while remaining respectful of the boutique's history and traditions.

Offer praise. Be sure to talk up the strengths and contributions of everyone on the team. It's easy for an existing employee to feel like they were overlooked when it came to finding a new owner. Highlighting their contributions will go a long way toward smoothing things over. Plus, treats always help! Solomon will often bring in coffee or flowers to make everyone happy. "Some days are long in the bridal industry," she says. "Little things can go a long way!"

the front lines," she says. "If a customer is having a bad moment, I can relate to the stylist because I've been in their shoes."

Lyles says that her former boss recognized how much she paid attention, asked questions and wanted to learn.

"I give her so much credit for seeing something in me that I didn't really recognize," she says.

It was passion for the job and the people, something Lyles says every future storeowner should possess, that ultimately won her the owner role. This is admittedly a somewhat subjective trait, so one thing current owners should do is keep their eyes and instinct open and carefully observe who seems to light up while at work and show unusual enthusiasm and passion.

Train for ownership – not just management.



Training Plans for Transitions

If you're planning to sell your business to an existing employee, a bit of thoughtfulness and intentional planning can make it a stress-free process for everyone involved.

Start with small shifts in responsibility to help her learn to take more ownership. Involve her in decision-making, share real numbers with her and teach her your proven strategies for inventory management and buying.

Many owners wait too long to begin this process. Ideally, succession planning should start years before a sale is ever discussed. Future owners benefit from gradually learning how to read financial statements, manage cash flow, negotiate with vendors, oversee marketing initiatives and make buying decisions. By slowly expanding responsibilities over time, you can identify knowledge gaps early and provide mentoring while there is still time to do so.

The goal isn't simply to train a manager. It's to develop someone who understands every aspect of operating a successful boutique. As well, there should be a transition period where you stay on board in some capacity to help her in the early days after takeover.

At Bridal Images and Mr. Tux, Campbell stayed on part-time for close to a year to work with Mulcahy and helped to transition the business over. Together, they created a schedule that would cover the shop and also allowed them time together to work on the operations.

On the other hand, when Brandi Solomon became the owner of Something Bleu Bridal in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., the transition was quick.

"The owner had two little kids and she was ready to not be in the shop as much," Solomon says.

Thankfully two existing employees stayed on and helped Solomon, who had worked in a boutique in her teens and most recently worked as a sales rep for one of the bridal brands. Over a short period of time, she learned the POS system and met all of the sales reps from each of the brands the shop carried.

"They were able to walk me through everything and answer all of my questions," she says.

Her best advice for trainees: Shadow everyone at the store to see how they do things.

"Everyone has a different approach," she says. "See how they do things and tailor it to how you want to do it."

Even with work experience at



Bridal Images and Mr. Tux *in Helena, Mont., features a large men's tuxedo rental category that required past owner* ***Linda Campbell*** *to train the new owner in.*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August 16-18 | Booth 7030
for sales inquiries email
sales@moncheribridals.com

the boutique, there are still parts of shop ownership that managers and consultants are not privy to. Lyles had to learn a lot of behind-the-scenes operations when she took over as owner of She Said Yes Bridal. These tasks include creating promotions and creating partnerships with other local businesses for marketing events. One thing that surprised her: The cost of inventory.

"It's expensive when you are the one buying the dresses!" she says.

Finance and Legal Considerations

The mountains of paperwork and decisions involved in buying a business can feel like a very tall task, but don't panic.

Mulcahy sums it up nicely: "For the most part, it was just transferring everything to my name," she says.

She was buying an existing business, and was not changing the name of the boutique or the business structure, making this part of the process much smoother for the two women.

Look for curiosity, not just competence.

"Since I was assuming all parts of the business and not just the assets, we arranged to have the bank account transitioned to my name on the first of the year," Mulcahy says.

Taking on the existing store, with an established brand, reputation and operations, comes with benefits.

"Something Bleu Bridal has been open for over 20 years," Solomon says. "It's a very well-known name in the area and has a good social-media and online presence."

This makes determining the store's valuation tricky. Campbell and Mulcahy ran into this issue when trying to determine business value.

"Linda had already received a valuation from her broker detailing the value of the assets plus any other soft assets," Mulcahy says. "However, with banks, because the majority of the business is what they consider 'blue sky' they did not value the business at the same amount."

Blue Sky, or good will, can account for a healthy amount of a boutique's total valuation due to many reasons. First, sample gowns function differently than inventory in many traditional retail businesses. While they are counted as inventory assets, their primary purpose is to generate special orders rather than immediate sales. Much of a bridal boutique's value is therefore tied not only to physical inventory, but also to its reputation, customer relationships, vendor partnerships and established brand presence.

"This makes the blue sky valuation for a bridal boutique a higher number," Solomon says.

Determining a boutique's value often involves more than simply counting inventory and assets. Professional valuations may consider revenue history, profitability, customer loyalty, brand recognition, market position and growth potential. Because lenders, brokers and buyers may all view these factors differently, owners should be prepared for varying opinions regarding what the business is worth.

That's one reason experts recommend beginning succession planning well before retirement. The more organized a boutique's financial records, systems and operations are, the easier it becomes to establish value and secure financing for a future buyer.

Solomon's best advice to anyone who feels overwhelmed and lost when it comes to the nuts and bolts of a business sale – hire a professional in business development and commercial lending who can help.

She worked with a business development agency that specializes



in commercial lending. Hiring an expert to take on all of the financial aspects of the sale was a huge confidence booster.

"He went through all of the inventory to make sure everything added up," she says. "He worked with the landlord to renew the lease and he made spreadsheets to check that everything the existing owner gave us matched up. He went through all of the numbers and he helped me secure a loan."

Legacy Building

Internal succession is not just a transaction - it's a legacy decision. In a business that is centered around people, and often has deep emotional ties, having the right person in place to take over when it comes time to retire can make all the difference in the world.

For Lyles, the people are the most rewarding part of her job, and the main reason she will consider passing along the business to an employee when the time comes.

"My team is amazing and seeing them grow in their own leadership skills is the most amazing thing," she says.

The advice from storeowners is the same across the board – start now. The strongest succession plans aren't created during the final months before retirement. They're built over years through mentorship, trust and intentional leadership development.

The bottom line: if you hope your legacy will continue long after you leave the sales floor, investing in people today may be the most important business decision you ever make





by Beth Chapman

Follow-Up Isn't Dead. . . Your Approach Might Be



Gen Z brides haven't stopped responding – they've stopped responding to pressure.Here are five strategies to make follow-up feel more like guidance vs a sales pitch.

Lately, in my coaching conversations inside The Bridal Retailer Academy and The White Dress Society, I have been hearing the same frustration from bridal store owners again and again:

"Follow-up feels like a waste of time."

"Brides don't respond."

"We just get ghosted."

And I understand why it feels that way.

Today's brides are shopping differently. They are visiting more stores, taking longer to make decisions and often communicating in ways that feel indirect or hard to read. For stylists and store owners, it can feel discouraging to have a wonderful appointment, identify a favorite gown, send a thoughtful follow-up. . . and hear nothing back.

Stop checking in; instead, start guiding brides.

But I want to gently challenge the idea that follow-up does not work.

Follow-up is not dead.

It just needs to feel different.

Gen Z brides do not respond well to pressure. They do not want to feel chased, sold to or cornered into making a decision. But they do respond to guidance, personalization, clarity and care.

That means the purpose of follow-up is not simply to "check in on their decision".

The purpose of follow-up is to continue guiding the bride after she leaves your store.

The appointment may end when the bride walks out the door, but the decision-making process often continues. And if your store does not stay connected in a thoughtful, supportive way, another store may step into that space.

Here are my top five tips for follow-up that works with today's bride.

1. Create a system – and stick with it

Follow-up cannot be something your stylists do only when they remember.


MONICA
LORETTI
MARIA DE SANTIAGO,
Customer Service Representative
maria.monicaloretti@gmail.com
(562) 274-6604
West Coast Sales Representative
MonicaLorettiSales@outlook.com
(385) 381-0671
JENNA DIEMUNSCH
Southeast, Midwest Sales Representative
jenna.monicaloretti@gmail.com
(937) 469-5495
KRISTINE ELLIS
Southwest Sales Representative
Kristine.MonicaLoretti@gmail.com
(918) 630-8638
NATIONAL
BRIDAL
MARKET
CHICAGO
Booth 1050
website: monicaloretti.com
instagram: monicaloretti_official

It needs to be a consistent part of your sales process.

Every bride who leaves without purchasing should move into a clear follow-up sequence. Your team should know when to follow-up, how many times to follow-up, what method to use and what information to include.

Without a system, follow-up becomes emotional.

A stylist may think, "I don't want to bother them" or "They probably bought elsewhere" or "If they were interested, they would reach out."

But those assumptions can cost you sales.

A system removes the guesswork. It helps your team stay consistent, confident and professional – even when the bride does not respond right away.

2. Follow-up using the bride's preferred method

One of the simplest ways to improve follow-up is to ask the bride how she prefers to communicate.

In fact, before they leave the store after their first visit, let them know that you would love to check in and see how their gown search is progressing. Then simply ask them how they would prefer that you reach out.

Personalize every follow-up and watch response rates rise.

Would they prefer a text?

An e-mail?

A phone call?

This small step accomplishes two important things:

First, by contacting the bride in her preferred method, she is much more likely to respond. Second, because she knows you will be reaching out, your follow-up doesn't feel like an intrusion. It feels like a continuation of the relationship you began building during the appointment.

Some brides respond quickly to text. Others prefer e-mail. Some may engage through Instagram DMs. The key is to meet them where they are, not where it is most convenient for us.

This should become part of your pre-qualification process and appointment notes.

If a bride has been texting with your store from the beginning, a formal e-mail after the appointment may feel disconnected from the relationship you have already built. If she is highly detailed and e-mail-oriented, a quick text may not provide enough information.

The more aligned your follow-up method is with the bride's communication style, the more natural and effective your follow-up will feel.

3. Make the follow-up personal

A generic follow-up feels salesy.

A personal follow-up feels like service.

That distinction matters.

Your first follow-up should include something specific from the appointment. This might be a photo of her favorite gown, the price of a customization you discussed, a mention of the gown's matching veil or even a vendor referral that came up during the conversation.

When you provide something useful, the bride is far more likely to respond.

Instead of simply saying, "Just following up to see what you thought," try approaching the bride with something that shows you were listening.

For example:

"I was thinking about the gown you loved with the sweetheart neckline, and I wanted to send over the customization information we discussed so you have everything in one place as you think it through."

That feels different.

It feels thoughtful. It feels helpful. It feels like guidance.

And that is exactly the energy today's bride needs.



4. Remember that subject line and energy matter

Please do not title your e-mail "Following Up."

That phrase may seem harmless, but to many brides it immediately feels like a sales e-mail.

The energy of your follow-up should mirror the energy of a strong bridal appointment: calm, supportive, warm and clear.

Gen Z brides are highly sensitive to pressure. If your follow-up feels like you are simply trying to get the sale, they will likely ignore it.

Instead, use subject lines that feel personal and connected to the appointment.

Examples might include:

"Something you might like"

"A few details we discussed"

"The customization option we talked about"

"A little more clarity on your favorite"

The goal is to make the bride feel supported, not pursued.

Follow-up should never feel like pressure. It should feel like the next step in helping brides make a confident decision.

5. Do not give up too quickly

Many stores send one follow-up and stop. This one of the most common mistakes I see with follow-up (besides not following up at all).

I recommend following up three times.

If the first method does not work, try a different one. If you e-mailed first, send a text. If you texted and did not hear back, try a warm e-mail with helpful information.

Remember, silence does not always mean disinterest.

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Great follow-up feels like guidance, not pressure.

Sometimes brides get busy. Sometimes they are overwhelmed. Sometimes they still love the gown but feel embarrassed that so much time has passed. Sometimes they are avoiding the conversation because they feel guilty if they bought elsewhere.

That is why the final follow-up should be what I call a "bless and release" message.

This message gives the bride permission to be honest.

It might sound something like this:

Subject line: Congratulations may be in order!

"Hi [Name], I just wanted to check in one final time. I know this is a big decision, and I also know you may have found your gown elsewhere. If so, I am truly happy for you and would love to know so I can celebrate that with you. And if you are still thinking about [gown/designer/detail], I am happy to help answer any questions you may have. Either way, I loved working with you and wish you the very best."

This type of message often opens the door to a response because it removes the awkwardness.

And sometimes, the bride will surprise you.

She may say, "I'm still thinking about it."

She may say, "I got busy and meant to reach out."

She may even come back and purchase.

But even if she did buy elsewhere, you have ended the relationship with kindness, professionalism and care – and that matters.

Because today's bride may not buy from you, but she can still refer you, review you and remember how you made her feel. You may have lost that sale, but her testimonial or kind words to others can lead to countless more sales!

Follow-up is not about chasing

The biggest mistake stores make is thinking of follow-up as chasing the bride.

It is not.

Follow-up is part of the client experience.

It is part of the relationship (which is the key to selling).

It is part of how we continue to guide brides through a decision that can feel emotional, overwhelming and deeply personal.

When follow-up is generic, inconsistent or pressure-filled, it does not work well.

But when follow-up is personal, thoughtful and rooted in service, it absolutely still works. . . even for Gen Z brides.

The question is not, "Does follow-up work?"

The better question is:

Does your follow-up feel like guidance?

If the answer is yes, then you are not just following up.

You are continuing the experience.

And that is where sales are still being made.





Beth Lindsay Chapman *is a bridal boutique owner, educator, mentor and industry thought leader with more than 20 years of experience in bridal retail. In 2004, she founded* ***The White Dress by the Shore****, a luxury bridal boutique in Connecticut, where she has helped thousands of brides find their wedding-day style while building one of the industry's most respected independent bridal businesses.*

Passionate about helping fellow bridal store owners navigate a changing industry, Beth is the founder of ***The White Dress Society****, a community and membership for independent bridal retailers, and* ***The Bridal Retailer Academy,*** *an on-demand educational platform for bridal store owners and their stylists.*

A sought-after speaker and educator, Beth travels throughout North America sharing insights on sales, marketing, leadership and the evolving bridal consumer. Her styling work and business expertise have been featured by The Today Show, The New York Times, Vogue, People Magazine, Martha Stewart Weddings, BRIDES, The Knot, Over The Moon *and* Style Me Pretty.



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by Shannon Hurd

Keeper of the Legacy



Credit: Louis Sanchez, @Renegadeindiefilmmakers

How Laurel Mungo turned a part-time job into a lifelong mission – and helped guide Mon Amie into its 50th year.



Where Is It?

Mon Amie Bridal Salon is located in the heart of Costa Mesa, Calif., less than two miles from the sands of Newport Beach. One of the world's premier indoor malls, South Coast Plaza, is less than a mile away. In addition to local traffic, the boutique regularly receives brides from Washington State, Arizona, Colorado and Tennessee. The furthest destination was a bride from Japan who came to see the first collection of Viktor&Rolf.

Fifty years after Mon Amie first opened its doors, Laurel Mungo still reacts to a newly arrived wedding gown the same way she did as a young bridal stylist in the late 1970s: with pure excitement.

That's remarkable not simply because Mon Amie has survived five decades in an industry transformed by changing brides, advancing technology and shifting shopping habits. It's remarkable because Laurel's story illustrates something increasingly rare in retail: what happens when a store is built not just on inventory or marketing, but on genuine love for the business.

Originally a college student who wanted a part-time job, Laurel discovered a career, a mentor and eventually a calling. Today, as CEO of one of the country's most enduring bridal boutiques, she continues to prove that while fashions, sales techniques and consumer expectations evolve, passion, culture and exceptional experiences never go out of style.

"I feel truly blessed," she says. "I just can't stress enough how much I love (this industry)."

As Mon Amie celebrates its 50th anniversary, Laurel's journey offers a master class in succession, staff development, customer experience and the power of building a culture that outlasts changing trends. From finding and training top talent to creating memorable appointments and preserving the founder's vision, Laurel's story demonstrates how passion and purpose can become a competitive advantage.

A Calling Discovered

In 1978, Laurel was a 19-year-old college student studying history and journalism at Long Beach State. She wanted to earn some extra spending money while in school and had always loved retail, so she answered a tiny newspaper ad for a bridal stylist at Mon Amie in Costa Mesa, Calif. The boutique's founder, Verna Huson, gave her the job immediately.

"I started working and then, unbenounced to me, fell in love with it," Lau-

rel says. "I didn't realize what effect (bridal) would have on me at the very beginning, but it just got in my blood and it's still there."

Originally, Mon Amie – which opened on April 15, 1976 – was 800 square feet and had one dressing room, a tiny backroom and a bridesmaids' dressing room. In addition to bridal, the boutique also sold mothers, flower girls and bridesmaids. Slowly, as Laurel gained competence as a salesperson and stylist, she learned other aspects of running a small business too. Due to the store's tiny size, employees did everything: cleaning toilets, sales and quarterly taxes, purchase orders, etc.

"It was complete immersion into a small business and I loved every roll," Laurel says. "Well, maybe not the toilets but I loved knowing what happened from start to finish. And I was very lucky to be able to learn that at that level!"

About two years after Laurel started working, Mon Amie tripled in size. The boutique, which originally began because Verna's daughters were getting married and she didn't like the experience of shopping in a department store bridal section, was thriving due to being at the right place at the right time and treating brides with respect.

And Laurel had fallen in love with it. She realized this about a year-and-a-half in, the moment she closed the biggest dollar sale the store had ever had: an Eve of Milady gown and matching hat that, combined, sold for $1,100. At the time wedding gowns averaged maybe $500 and high-end bridal was less than $1k.

"And this bride was so excited she goes, 'This is my wedding gown!'" Laurel says. "At that particular moment it was like the heavens opened up and I'm like, 'This is what I'm meant to do!'"

The best bridal education happens on the sales floor.

After about three years, Laurel was officially named manager. When it became apparent she could make bridal a career, she stopped taking college classes.

"I never graduated unfortunately; that's probably the biggest regret I have in life," she says. "And yet I've been to the university of reality and hard knocks, so I did have that sort of education under my belt."

Laurel remained at Mon Amie from 1978-94, during which point her responsibilities steadily expanded. In addition to being sales



Mon Amie's front desk.

Most Memorable Moment



With so many years in the industry, two key moments stand out to Mon Amie CEO Laurel Mungo.

The first occurred in the late 80s, at a time when Mon Amie sold bridesmaids, flower girls and mothers' gowns.

"I remember that the bride wore a beautiful Eve of Milady with a matching hat," Laurel says. "She also purchased two mothers' gowns and three flower girl dresses."

At her first alteration appointment, this bride asked if the boutique could alter the flower girls and was quickly told "of course"! She then added her flower girls were a bit of a handful (most little girls are), and again was told "no problem!"

"Then she told us her flower girls were MONKEYS!" Laurel says. "Her family owned a traveling circus!"

The second story involves a couple who married in 1975, before the boutique opened. Every 10 years after that, they would come and purchase a wedding gown and veil: in '85, '95, '05 and '15.

"They redid their vows every 10 years – CHURCH AND RECEPTION!" Laurel says. "She shared that every 10 years they changed their vows to address the changes that had happened and what the future held. They were kind to us and each other and always thankful!"

manager, she helped train new people, attended New York market with Verna and her daughter, and did purchase orders – all via paper and telephone.

In 1988, Mon Amie moved to its current 15,000-square-foot location. This same year, Laurel met her husband, Robert, on a blind date at a Super Bowl party. They married in 1990, and adopted their first of three children, a son, in 1994.

"At this point I made the difficult, heartfelt decision that I wanted to become a stay-at-home mom," she says. "Verna loved my husband a lot and knew he could provide for us, and she encouraged me to always follow my heart."

Laurel left the business she loved – and came back to lead it.

Laurel and Verna stayed in touch, however, talking a minimum of once a month for years. Laurel recalls the Mon Amie founder, who was a polio survivor, to be "one strong cookie, very much a lady and very proud." Not only would she insist on hiding her cane before entering a market showroom so nobody could see it, but when she grew increasingly sick in 2012, she refused to let Laurel visit her in the hospital because she didn't want to be seen without lipstick and her hair done.

"That was her thing – she always had to be completely put together," Laurel recalls.

Ultimately, Verna passed on December 26, 2012, and her celebration of life reception was held at Mon Amie.

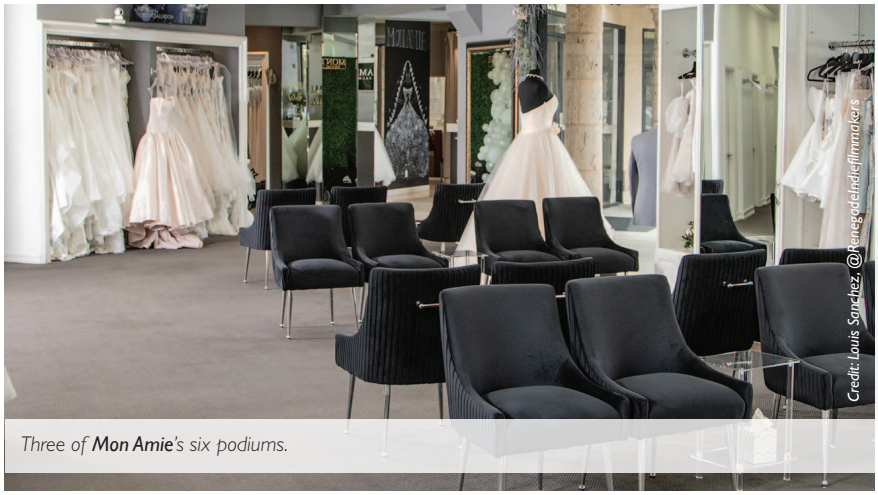
"I hadn't been in the store for probably eight years, and when I walked in it was seriously like coming home to a homecooked meal," Laurel says. "It was comfortable and it just felt right."

Shortly after, Laurel returned to work at Mon Amie part-time, assisting with marketing and public relations projects. One day while in the back room, she said to Verna's daughter: *you know your mom always wanted Bobby and I to have the store.*

"And she looked at me and said, 'You want it? I'm ready to get out!'" Laurel recalls. "And so we talked about it and Bobby knew my love of Mon Amie and that's how this story came about."



***Mon Amie** CEO Laurel (L) and Sales Manager **Betzi** holding the boutique's three different choices of signs for when a bride says yes, in front of its photo wall.*



*Three of **Mon Amie**'s six podiums.*

Building an Experience Brides Remember

Laurel officially became CEO of Mon Amie in August 2013, a role she has held ever since in an industry she cherishes deeply.

"I love everything about it, really!" she says. "There's nothing more satisfying than when a bride has decided to purchase a gown and I walk over to her and want to celebrate with her. And we're

celebrating that she is going to stand in this beautiful dress, marry and vow to love a person for the rest of her life!"

Laurel acknowledges that the search for a gown has changed significantly over the years, from a generation focused exclusively on finding a dress at the best possible price to a different goal.

"Brides are looking for an experience that makes them feel seen, beautiful and safe," she says. "Especially because we're all pretty much on the same page price wise, that's not really the goal anymore. The goal is the experience."

Creating that experience requires a deliberate strategy. First and foremost, Mon Amie has amazing depth of selection. The boutique carries bridal gowns and accessories from a total of 51 designers, which are listed on its website.

"If we don't have a look that they're looking for then shame on me," Laurel says. "Because that's something I try very hard at – to get at least one or two pieces in every single look. I would say the depth of our selection is very unique in our area."

Another unique feature is the boutique's 16 large dressing rooms, each of which can accommodate the bride on a pedestal plus four other guests and the consultant.

Not only are there real doors in lieu of curtains, but each consultant is assigned her own fitting room, in which she holds all of her appointments and is allowed to decorate to suit her personality. As a result, each fitting room boasts a different aesthetic, ranging from very vintage, complete with a 1920s wedding gown hanging on the wall and bridal books from the 40s-50s; to fun modern with little black furniture and bright pink "Love" things everywhere.

Stop competing on price. Start competing on experience.

"We feel comfortable letting them do that because it's where they're comfortable," Laurel says. "(The different styles) are a non-issue because their presentation to the brides and knowledge of stock is pretty much the same across the board."

Of course, creating memorable experiences ultimately comes down to people. To ensure top-notch service, extensive effort goes into finding and training staff. Laurel's top two salespeople are women she found herself while out shopping "because I'm such a great consumer myself," she laughs.

The first worked at Saks Fifth Avenue and the second a red light therapy salon. In both cases, Laurel would talk with these women regularly and thought they were quite personable. When they found out what Laurel did and expressed interest in bridal, she hired them. The former is still with Mon Amie after 12 years and the latter, a retired policewoman with amazing listening and body language skills, "has seriously broken every sales record we've ever had!"

"Always be looking and go with your gut!" Laurel says. "Be open and take that leap of faith if it's something you believe in."

For compensation, stylists have three options: a higher dollar per hour with a lower percentage of commission; medium dollar per hour with medium commission; commission only at a very high percentage (with this option, if someone doesn't sell they get minimum wage).

Additionally, Laurel will sometimes throw in enticements, like whoever closes the first sale that day gets $100 or whoever sells highest total dollar gets $250. There are also opportunities to make additional compensation



Credit: Louis Sanchez, @Renegadeindiefilmmakers

*One of **Mon Amie**'s stylist dressing rooms, decorated to the stylist's taste.*

from manufacturers or designers during trunk shows.

Currently, two consultants have elected to be commission only and the rest are at the medium level. Consultants are allowed to change their pay range up to three times a year.

"The hardest thing about bridal is the confidence," Laurel says. "So if they need a couple of months to get their feet wet they go with the more per hour and less on commission. (This system) is more to make them feel comfortable and let them believe in themselves."

Beyond that, training is extensive. No new consultant can be with a bride by herself for three weeks and must shadow in every department including alterations, shipping and receiving and the phone room. They also do hands-on training with the POS system, as well as about 10 days of shadowing different consultants.

"They're glued to their side but they don't talk or offer any opinions," Laurel says. "They're there to observe and see how an appointment runs."



***Laurel** in front of **Mon Amie**'s trunkshow area.*



Another stylist's dressing room, decorated to her taste.

Finally, Mon Amie holds regular sales meetings to address ongoing issues and do continuous product training.

"We don't want to misinform or guide brides in the wrong direction, so we really train our stylists so they're comfortable with the depth of our selection," Laurel says. "That way they won't show them something they can't get in time or that's $1,500 over their price point. We're very respectful of price points and very respectful of what brides think they want."

Lessons From Five Decades in Bridal

Many years of experience have given Laurel a front-row seat to changing consumer behaviors, shifting fashion trends and evolving retail challenges. Along the way, she has developed a few hard-earned philosophies that continue to guide her leadership today.

The biggest, which she admits she still isn't great at, is not to overbuy.

"That's a tough, tough lesson to learn and the less you can buy the harder it is," she says. "Because I can walk into any showroom and fall in love with at least six wedding gowns. I mean I just love them! We can't buy it all, but we want to!"

To avoid oversaturation, Laurel always brings somebody else with her to market "to either take my pen away or kick me under the table. That definitely helps!"

Another lesson is how to successfully navigate the posse brides bring with them to appointments, especially considering how very important those peoples' opinions are to them.

"You have to respect and acknowledge each and every one of

them," she says. "And once they realize you respect their presence and hear them, then you can say, 'ok, so as we all know, we're here for Suzy. And I think that she's leaning in this direction.' And then just let the bride take the reins. But you actually have to say those words."

As owner, Laurel is very involved, working in the store four days a week (Mon Amie is closed Tuesdays and Thursdays and she recently started taking Sundays off). Daily, she spends time going through emails, talking to anyone who needs to and has final say in every major decision. But most of all she enjoys interacting with people, being on the floor and of course those beautiful gowns.

"It's like Christmastime when the new stock comes in," she says. "I kind of ask them to open things out of order just so we can see it because I still get excited!"

Additionally – and here is a fun fact – she loves to steam gowns.

"Always have," she says. "Steaming and ironing are a super fun thing for me."

As for other core tenets of how she operates the store, Laurel is a big believer in social media ("You have to be present, period – there are no other avenues to grab brides"), including humor in everything you do ("Because you have to be able to laugh with them, never at them, and at yourself!") and showing respect to every single person who walks through your doors ("Because these brides have a choice as to where they want to go.")

While these principles definitely help Mon Amie run smoothly, over the years there have been challenges of course.

Throughout everything though,

Love the business – or the business will wear you down.

there is one constant that hasn't waivered a bit:

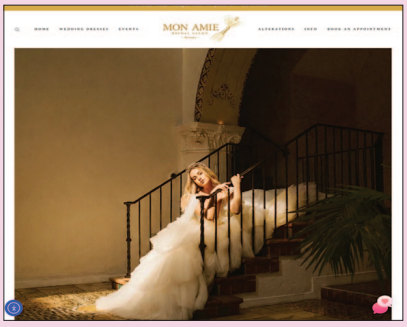
"It's love of it; you have to love it and I can't say that enough," she says. "Because it's a lot of work. Yes, there are fun times, but consistently you have to be willing and able to put in the time and effort to have any amount of success in this industry."

Keeper of a Legacy

On April 15, 2026, Mon Amie officially marked 50 years in business, a monumental achievement for a little boutique that was born to fill a niche.

"It's kind of like when a person turns 50 – you can't believe it's been that long because it seems like the blink of an eye," she says. "In looking back in what has happened in this country, in this world since 1976, that's what really amazing. Changes in industry, technology, travel, fashion – things like that boggle my mind!"

For Laurel, the anniversary is about more than celebrating longevity. It's about honoring the generations of brides, employees and industry relationships that



In The Spotlight: Mon Amie Bridal Salon

Established: April 1976
Owner(s):
Verna Huson (1976-2005)
The Flatten family – Verna's daughter (2005-13)
Laurel Mungo (2013-current)
Size: 15,000 sq. ft
Rent or Own: Rent
Number of Dressing Rooms: 16
Price Range of Gowns: $1,700-$20K
Average Bridal Sale: $2,800-$4,200
Niches Carried: bridal gowns, accessories, veils
Alterations: in house
Total Staff: 22
Compensation: stylists have three choices: higher dollar per hour with lower commission; medium dollar per hour with medium commission; commission only (very high percentage)
Database Management System: recently switched to BridalLive
Website: www.monamie.com
Social-Media Stats
Facebook: @monamiebridalsalon – 14k followers
Instagram: @monamiebridalsalon - 26.4K followers
TikTok: @monamiebridalsalon - 3,295 followers
Pinterest: @monamiesalon - 2.7K followers
Goodwill Causes: Military Bride giveaways; Mon Amie partners with Brides Across America and uses all its own gowns. Make a Wish a few times a year, which includes gowns, veil and alterations.
Good Business Read: Rather than recommend a book, Laurel offers some advice.
"The best education that anyone – new or existing storeowner – (could get) would be to work at someone else's store," Laurel says. She points out that because bridal retail is a special-order business, few books address how to manage cash flow when revenue may not be realized for two to 10 months.

Mon Amie Bridal Salon

The real achievement isn't longevity – it's impact.

helped make Mon Amie what it is today.

Rather than have a gigantic party, she has opted to incorporate multiple 50th anniversary activities throughout the year "because the success of this store didn't start when those doors opened," she says. "Our story began, but the success came slowly and evenly."

At the beginning of the year, they designed a tree with branches on the front window. Every bride that purchases from Mon Amie is given a small card that says "50th Anniversary" in gold on the outside and asked to write a small note inside – to other brides, to their stylist, to their fiancé. This is then taped to this window.

Any bride who walks through the door is asked to take a selfie with their polaroid camera and tape it to this photo scrapbook, and write a note saying how they enjoyed their time with Mon Amie.

And legacy brides – whose mothers, aunts or grandmothers got their dresses from Mon Amie – receive a handkerchief embroidered with "Mon Amie established 1976" when picking up their gown this year. They also, along with their moms, get a t-shirt that says "Mon Amie legacy bride."

Finally, Mon Amie is having 50th anniversary wedding gowns designed especially for the store and these styles will be exclusive to the boutique for one year.

"I want everyone to know how much I love what I do and how blessed I feel (to have reached this milestone)," Laurel says. "The many people I have met over the years have made my life richer. Whether it be other storeowners or vendors, I just enjoy everybody that's in this industry."

She enjoys it so much, in fact, that there is no plan to exit. The only way Mon Amie would move locations is if Laurel could find a building to buy, something she says is unlikely in Costa Mesa, but even if that happens the store will continue.

"Eventually it will be handed off to somebody that will continue the legacy started by Verna, and that is for sure," she says.

In the meantime, she is grateful to have a COO and sales manager in place who "are very, very capable and I really trust" so she has been able to enjoy her passion for travel quite a bit in the last couple of years.

"If I have a work-life balance, who knows when I will retire?" she says. "I love it so much that I cannot picture (bridal) not being part of my life."

Q&A with Mon Amie CEO Laurel Mungo



What is your approach to market buys? This is my true weak point. I LOVE wedding gowns! I try to sit on my hands as much as possible. Seriously though, I start with the designers that are consistently strong in our store. I look at everything I can. Buys have shifted a bit to make sure our selections have just about something for everyone. Also, I feel that sometimes in this niche business that we are in, working relationships are key. Trust and loyalty are also very important to me.

How is your business dealing with rising costs? The cost of doing business has certainly become a topic of conversation and a concern. The tariff situation was a curveball. We absorbed everything in the beginning. When it became obvious that this was not going to sustainable, we repriced our gowns to reflect the costs.

How do you deal with the indecisive bride? The brides of today CANNOT be rushed into buying. There are too many choices in gowns, stores, etc. Transparency is key and following up.

What is your business mantra? Lead with kindness and integrity. Also every day I tell myself: After the issues of running a business, the highs and lows, I remember it is only because two people fell in love!

What do you like to do outside of work? I love everything outdoors: camping, fishing, beaches and LOVE to travel. Shopping for me is an art form. My husband and I enjoy cooking and entertaining in our home. Also, I am a Pilates junky, I have been doing four classes a week for 25 years. Finally, I love talking animal movies. If the movie has an animal taking, I am there for opening day!

Looks & Lines

Mon Amie carries bridal gowns and bridal accessories from a total of 51 designers, which are listed on its website.

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

Rep Opportunity for Clarisse Designs' Bridal Collections

Clarisse Designs is seeking an experienced Bridal Sales Representative for the Midwest, East Coast and Southern territories to represent its Private Bridal and Verra Valle Collections.

Bridal or wholesale sales experience preferred. Must be motivated, relationship-driven and ready to grow the territory. Send resumé to **admin@clarisse.com**.

Opportunities From Established Headpiece Brand

Established headpiece manufacturer seeking driven sales reps. Multiple territories available. Submit your resumé to: **bridalsalesrep@gmail.com**.

Jasz Couture Territories Available

Jasz Couture Prom, pageant, evening wear is seeking representation. Contact Pam Nierenberg **561-722-6189** or e-mail **Pamelasfashions@gmail.com** for details.

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 collections here: **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.

Please contact Marie Adornato at **info@Adornatocouture.com** or **315-263-1712**.

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 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**.

Opportunity

Private Haute Couture Collection — Wholesale Opportunity

Luxury evening and bridal gowns available from a Private Collection of 100+ one-of-a-kind pieces. Ideal for boutiques, designers and re-sellers.

Available as full or partial lots at well below couture pricing based in Miami. Inquire for detailed selection, catalog and quantities: Jaquelina at **jaquelinasbridal@gmail.com** or call **305-443-6977**.

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**.

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