

VOWS:

The VOWS Profile:

Evaline's Bridal
An 82-year legacy
worth preserving.
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**Rapid weight loss
shapes bridal!**
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chaotic times**
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**Where it pays to
spend more**
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**PLUS: Spring 2027
Bridal Market Pictorial**

Holly Naples and Lori Dubasik
owners, Evaline's Bridal



justinaalexander.com



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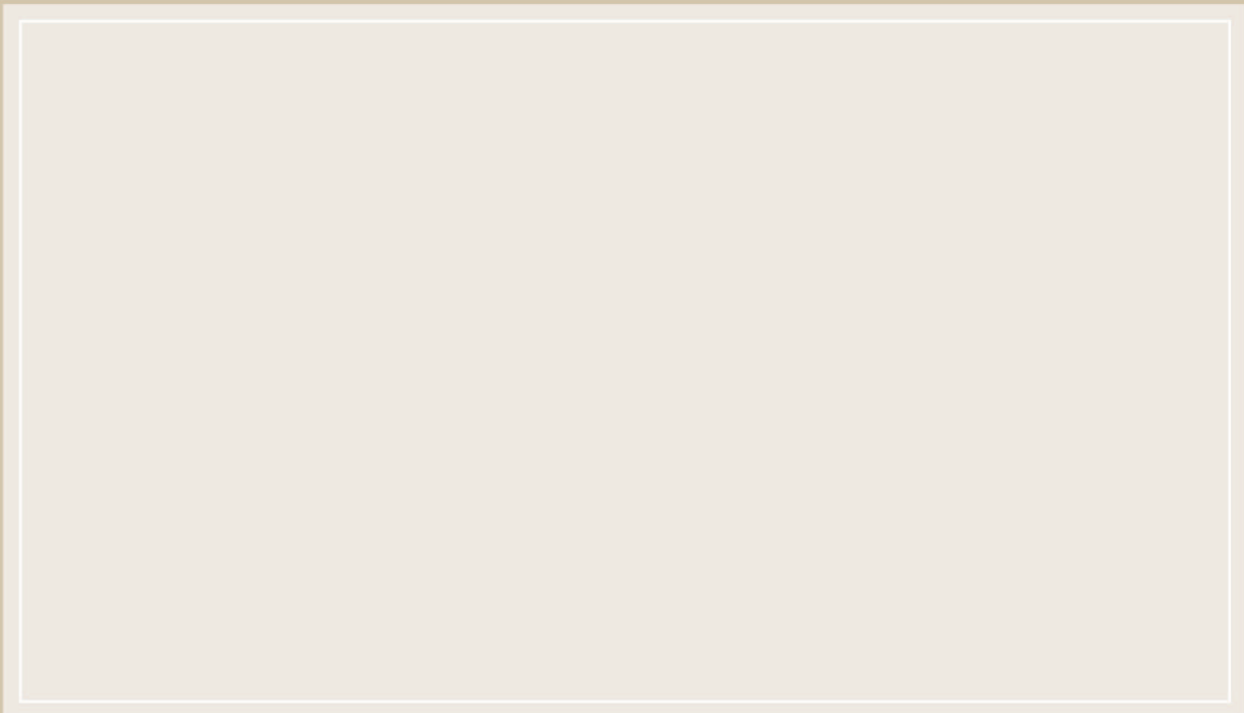
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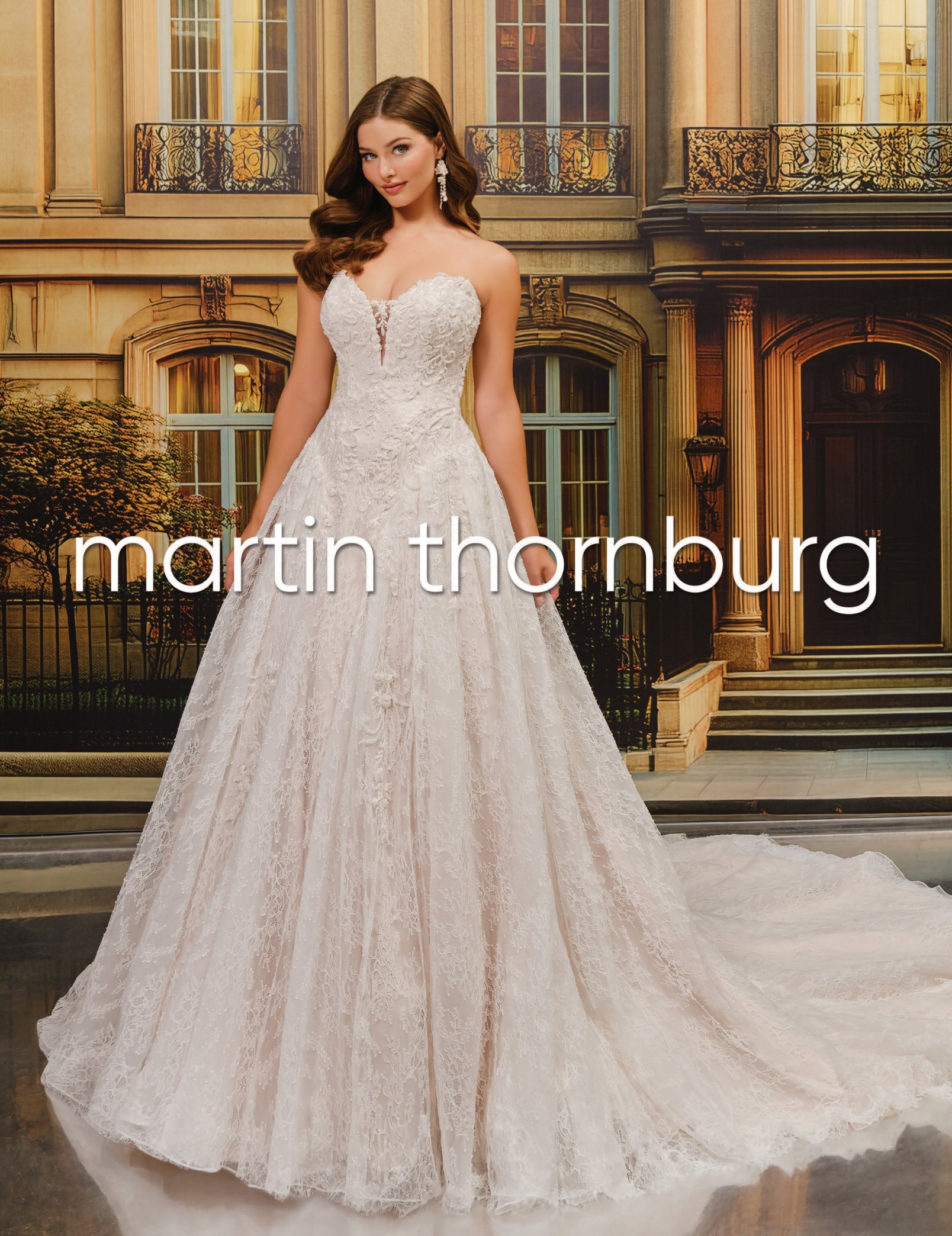
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TIMELESS BRIDAL GOWNS CRAFTED WITH
EXCEPTIONAL DETAIL



Discover the Evolution of Casablanca Bridal.

CASABLANCA BRIDAL WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1997 AND HAS SINCE BECOME ONE OF THE FASTEST
GROWING, WELL KNOWN MANUFACTURERS OF BRIDAL GOWNS IN THE INDUSTRY

RSVP AT SALES@CASABLANCABRIDAL.COM

CASABLANCA

A full-page photograph of a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, looking slightly to her right. She is wearing a white, long-sleeved, high-necked lace dress with a heart-shaped cutout at the bust. The dress is covered in intricate floral lace patterns. She is standing in front of a large window with a grid pattern, and the scene is lit with warm, natural light. The background shows a blurred outdoor area with greenery.

BELOVED

BY CASABLANCA

EST. 1997

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MONTAGE
by MON CHERI®

The image features two models standing in front of a large window with sheer white curtains. The model on the left is wearing a black strapless gown with a fitted bodice and a full skirt, adorned with intricate gold floral embroidery. The model on the right is wearing a brown, off-the-shoulder gown with a fitted bodice and a full skirt, featuring a complex, textured pattern. Both models have long, dark hair and are looking towards the camera.





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A full-body photograph of a woman with blonde hair pulled back, wearing a strapless, floor-length gown made of intricate white lace. She is standing with her hands on her hips, looking directly at the camera. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The word "DEMETRIOS" is overlaid in a large, white, serif font across the center of the image.

DEMETRIOS



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Credit: Twenty Two Photography

Getting to Yes

The Ozempic Effect

As GLP-1 use surges among brides, rapid weight loss is creating new challenges – and forcing you to rethink everything from sizing and alterations to inventory and policies.

by Daniel P. Smith **50**

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When Everything Feels Urgent...

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Where It Pays to Spend

Invest more in key areas to elevate the bride's experience and benefit your bottom line.

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The VOWS Profile: Evaline's Bridal

Something Worth Preserving

For more than 80 years, Evaline's Bridal has evolved with the times while holding tight to the relationships, values and service that built its legacy.

by Shannon Hurd **82**

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VOWS.

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Credit: Twenty Two Photography

The front checkout area at **Evaline's Bridal** continues the clean, bright and elegant feel of the boutique.

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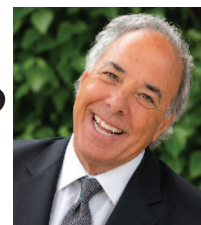
On the cover

Holly Naples and Lori Dubasik
owners, Evaline's Bridal

Credit: Twenty Two Photography

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What's Your Budget?



Peter Grimes
Publisher
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vowsmagazine.com
949 388-4848

Several issues back I wrote about a pricing practice that had gone viral after brides discovered some boutiques were selling the same gown at different prices based upon the bride's stated budget – essentially, what the stylist or owner believed she was willing or able to pay.

I argued then that the flexibility you have in pricing a gown should be based upon its perceived market value, your costs and the margins necessary to operate a healthy business – not on what an individual bride can bear.

Based on a recent announcement by the Federal Trade Commission there may be regulatory issues on their way.

The FTC has proposed an enforcement policy addressing “personalized pricing,” which it describes as using personal information to determine what a company believes an individual consumer is willing to spend.

To be clear, the FTC is not looking specifically at our industry, but is taking a broader look at personalized pricing across all retail categories.

There's an important distinction here. Asking a bride her budget is not the problem. In fact, it remains an important part of understanding her expectations and helping her find the right gown.

Using that information to decide **what you show her** is selling.

Using it to decide **what you charge her for the same gown** is something quite different.

The FTC is not saying all individualized pricing is illegal. It is warning, however, that businesses may violate consumer-protection laws when customers are misled about how prices are established or when personal information is used to set those prices without appropriate disclosure.

It's also important to emphasize that selling the same gown to different brides at different prices based upon their stated budgets is not a rampant practice in bridal retail.

But that doesn't make this conversation any less important.

And that makes this a good time to look at your own pricing policies, how much discretion your stylists have, and whether the price a bride sees – or is quoted – is as transparent and consistent as you believe it is.

Because asking “What's your budget?” remains an important part of personalized service.

Stay tuned for future updates about this FTC rule and its enforcement.

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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.

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Shannon Hurd
Editor in Chief
shannon@vowsmagazine.com
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The Details *are Negotiable*

When you know what matters most, the question isn't if you'll make room for it, but how.

Certain things in my life aren't up for debate.

Working out is one of them.

I exercise every day, no matter what. The question is not if I'm going to work out. It's when and how.

That distinction may sound small, but it matters.

Some days, the answer is easy. I have plenty of time, the weather is gorgeous and I do exactly what I'd planned. Other days, life gets in the way. My schedule changes, a storm rolls in or I don't feel great.

So I adjust – working out later in the day, doing a different activity or intensity, or moving indoors instead of going outside.

The point isn't that my original plan has to happen exactly as I imagined. It's that I've already decided the priority matters and I'm going to do it in some form no matter what.

Reading the stories in this issue made me think about that approach.

Running an independent boutique means spending every day surrounded by things competing for your attention. You simply cannot make everything a top priority.

So what have you decided is non-negotiable?

Maybe it's investing in your employees by paying them fairly and making sure they know they

matter. Maybe it's maintaining a beautiful store because you believe the environment should reflect the significance of the dress purchase. Maybe it's continuing to market your business even when money is tight, because disappearing from view isn't a viable growth strategy.

Or perhaps it's protecting time with your family, your own physical/mental health or the individuality of your business.

No matter what your answer, remember that non-negotiable doesn't mean never change.

One of the strongest themes throughout this issue is that successful boutiques constantly adapt. Brides' behavior changes, technology advances, the economy shifts, new challenges appear

– sometimes seemingly overnight – and you have to respond.

The trick is knowing the difference between changing your approach and changing what you stand for.

That's what I love about the idea of non-negotiables. They aren't rigid rules that prevent us from adapting. They're anchors that help us decide how to adapt.

Your boutique deserves that same clarity.

Because there will never be enough time, money or energy to do absolutely everything.

Your goal instead is to decide what matters most – and stop making those things fight for a place on your list.

Boutique Contributors

(+Instagram handles – give them a follow!)

Aurora Bridal, Melbourne, Fla.

@aurorabridal

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

@charlottesbridal

Clarice's Bridal, St. Louis, Mo.

@claricesbridal

Coreena's Bridal Boutique, College Station and Georgetown, Texas

@coreenasbridal

Evaline's Bridal, Warren, Ohio

@evalinesbridal

Facchianos, Broken Arrow, Okla.

@facchianos

Heart to Heart Bride, Webster, N.Y.

@hearttoheartbride

Honest in Ivory, Spokane, Wash.

@honestinivory

K&B Bridals and Tux, Bel Air, Takoma Park & Hagerstown, Md. @kandbbridals

Laura & Leigh Bridal, Cherry Hill, N.J.

@lauraandleighbridal

Lili Bridals/Della Curva, Tarzana, Calif.

@lilibridals @dellacurva

Madison Marie Bridal, Berlin, Md.

@madisonmariebridal

MB Bride & Special Occasion, Greensburg, Pa. @mbbride

Mirror Mirror, Baldwinsville, N.Y.

@mirrormirrorincbridal

Strut, Long Beach, Calif. & Chandler, Ariz.

@strutbridal

The Bridal Gallery, Salem, Ore.

@bridalgalleriesalem

Trudys, San Jose, Calif.

@trudysbrides

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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.vovsmagazine.com/events>

2026 International and Domestic Market Dates

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 Couture Luxury Bridal Market

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

www.nationalbridalmarket.com/mca

2027 Dates

March 14-16, 2027

National Bridal Market Chicago

Merchandise Mart, Chicago, IL
Sunday, Monday, Tuesday
www.nationalbridalmarket.com

April 6-8, 2027

NY Luxury Bridal Fashion Week

Check with individual designers
for their schedule of events and shows
www.thebridalcouncil.com

April 7-8, 2027

One Fine Day Bridal Market

New York, NY
<https://onefinedaybridalmarket.com>

April 7-8, 2027

Melange de Blanc New York Bridal Market

New York, NY
www.melangedeblanc.com

April 12-14, 2027

Formal Markets Atlanta

Apparel Mart, Atlanta, GA
Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday
www.atlanta-apparel.com/markets/Formal-Markets

August 2-5, 2027

Formal Markets Atlanta

Apparel Mart, Atlanta, GA
Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday
www.atlanta-apparel.com/markets/Formal-Markets

August 16-18, 2027

National Bridal Market Chicago

Merchandise Mart, Chicago, IL
Sunday, Monday, Tuesday
www.nationalbridalmarket.com

October 2027 TBA

One Fine Day Bridal Market

Melange de Blanc
NY Luxury Bridal Fashion Week



To share your
industry-specific news
releases in our **Tidbits** section, e-mail
Shannon@vovsmagazine.com

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words or less are always
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Heard Around the Industry...

Products/Services

Allure Expands Disney Fairy Tale Weddings Collection into Men's Formalwear

Allure Bridals expanded its Disney Fairy Tale Weddings collection into men's formalwear in mid-August with the introduction of the Disney Mickey Mouse Tuxedo, available through an exclusive national distribution program by Sarno and Son for both retail purchase and rental.

"Allure Bridals' Disney Fairy Tale Men's Formalwear collection was officially launched in mid-August, and received near immediate and extensive media coverage as well as generating excitement among our accounts," explained Ridge Crum, Allure Bridals' menswear manager. "This level of celebrity license is truly the first of its kind in the menswear rental industry."

The black-tie style features a tailored silhouette and satin peak lapel, with a tonal Mickey Mouse ear motif discreetly incorporated into the interior lining. The result is a contemporary formal look with a subtle reference to the iconic Disney character.

The rental version is offered in Ultra Black Performance Stretch Coolmax fabric blended with Super 120's fine wool, combining stretch construction with breathability and ease of movement. A synthetic-blend retail version incorporates stretch and recycled materials while offering the same overall styling in a fabric designed for durability and repeated wear.

The collection is also an expansion of the existing **Allure Suits & Tuxedos** collection.

Sarno and Son, through its **Smart Formalwear** program, has exclusive national distribution rights for the Allure/Disney men's formalwear collection, making the garments available to Allure accounts nationwide.

"The Disney license brings a new level of excitement and creativity to men's formalwear," said Emily Sarno, a fourth-generation member of the family business established in 1940. "Today's customers are looking for more ways to personalize their weddings and special events and incorpo-



Allure Bridals' Disney Fairy Tale Men's Formalwear collection.

rate things that are meaningful to them."

Sarno added that the collection gives formalwear retailers another opportunity to reach Disney's multigenerational fan base while generating new interest in men's formalwear.

A collection of accessories are also available including Disney Mickey Mouse cufflinks, Disney patterned bow tie and neck tie, and Mickey Mouse silhouette socks.

The Disney Tux wholesale rental cost is \$150, including coat, pants, vest, shirt, tie, shoes, and special lapel pin.

Suggested rental cost for the customer is \$299, non-discountable. Retail garment suggested retail price is approximately \$700-750 for the woolrich garment.

For additional information, contact

Smart Formalwear;
info@smartformalwear.com or 570-504-2300.

Erica Koesler Wedding Accessories Continues With Maritza's Bridal Veils

Maritza's Bridal Veils has assumed production and distribution responsibilities for the **Erica Koesler Wedding Accessories** (EKWA) collection, following the retirement of longtime owner Nora Hollinger. The transition ensures the EKWA brand will continue serving retailers with the same craftsmanship and reliability it has been known for more than four decades.

Hollinger has worked closely with the Maritza's team to create a seamless handover. Maritza's Bridal Veils is now producing and shipping all EKWA styles, maintaining the established quality, materials, and service standards that retailers have trusted since the brand's inception.

"The designs will remain exactly the same, the quality will remain exactly the same, and the service will remain exactly the same. Maritza's works with the same factories we've partnered with, so retailers will continue to have access to many of the EKWA styles – and custom requests will still be available," Hollinger reiterated during the transition.

The arrangement was developed to preserve EKWA's presence in the bridal market and ensure uninterrupted



Erica Koesler style 779-45.

Heard Around the Industry...

support for retailers who rely on the brand's accessories.

"I've known Nora for years and deeply respect the business she built," said Jackie Deoleo Thomas, second-generation owner of Maritza's Bridal Veils. "It felt natural for Maritza's to help carry the EKWA brand forward with the same care and consistency retailers expect."

With Maritza's Bridal Veils now overseeing production and fulfillment, retailers will continue to have access to the EKWA collection, including custom-order capabilities.

For product inquiries or questions regarding existing or new EKWA accounts, contact Jackie Deoleo Thomas at or 305-221-5308.

Martina Liana's Martine Harris Headlines Essense of Australia's Elevate Summit, Spotighting AI's Growing Role in Bridal Retail

Essense of Australia welcomed bridal retailers to its U.S. headquarters for Elevate, its annual education summit, held July 20-22 and July 27-29. The annual summit paired business education with runway presentations, networking, and showroom appointments.

This year, **Martine Harris**, co-owner and chief creative officer of Essense of Australia and head designer of **Martina Liana** and **Martina Liana Luxe**, presented two sessions addressing one of the bridal industry's fastest-moving topics: the role of artificial intelligence in how brides discover, research, and ultimately choose a wedding dress.

In "AI" Do, Harris joined **Wallace Wilson**, vice president of **Marketing Technology**, to examine how AI is reshaping the way brides discover, shop for, and ultimately choose a wedding dress. The conversation covered the technology's growing influence on marketing, appointment quality, trend cycles, and store operations, along with what retailers can do now to remain competitive.

Harris also led *When the Bride Can't Decide*, a candid look at the changing rules of bridal retail. The session explored what is driving those changes, what they demand of retailers, and where new opportunities may lie.



Martine Harris, co-owner and chief creative officer of Essense of Australia.



In addition to AI seminar, Martina Liana, Martina Liana Luxe, Stella York, Essense of Australia, All Who Wander, and Oxford Street fashions were presented.

"Brides are coming into appointments with more inspiration than ever, but that doesn't always mean they feel more certain," said Harris. "AI is changing how they discover dresses and prepare to shop, while retailers are being asked to understand them faster and guide them with more confidence. Elevate allows us to talk honestly about those shifts and what they mean for the future of bridal!"

Alongside the sessions, Elevate included runway presentations featuring Martina Liana, Martina Liana Luxe, Stella York, Essense of Australia, All Who Wander, and Oxford Street, as well as retail training, networking and showroom appointments.

Retailers unable to attend can shop the newest collections through Essense of Australia's Virtual Showroom featuring models across a range of sizes, shapes and skin tones.

Personnel

Casablanca Bridal Names Nikki Deeds Customer Success Manager

Casablanca Bridal recently announced the appointment of Nikki

Deeds as Customer Success Manager, effective immediately.

In her new role, Deeds will focus on strengthening the company's retailer experience while helping develop Casablanca Bridal's Customer Success department. Working across departments, she will help translate retailer feedback and evolving needs into improvements throughout the company's operations and retailer support programs.

Deeds will also support partner initiatives including retailer training, markets and events, trunk shows, gown-on-loan programs, and other resources designed to help Casablanca Bridal retailers grow their businesses.

"Nikki brings an incredible depth of industry experience, but what stood out to us most is how deeply she understands and values the retailer relationship," said Crystal Lu, creative director of Casablanca Bridal. "As we continue evolving Casablanca, strengthening the way we support our retail partners is a major priority. We're incredibly excited to have Nikki helping us build that next chapter."

Deeds brings 25 years of bridal industry experience to the position, most recently serving as Global Brand Manager for Allure Bridals, and said her longstanding relationships with retailers will remain a central focus of her new role.

"For the past 25 years, I've had the privilege of working in an industry I truly love," Deeds said. "I feel incredibly blessed for the experiences, opportunities and knowledge I've gained along the way, but even more so for the many friendships I've built throughout the years."

"As I begin this next chapter with Casablanca Bridal, I'm excited to continue doing what I'm passionate about: working closely with retailers, building strong partnerships and helping them achieve continued success."



Nikki Deeds

Tidbits continued on page 44





DISCOVER THE

Allure in Bloom

SPRING 2027 COLLECTIONS

For more information about the Allure Family of Brands
contact sales@allurebridals.com

Continued from page 41

Casablanca Bridal Welcomes Retail Partners for Spring 2027 Launch



Global Marketing Manager **Brooke Simon** led a presentation on **Casablanca's** rebrand direction.



Rebecca's Bridal Boutique, Louisville, Kentucky was in attendance. From left, **Jesse Bishop**, **Madeleine Sierakowski**, **Casablanca's Crystal Lu** and **Kevin Lu**, **Rebecca Kimura**, **Haley Crigger**.

Casablanca Bridal welcomed retail partners to Southern California mid July for a two-day event introducing its Spring 2027 collection and offering retailers a closer look at the company's next chapter.

Hosted in Laguna Beach, the gathering was designed to combine new-product presentations with education, business resources and time for retailers to connect with the Casablanca team and one another. In welcoming attendees, the Lu family (**Kevin** and **Gloria Lu** and daughter **Crystal**) thanked retail partners for the relationships and support that have helped build Casablanca Bridal for nearly 30 years, while describing Spring 2027 as a first look at the brand's next chapter.

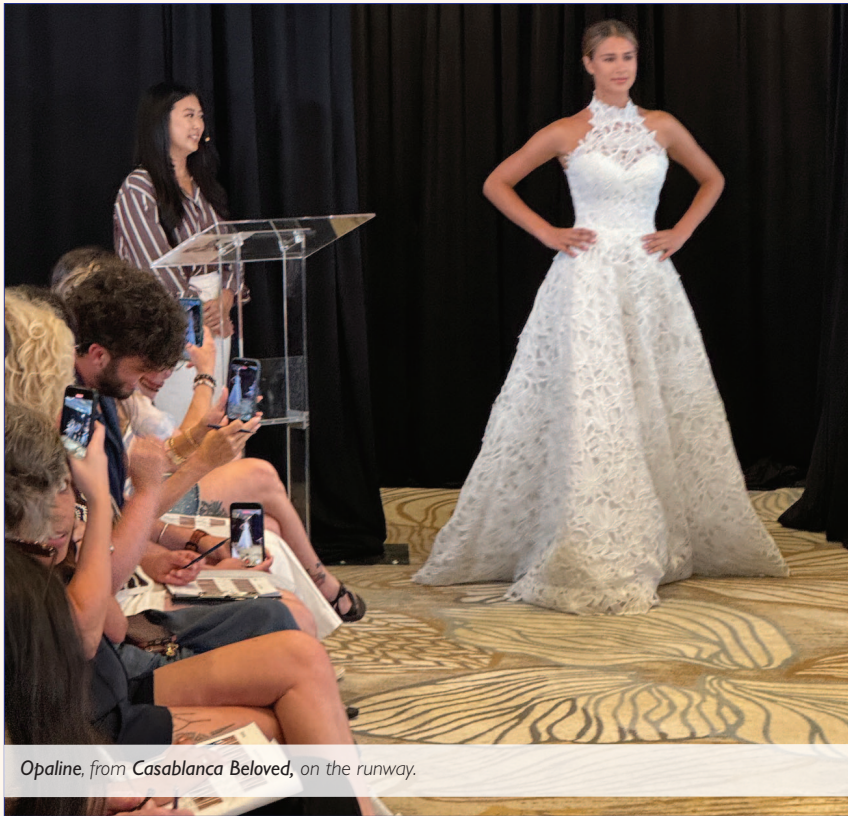
The event schedule included live Spring 2027 fashion shows along with a series of retailer-focused training sessions. Among them were customization workshops covering how to sell, order and service Casablanca gowns; demonstrations of

Casablanca's new B2B retailer portal; and sessions with **Brooke Simon**, Casablanca Global Marketing Manager, introducing "The New Casablanca Brand Refresh and Retailer Playbook".

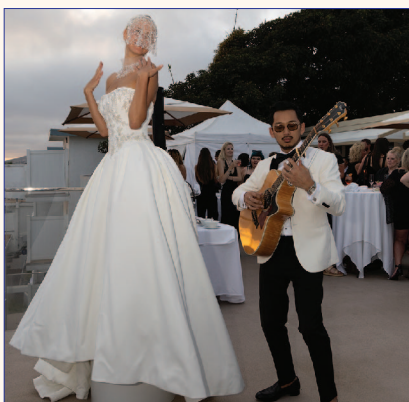
Beyond the business sessions, Casablanca created opportunities for retailers to socialize and celebrate, including an ocean-view welcome reception and a hosted evening of cocktails and dinner overlooking Dana Point Harbor.

The event brought together Casablanca's emphasis on product, retailer education and partnership – a relationship the company underscored in its message to attendees: "Thank you for your continued partnership and support. We look forward to an incredible season ahead."

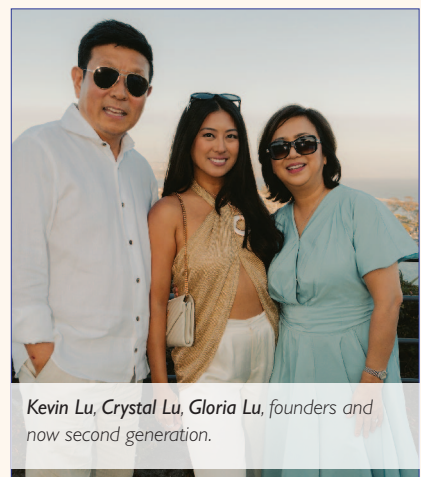
Casablanca Bridal's family of brands includes **Casablanca Bridal**, **Beloved by Casablanca**, **Le Blanc by Casablanca** and **Amaré by Casablanca**.



Opaline, from *Casablanca Beloved*, on the runway.



Crystal Lu, *Casablanca* Creative Director (left), and Hannah Gutierrez, *What's Up Europe Couture*, Fresno, Ca.



Kevin Lu, Crystal Lu, Gloria Lu, founders and now second generation.

Tidbits continued on page 46

The VOWS Interview: The Rebirth of House of Wu



Judging from House of Wu's presence at last season's Markets, and the changes in approaches to its marketing materials and presentations (some of which has been showcased in VOWS), the multi-category bridal and social occasion apparel company appears to be going through a refresh extending beyond a branding update to include a reimaging of the company's business direc-

tion.

Spearheaded by Tiffany Wu, daughter of founder Wen Wu, the effort coincides with and is the result of Wu successfully buying back the company he founded 36 years ago in mid-2025.

VOWS asked Tiffany and Wen about their plans and goals now that the company is fully under their control.

VOWS: Congratulations on re-

acquiring the company you founded so many years ago. What can we expect of House of Wu through this rebirth?

Wen: We are going back to our roots after a decade under different ownership. Now that we're fully family-owned once again, it was natural for Tiffany to join and help chart what's next. She brings a fresh perspective, has grown up in the business, and understands our customers' needs.

Tiffany: After the buyback, it felt wrong not to come back. I'm bringing a decade of experience from other industries and translating that across the family business. Prior to this I was in law and real estate, and I'm finding the overlaps everyday.

Wen: With her leading creative direction and brand building, I am able to focus on improvements to enhance our product development, sales, and operations. It's been nice to have Tiffany as a sounding board and it's great to be back as a family.

VOWS: How does this impact and/or reflect the legacy of House of Wu?

Tiffany: You're seeing us

build in real time where we left off. After over 30 years in business and a large part of that under someone else's vision, this shift represents thoughtfulness behind where we want to go as a brand. Respecting our history while evolving to ensure it carries on is the legacy.

Wen: It has been an amazing 36 years in business, and now being a new grandfather to two little girls, legacy is even more important to me. I have newfound inspiration to keep going.

VOWS: Can you provide specifics as to how accounts and prospects will benefit and/or be supported?

Wen: Yes. . . Even better margin-optimized designs, tailored customer service, constant improvements in fit, materials, and construction, and a relationship-first philosophy that acknowledges the challenges stores are facing.

I'll never forget the stores that tell me how I've helped them stay in business during hard times. This is the point of what we do.

VOWS: Do you see this change of direction as responsive to the market. . . or leading it. . . or?

Tiffany: This isn't market

driven. It's what we think is right for the company, our stores, and the people who have been with us since the beginning. We've trusted others with leadership direction for the last decade, so now it's a new chapter on our own terms.

VOWS: House of Wu has been in this process for about a year. . . what has been the reaction?

Wen: I'm very happy with our trajectory and our retailers seem to share the same outlook. We've had only positive feedback on our product development, marketing strategy and retailer support. Above all, our stores tell us that the margins we now offer is the best-kept secret in the business.

Tiffany: Having been on the inside for six months now, I

can see the work that's been put in to optimizing every part of the production chain to get those margins for our stores. That's not something every designer prioritizes but he's been very clear about our focus.

Wen: That's been my focus from the beginning and it's still our guidepost. I'm so appreciative of the retailers who have been with us through it all and understand how much work we put into each season. I invite everyone else to join and grow with us as we build the next phase even better.

For additional details on House of Wu, its collections or programs for boutiques, contact Wen, wenwu@houseofwu.com, Tiffany at tiffanywu@houseofwu.com, and visit www.houseofwu.com.



Wen Wu, founder, House of Wu



Tiffany Wu, second generation, Marketing and Sales Enablement, House of Wu



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The Ozempic Effect



Over recent years, **Trudys** in San Jose, Calif., has invested more heavily in off-the-rack sales. While not driven by GLP-1 medications, the move has allowed Trudys to better serve that clientele and the “fit anxiety” so many feel.

As GLP-1 use surges among brides, rapid weight loss is creating new challenges — and forcing you to rethink everything from sizing and alterations to inventory and policies.

Lately, a new friction point has become an increasingly prevalent topic of conversation.

That is, of course, the growing number of brides slimming down before their walk down the aisle with the help of GLP-1 drugs like Ozempic, Wegovy, Trulicity and Zepbound.

In July, *The Guardian* published a story with a particularly alarming headline: “Ozempic is upending the wedding dress industry.”

The nearly 1,600-word story went on to discuss how the ubiquity of GLP-1s, a relatively new class of medications often celebrated for their weight-management abilities, was “wreaking new havoc on bridal designers who must scramble to accommodate rapid weight loss.”

Many retailers report brides anxiously asking questions about weight loss and alterations and fretting over the decision to purchase in a more intense way than ever before.

GLP-1s are often the reason.

In Zola’s *First Look Report* published in March, a survey of more than 11,500 couples getting married this year, 10 percent of respondents reported they were currently using a GLP-1. Another 10 percent, meanwhile, were considering it. Those numbers, which some retailers believe are low, have introduced a new challenge: a bride’s size can sig-

nificantly fluctuate between the time she orders her gown and the moment she walks down the aisle.

To be certain, brides have long told boutiques of their plans to shed a few pounds before the wedding day. Sometimes the weight loss happened. Sometimes it didn’t. But rarely did shops struggle to roll with the punches. If a bride lost, say, 10 pounds, alterations could manage the relatively modest shift or stores could employ other reasonable solutions, even in late-stage circumstances.

What’s new today with GLP-1s is that chemistry has fueled certainty and replaced wishful thinking. The weight loss is virtually guaranteed to happen, and it can be drastic. Brides are not dropping a couple of pounds, but rather 20, 30 or even 50-plus, which can easily equate to three or more dress sizes.

The Guardian story noted one instance in which a bride lost so much weight her dress needed to be taken in more than 20 inches. Another bride, meanwhile, went from a size 16 to a six over six months — and faulted the designer for the dress being too big.

(Of course, not all GLP-1-induced weight losses are so drastic. According to a study published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* earlier this year, women who took GLP-1s lost about 11 percent of their starting weight on average.)

As brides' bodies change you must adapt quickly.

Yet more, brides can lose weight – and unpredictably so – in different areas of their body, from their bust to their behind, which can drastically impact the fit of a gown. One GLP-I bride cited in *The Guardian* story recalled meeting with her seamstress a few weeks before her September wedding and the seamstress warning her: “Please, just don’t lose another pound. This is a strapless gown. It will start to fall off.”

Crafting an appropriate response

The Wall Street Journal recently told the story of a New York bride who requested a waist roughly three inches smaller than her frame on the A-line bridal gown she selected at a local boutique. The bride had lost about 50 pounds on weight-loss medications over recent years, including 15 since her fiancé’s proposal in May alone, and she planned to lose more. Hence, the request for a smaller size.

While the store honored the bride’s size request, it did ask the bride to “sign a legal waiver, acknowledging in writing that the gown didn’t yet fit,” the newspaper reported.

Legal waivers are one way bridal shops are confronting GLP-I’s accelerating momentum, a way to meet the bride’s terms while also covering their own backside. Others are nudging GLP-I brides toward more forgiving options, such as A-line gowns that flare out from the waist, corset-back gowns that offer built-in adjustment room and even two-piece separates. Still others are switching their business model, moving from special orders to more off-the-

rack sales. Some are permitting dress exchanges.

FYI: David’s Bridal recently introduced its David’s Fit Guarantee to combat accelerating “fit anxiety,” indicating that it saw a 25-percent increase in rush orders at the close of last year as well as a 20 percent jump in brides buying dresses within eight weeks of their wedding.

These workarounds, creative solutions, messaging and massaging are becoming necessary for all shops to take on the rising use of GLP-Is among brides and the unique situations the medications spark.

Following, four bridal retailers share their experiences with GLP-Is, including how the issue is impacting their respective boutiques and how they are responding.

“She says she’ll come back in six months, but who knows?”

Lisa Litt is feeling the impact of GLP-Is in a profound way.

At **Lili Bridals**, the Tarzana, Calif.-based bridal boutique Litt’s father founded in 1958, Litt estimates 10-20 percent of the shop’s customers are using GLP-Is. But at **Della Curva**, the plus-sized shop Litt opened above Lili Bridals 13 years ago, Litt places that number higher, perhaps as great as 70 percent.

“These brides are for sure going to lose weight, so what do



Credit: Laura Starks Photography

With some brides on GLP-I drugs dropping multiple dress sizes, stores have revised their dress contracts to confirm the store is not responsible for sizing changes due to weight loss medications.

Must-haves: thorough documentation and a clear contract.

we do?" laments Litt, who has already downshifted the sizes of sample gowns she orders.

Litt says the rising number of brides on GLP-1s has affected many of her operation's key metrics, such as appointments booked, closing ratios and cost per appointment. Appointments can feel wasted when a bride, 9-12 months out from her wedding and using a GLP-1, finds her dream gown at Lili or Della Curva but hesitates to purchase knowing she will shed weight.

"She says she'll come back in six months, but who knows?" Litt says.

Yet more, the GLP-1s can put the business in sticky situations. Litt recalls one mother of the bride calling her a year after her daughter purchased a gown at a sample sale. At the appointment, Litt's staff told the bride a tailor

could take the dress down two sizes – reasonable guidance many other bridal shops across the country share with their customers. The bride, however, lost three sizes with the help of a GLP-1 drug. The mother told Litt she felt "bamboozled."

Experiences like that have intensified Litt's focus on documentation. She relies on a contract explicitly saying the store is not responsible for weight changes and assigning customers responsibility for the size they order. In addition, Litt's stores keep "copious notes on every order" to ensure a detailed record of conversations, including suggestions and decisions.

"I want everyone on the same page," Litt says.

For as much as Lili Bridals has felt the GLP-1 surge, the punch has been particularly mighty at Della Curva.

For years, Della Curva has touted itself as "Southern California's only plus-size bridal salon." But that market, Litt says, is shrinking – literally. The curvy bride who might have been a prime Della Curva customer two years ago has now lost so much weight with the help of GLP-1s that she doesn't need a plus-size boutique anymore. Her local shopping options have expanded, which has hampered Della Curva's sales.

"It's cut our business a lot," Litt says of GLP-1s. "It's sad because this is a labor of love for me. I love curvy women. Now, they don't need us anymore."

Three years ago at Della Curva, Litt says she was regularly selling sizes 30 and 32. Now, that's a rare



Credit: Laura Starks Photography

Della Curva promotes itself as "Southern California's only plus-size bridal salon." As more brides embrace GLP-1 drugs and lose weight, owner Lisa Litt has been forced to re-evaluate many aspects of the 13-year-old business.

Off-the-rack inventory gives flexibility as sizes change.

ity. The new environment has altered the number of gowns Litt brings into Della Curva overall and has also compelled her to forego bringing in any new lines for curvy brides.

"I'm watching that money much more closely," she says.

GLP-Is have created a new puzzle for Litt to solve, even leading her to consider changing her business model to favor off-the-rack sales.

"We still have a lease and a lot to figure out," Litt says.

"We're going to see more of this."

At **Charlotte's Bridal & Formal Wear**, which operates three stores across Wisconsin (La Crosse, Eau Claire and Madison), owner Jenn Walker estimates about 10 percent of her customers are using GLP-Is.

"And that number is climbing

steadily," says Walker, who purchased the now 80-year-old business in 2004.

On the plus side, most brides voluntarily alert Charlotte's stylists they are using GLP-Is. That's valuable, Walker says, as it helps inform decision-making and limits potentially awkward situations at Charlotte's.

"Though we've certainly had a few instances of brides not telling us and – surprise – a 30-pound weight loss later and they need a different dress," Walker says.

Admittedly, Walker sits in a unique position compared to many of her peers, as about 80 percent of Charlotte's revenue comes from off-the-rack sales.

That opens the door to dress ex-

changes should a bride lose more weight than anticipated and, even more, helps Charlotte's accommodate ever-narrowing timelines from the date of purchase to the wedding day. With substantial inventory and sizes 0-38 across her three shops, Walker has plenty of opportunity to fulfill bride's wishes, even in tight timeframes.

Even still, the momentum of GLP-Is has brought challenges to Charlotte's. The average size of gowns sold is trending downward. Years ago, for instance, Walker says size 20 was the second-most common size sold at Charlotte's. Now, it's 16, while size 10 is now the average. GLP-Is have fueled a far more intense focus on sales data for Walker and her team, particularly when it comes to sizes.

"We need to carefully track all the sales, so we go to market



With about 80 percent of its revenue coming from off-the-rack sales, **Charlotte's Bridal** has been able to accommodate a good number of brides taking GLP-I medications and the shorter timelines they seek due to ongoing weight loss.

ready to fill in what we're missing in our stock," Walker says.

In addition, Walker says GLP-1 brides often demand more time and energy than others to navigate the selection process. After all, there are unknowns demanding thoughtful attention. It has required Walker to further prioritize staff training and to lean more firmly into protocols.

Stylists, for instance, note Charlotte's accepts exchanges, though the store does charge a \$300 restocking fee. And though Charlotte's does not provide in-house alterations, stylists do share educated guidance on alterations. They will caution brides that if a dress is several sizes too big, alterations might be especially costly or, in some cases, not even suitable.

"We've had to train our stylists, so there's consistency in response and stylists know how to approach the GLP-1 bride from the beginning," Walker says. "As these medications have become more popular, we're going to see more of this. We need to have a game plan and be talking to our stylists about it."

Train stylists to give GLP-1 brides the extra care they need.

"That's what's needed here."

At **Trudys**, a 52-year-old bridal and special occasion shop in San Jose, Calif., Rebekah Blechman sends praise the way of her husband, Steven, when it comes to reading the wedding industry's tea leaves.

Following the height of the pandemic, Steven Blechman saw engagement timelines shortening and suspected the trend would continue. As a result, he invested in more product to sell off the floor in sizes 4-26. As GLP-1s gained popularity over the last two years, then, Trudys was rather well positioned to absorb a significant number of brides waiting to purchase their wedding gown.

"Investing in more merchandise for the floor wasn't because of GLP-1s, but because we saw the climate changing," Blechman says. "There's a different mindset now around weddings and the formality of planning a wedding."

Still, the move to more off-the-

rack sales has helped Trudys endure the challenges of serving GLP-1 customers, which includes brides, mothers and bridesmaids at Trudys.

Blechman says about one in four customers at Trudys are using GLP-1s, and many disclose their involvement with the medication early, sometimes even mentioning it when booking their appointment. Rather than treating that news as a challenge to overcome, Trudys staff instead adopts a celebratory tone and shares enthusiasm for the customer's weight loss journey.

Then, Blechman continues, Trudys staff tries to help women navigate challenges and uncertainty "as best as possible." For example, stylists might suggest dresses with more structure and cinch to better hug a bride's body or drapes to go over bride's arms.



At bridal shops across the country, brides are saying yes to the dress much closer to their wedding date. While numerous factors are at play, the role of GLP-1 medications and the weight loss they stimulate cannot be ignored.

How weddings are impacting GLP-1 use



54%

of 2026 couples taking a GLP-1 said their wedding played a motivating role in taking the medication



21%

said they were taking the medication entirely to lose weight for their wedding



33%

cited their wedding as one of multiple motivating factors

Source: Zola's First Look Report (March 2026)

Featured Designer: Veni Infantino

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11% of Americans take GLP-1s for weight loss.

To be certain, though, Trudys has made operational adjustments to address the unique needs of GLP-I brides, in particular.

Earlier this year, for instance, Trudys added a specific mention of weight loss medications to its dress contract and said the store would not take responsibility for a change in dress size due to weight loss. Brides must initial this specific item in the contract to acknowl-

edge understanding.

And with more brides, including GLP-I brides, buying off the floor as close to their wedding date as possible, Blechman employs an extra stylist at Trudys solely directed to provide help and service to walk-ins.

"Sometimes that means a person too many on the floor, but that's what's needed here," she says.

The rise of GLP-I has also impacted conversations around Trudys overall business strategy and purchasing. Once upon a time, Blechman reports, Trudys leadership would engage in regular discussions about bringing more plus-size dresses into the store. Over recent months, however, those conversations have become virtually nonexistent.

"It's different now, for sure," she says.

"We all have to think strategically."

Angie Oven saw the GLP-I writing on the wall early. On the medication herself a few years back, she recognized the pharmaceutical's power to turn weight loss wishes into a slimmed-down reality.

Having run **The Bridal Gallery** in Salem, Ore., for nearly two decades, Oven had, of course, heard her fair share of brides promote their weight-loss plans. When GLP-I came on the scene, however, she predicted the meds would be a game changer. So, Oven got proactive and altered her shop's dress contract to better protect the business and give clarity to brides.

Instead of wordy paragraphs brides would glaze over, Oven instead used bullet points to spotlight key terms, including that The Bridal Gallery was not responsible for weight loss or gain and that all sales were final. Brides then placed their initials next to those core terms to confirm agreement.

"It simplified things for us and made everything more clear and concise, which is so critical to

The 411 on GLP-1 Drugs

Glucagon-like peptide-1

receptor agonists, better known today as GLP-I, are "medications that mimic a natural hormone in the body that helps to regulate blood sugar levels and appetite," according to the National Academy of Medicine.

Put more succinctly, the drugs work "by slowing stomach emptying, increasing feelings of fullness and reducing appetite," all of which contributes to weight loss.

GLP-I were initially prescribed to treat Type 2 diabetes. In 2021, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved Wegovy for weight loss. In the years since, other medications have received similar approval, including Foundayo and Zepbound. Numerous studies published in credible, peer-reviewed academic journals have shown significant weight loss among those using GLP-I.

Typically sold through the manufacturer with a valid prescription, most commercial health insurance plans cover GLP-I options for diabetes management. Few plans, however, support weight management, though there has been an increasing political push for such coverage.

If the medications, which can run up to \$500 per month, receive wider coverage from health care plans, then GLP-I use could become even more prevalent among the American populace. Ditto if major employers agree to foot some of the bill, as Bank of America recently announced it would do for its employees.

In July, Gallup's *National Health and Well-Being Index* reported 11 percent of U.S. adults are currently taking GLP-I medications for weight-loss purposes — nearly four times the tally just two years ago. Yet more, 91 percent of Americans are now aware of GLP-I drugs intended for weight loss purposes, another significant rise from 2024.



Credit: Kristina Shvedenko via Unsplash

A GLP-I drug was first approved for weight-loss in 2021. Five years later, 11 percent of U.S. adults are taking a GLP-I for weight loss.



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Silver lining: a boost in alterations revenue.

avoiding issues down the line,” says Oven, adding that The Bridal Gallery has had few problems holding brides to its contract even as GLP-Is have become more commonplace among her customer base. Today, she says about one out of five brides visiting her store is on GLP-Is, though that number jumps for brides in the size 18 and up category.

Another key proactive change Oven made at The Bridal Gallery was shifting from special orders to more off-the-rack sales. That transition, guided in part by Oven’s GLP-I forecast as well as other factors contributing to shorter timelines, from shorter engagements to storage issues, took roughly four years to execute, according to Oven.

“Girls have shorter timelines than ever, and more off-the-rack sales gives us more inventory flexibility,” Oven says. “The truth is a lot of girls don’t trust the process, and they definitely don’t want to make an investment twice. Being

a strategic retailer, I feel you have to look at more off-the-rack options.”

In addition, Oven admits The Bridal Gallery benefits from offering in-house alterations. Staff can make reasonable promises they know their own seamstresses can deliver. For instance, Oven says transforming a dress from a size 18 to a size 12 is often “child’s play” for her professional seamstresses. Doing so three weeks before the wedding, however, isn’t so simple.

“Having in-house alterations gives us control over messaging to the bride,” Oven says. “The big thing is teaching stylists not to make promises we can’t keep.”

As the majority of Oven’s brides chose to alter their dress with The Bridal Gallery, the department is a solid profit center for the business. In fact, Oven re-

ports a healthy jump in alterations revenue as GLP-Is have become more popular among her customer base.

Even so, there are frequent hurdles. Bridal Gallery’s seamstresses are consistently having to re-alter dresses, Oven says, and they now take measurements at each appointment while also openly discussing when the bride might stop taking her GLP-I medication.

“Open, honest and clear communication with brides has always been important,” Oven says. “Now, it’s even more so.”

While Oven calls GLP-Is the latest challenge in a long road of challenges for bridal retailers, she nevertheless considers the rising use of GLP-Is and even the stress it puts on bridal shops a “great opportunity” for retailers to rethink their businesses.

“The popularity of GLP-Is hasn’t completely changed my business because I haven’t let it,” says Oven, who also serves as president of the Better Bridal Group. “Still, we all have to think strategically and with a forward-looking focus.”



Join the Conversation!

E-mail your thoughts about brides, the industry, VOWS...



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When Everything *Feels Urgent*

Eight
stress-busting
strategies to
regain control
without
sacrificing your
business or
yourself.

Talk about irony – and stress. The very day I started reaching out to retailers about this article's topic – “*When Everything Feels Urgent*” – the area in which I live sprang into various levels of wildfire evacuation.

As I busily fired off e-mails for interviews centered around managing today's biggest stressors, my phone repeatedly blared emergency alerts, broadcasting fire updates, responder activities and evacuation notices. It wasn't just the nearby wilderness lighting up – my amygdala was on fire, too, triggering its lizard-brain fight-or-flight response.

I chose flight – my family packed up and headed to a fire-free area of Oregon and, fortunately, returned 72 hours later to a home intact and community saved. Yet this is life today. The increasing number and severity of natural disasters is just one example of the many stressors people and businesses across the country face. Add to that the fact that

over the past couple of decades, many unforeseen, seismic events have shaken our industry and life as we've known it, such as the Great Recession of 2007-09 and the coronavirus pandemic.

Then there are the micro-stressors – smaller, often daily, dealings that continue to pop up and test us, making a state of heightened adrenaline our new norm.

The bottom line: it feels like you have to do a lot more and a lot faster – just to survive.

Stressed to the max? You're not alone

No question about it, the goal in any business isn't just to survive but to thrive. Yet sometimes that feels like a roller-coaster that keeps speeding up and never seems to stop, particularly in the past few years.

“I think one of the reasons why business owners feel they're under excess

*Story continued on page 64
Sidebar page 63*

When Everything Feels Urgent

10 Stress-Busting Strategies for You

Practical ways to regain control without sacrificing your business or yourself.

1



ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT'S OUT OF YOUR CONTROL

From wildfires to the economy, much is beyond our control. Focus your energy on what you can control.

2



STOP WEARING SO MANY HATS

You can't do it all well. Identify what only you can do—and delegate or outsource the rest.

3



SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Brides today face "decision paralysis" with endless options. Set boundaries and communicate clearly.

4



INVEST IN YOUR TEAM & CULTURE

A positive work culture and strong team help you handle challenges and deliver an exceptional experience.

5



MANAGE REVIEWS WITH INTENTION

Address concerns professionally and promptly. Great service and follow-up turn challenges into opportunities.

6



EMBRACE CHANGE—DON'T FIGHT IT

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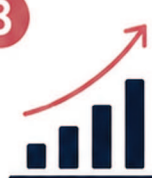
7



PROTECT YOUR TIME & YOURSELF

Build in time for rest, renewal and the people you love. You can't pour from an empty cup.

8



FOCUS ON WHAT DRIVES RESULTS

Don't get lost in the busywork. Focus on the activities that move the needle for your business.

9



CELEBRATE SMALL WINS

Progress, not perfection. Celebrate the victories—big and small—to keep motivation and momentum strong.

10



LEAD WITH PURPOSE & PASSION

Remember your "why." Your passion and purpose are your greatest tools for navigating any storm.



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Continued from page 62

stress is we're being asked to wear more hats than ever before," says Stephanie Long, owner of **Mirror Mirror, Inc.** in Baldwinsville, N.Y.

"I never thought I'd become a semi-expert on the intricacies of importing tariffs and duties, but here I am," Long says.

Additionally, many business owners take on responsibilities such as bookkeeping, social media, branding, insurance, 401(k) and formalizing the store's employee handbook.

"Any one of these items and a number more are an entire job in

Tariffs, technology and shifting expectations cause stress.

and of themselves," Long says. "It's unrealistic for us to believe that one person can handle all of it while still running day-to-day operations."

Angie Oven, owner of **The Bridal Gallery** and **Tuxes on Tap** in Salem, Ore., and president of the Better Bridal Group and National Bridal Retailers Association, echoes Long's perspective, adding that "life is more complicated than ever before. It's expensive, there are more

emotions flying, and every decision that's required of a bride is met with hundreds more options than ever before, which has created decision paralysis."

Both Oven and Long also note that GenZers are so different from their Millennial counterparts. While this newer demographic wants straight answers to questions and transparency around the bridal experience, they often have a misguided understanding of what's possible.

"Today's customers have been surrounded by thousands of images and now AI," Oven says. "They are putting any thought that they have of their weddings into their own reality. With this distorted sense of what's real comes a whole new set of expectations placed on us as retailers to 'make it work,' and because they created this vision for themselves and it's 'real,' we should be able to recreate this."

For Reed Pederson, co-owner with wife Maja and president of **MB Bride & Special Occasion** in Greensburg, Penn., the pressures today revolve around balancing time and resources against the backdrop of social media, advertising, new technologies, a re-emergence of online sellers and new competitors, and tariffs and the economy as well.

They've seen a lot of change in 35+ years in the industry, pivoting time and again, and yet Pederson points out the times of late have become uniquely challenging.

"Overall, there is an enormous amount of change happening in the economy and world, which is stressing small business owners," he says. "We are out of the era of free pandemic money, loans, etc.,



The "Smash It" room is a team-building activity that **Angie Oven** uses to infuse the fun-factor into her team culture at **Bridal Gallery and Tuxes on Tap** in Salem, Ore.



MB Bride & Special Occasion in Greensburg, Penn., has unexpectedly reduced stress culture-wide through its weekly managers/owners meeting. Here, **Caitlin Harman** (assistant manager), **Clark Pederson** (vice president of operations) and **Angela Ciliberti** (sales associate) review the week's agenda.

and the influx of customers with pandemic savings the years after the pandemic's end buoyed stores. The money is gone."

What's more, fewer people are getting married or putting off marriage, he says.

"There are fewer young people. . . demographically, prom-age customers are dropping each year so competition for them is getting tough. . . the cost of business is skyrocketing. Insurance. Wages. You name it," he says.

Meanwhile in Melbourne, Fla., the pressures around addressing online reviews and sustaining a positive work culture with quality employees who can manage difficult groups are some of the trickiest issues for Cami Hester, who's owned Aurora Bridal for more than three decades. While these do contribute to stress, Hester feels pretty good about business right now, particularly relative to the recession and pandemic.

"The one thing that has been constant in bridal is all the change that occurs every year," Hester says. "You can count on it, for sure!"

Root of the issue

While change is a certainty in our lives and businesses, it's the sheer number of changes, along with the greater degree and speed at which they've been occurring lately, that is contributing to overwhelm.

Given this, it's crucial to take a breath and focus on things we can control.

While easier said than done, following are eight strategies to help manage what's come to feel like a never-ending rollercoaster of stress.

Continued on page 66



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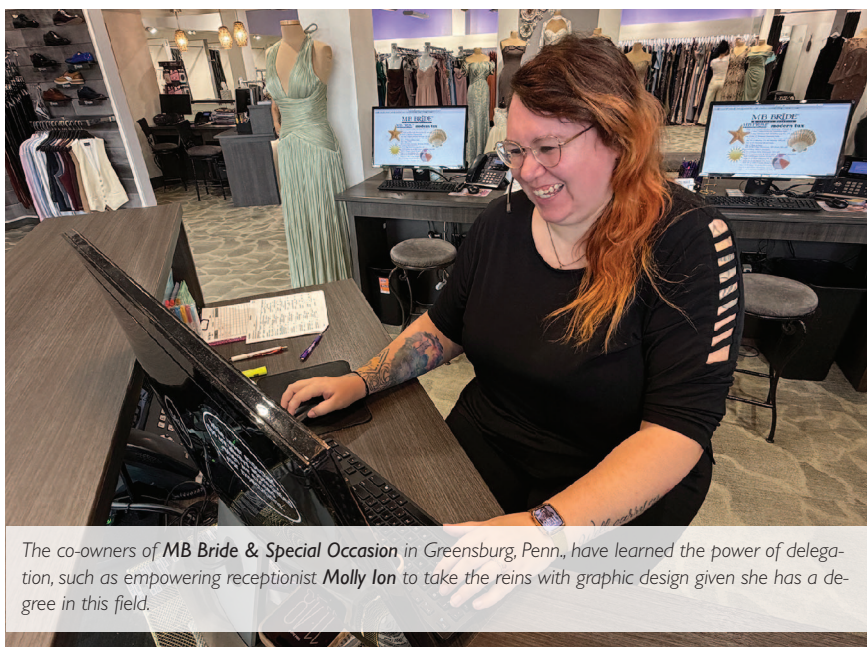
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Continued from page 65



On particularly busy Saturdays, owner **Angie Oven** (far right) sometimes starts the morning off with a surprise Tequila Sunrise toast, lifting spirits literally and figuratively at **Bridal Gallery and Tuxes on Tap** in Salem, Ore.



The co-owners of **MB Bride & Special Occasion** in Greensburg, Penn., have learned the power of delegation, such as empowering receptionist **Molly Ion** to take the reins with graphic design given she has a degree in this field.



Store Manager **Heather Jensen** kicks off each morning by asking her team to share a daily gratitude, which builds communication and connection and shapes a positive workplace culture at **Mirror Mirror Inc.** in Baldwinsville, N.Y.

• **Design your mindset.** Every day, you can count on one thing: It won't go as expected. Rather than think of this as good or bad remember that the mindset you bring to the start of each day sets the framework for how you'll respond.

Furthermore, consistently implementing a growth mindset will change patterns of thinking and response over time. Consider the difference between "Today's team meeting is going to be a nightmare" versus "I bring joy and goodness to my team meetings."

Which way of thinking helps? Which hurts – or honestly wastes time?

If you're choosing a mindset that undermines your growth and that of those around you, dig deep to name it, then create a plan to address it. *Get out of your own way!*

• **Plan and prioritize each day.**

There are many ways to structure a day, but the point is to *plan it*. For example, you can structure it into three simple focus blocks:

- 1) Morning Maker: high-value work while your mind is sharp
- 2) Mid-Day Manager: operational execution
- 3) Afternoon Strategist: review and reset

Within each block, focus on the top 20% of tasks that drive 80% of results, perhaps aiming for one to three priorities per block and being realistic about the time you'll need. If a distraction arises, drop or delegate it to stay focused on high-ROI work.

Not every day can go according to plan, but consistent planning does bring more intention and

Identify and delegate what's stealing your time.

control into every day. Store meetings can also veer off track; Pederson offers a hot tip for structuring them: Discuss pre-planned topics but also buffer in capacity for current concerns or ideas.

"Everyone has a say in prioritizing problems or dilemmas and coming up with solutions," he says. "We solve a lot of problems at these meetings and sometimes even foresee potential problems."

The unexpected benefit of this tactic? Less stress!

• **Identify and extinguish time-robbers.** What's taking time away from your ability to focus on priorities? Carve out half an hour to identify what regularly steals your precious time and commit to delegate, outsource and/or automate your time-robbers.

"I used to handle all the advertising, but since it has gotten so complicated, I have mostly delegated that to advertising agencies," Pederson says. "I have also delegated our graphic design needs to an employee who has a degree in graphic design. Some of our payroll and bookkeeping has been delegated to Artificial Intelligence, reducing the number of hours needed to calculate and process. We try to employ the latest technology to reduce the owner's work hours, so we can concentrate on the most important issues."

• **Prioritize wellness.** Stress left unaddressed leads to overwhelm, which leads to burnout. To prevent and/or recover, put your physical, mental and spiritual well-being on



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Breaking away from the store for margaritas and good Mexican fare enables staff to decompress and, importantly, laugh together, which works miracles for inviting levity and perspective into workplace stress at *Mirror Mirror Inc.* in Baldwinsville, N.Y.



Cami Hester, owner of *Aurora Bridal* in Melbourne, Fla., says starting communication with the bride before she steps foot in the store reduces stress by helping appointments go smoother and minimizing the risk of negative online reviews later.

the front burner immediately because, in truth, that's where it belongs.

The best leaders don't just do this for themselves but model this behavior for their staff. As Brené Brown stated in a "Today" show interview, the big trick to avoiding stress and burnout "is to figure out what deliberate recovery looks like for you – to really ask yourself what are the behaviors and practices that lead to deliberate recovery. For me, it's eat well, move well, sleep well, connect well, create well."

Brown points out that if we're not doing some pretty healthy combination of these deliberate recovery activities, "stress and burnout are lurking right around the corner." (See p63 for tips)

- **Sustain organizational alignment.** Successful stores don't fly by the seat of their pants. They set goals and supporting strategies, then drive results through measurable activities (or KPIs).

While organizational alignment may sound formal and intimidating, the structure actually has the opposite effect because your people will know the goal, what's expected, and feel empowered to do their jobs well.

Don't feel you have to go overboard with planning and strategies. Some of the best plans are simple, focusing on what matters most. Empower managers to participate in designing a plan that's balanced, lifts your culture up and delivers ROI.

- **Revisit company norms.** Sometimes stress is caused by doing things the wrong way, including how they've always been done.

Reaching out for support is a smart move.

Particularly in the face of change, if a business isn't evolving due to its "stuckness," self-destructive symptoms can surface: frustration, low morale, resentment, customer complaints, loss of revenue and more.

Get curious and invite your staff to bring ideas and solutions to the table. In meetings, challenge them to brainstorm areas of stuckness and possible solutions around how the store can move beyond to a place of stronger productivity and performance.

• Lean on your community.

When you're struggling, reaching out to industry peers for insight or support around a particular topic helps you know you're not alone, enables others to empathize and provides an opportunity for your colleagues to offer tangible solutions and encouragement. Leaning in gets you out of your own head, drops blinders, and, through the power of connection, can help transform your perspective and provide real hope.

• Develop a contingency plan.

Few sit around thinking "what big disaster could be next?" But anything could happen, so along with your traditional business plan, play it safe by creating a contingency plan. If a major threat to your business surfaces, what triggers will you pull to ensure its sustainability?

As the saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

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Where it Pays to Spend



Invest more in key areas to strengthen staff, elevate the bride's experience and benefit your bottom line.

As a boutique owner, you frequently press the message onto your customers that they shouldn't make decisions based solely on price when purchasing their bridal gown.

Rather, you rightly suggest, they should consider the premium service they receive, your staff's expertise, the product quality and amazing experience they have when shopping with you.

But do you listen to your own advice and spend money where it matters?

Here are seven areas where investing more can make your boutique stronger, your staff happier and the bride impressed.

Connecting with staff

Worldwide, only 13% of employees consider themselves to be fully engaged, according to research.

You might tell yourself that's not the case in your store, but do your employees really feel vested in your business?

It's in your interest to have employees who care about your store because

they'll do a better job with brides and save you money on looking for someone else.

In a bridal boutique, that engagement can be especially important because employees aren't simply completing transactions. They're guiding brides through an emotional, high-stakes purchase and representing your store during every interaction. An employee who feels connected to the business is more likely to put extra effort into an appointment, solve problems rather than pass them along, and create the kind of experience brides remember and recommend.

To keep her staff vested in the store, Katie Surkamp, owner of **Clarice's Bridal** in St. Louis, Mo., celebrates the birthday of her grandmother, Clarice, for a week every October.

Each day, every employee receives a gift with a story about Clarice. Gifts have included a purse, an angel decoration and Target gift cards, all with a story related to Clarice – she collected angels,

Don't spend less, spend strategically.

for example, and she took Surkamp to Target.

Some gifts are very small – Clarice loved Trident gum, so one day might be a pack of chewing gum. Other gifts are more expensive.

“After years of doing this, it gets trickier every year to come up with a new gift for each day with a story that relates to her, but it's so worth it in the end,” Surkamp says. “It's a fun way to celebrate who she was and keep it personal to our staff in remembering the legacy she started.”

Sarah Ashworth, owner of Heart to Heart Bride in Webster, N.Y., spends money on employee outings each month they hit the store's stretch goals to make them feel valued.

They've done all kinds including dinners, craft classes and “smash sessions” (where you can smash things).

“(The outings are) great not only to celebrate the win but for team bonding in general,” she says.

Coreena Ferrata, owner of the two **Coreena's Bridal Boutique** locations in College Station and Georgetown, Texas, takes things one step further and hosts about four annual events for her staff and tries to bring the staff from both stores together twice a year. She gives out annual awards in categories such as employee of the year and top salesperson, with recipients receiving a trophy and a gift card.

Employee compensation

Payroll is among the most important expenses you have. Rather than viewing it as a cost, consider it an investment in your boutique's long-term health.

Employees who are paid fairly

feel vested in your store. They also feel valued and will give their all, which means performing well in every appointment.

If you're not paying them well, or helping out with things like health insurance, they could be spending their time worrying about their finances instead of concentrating on their job. And when one employee leaves, it might have a knock-on effect, leaving other staff members dissatisfied or missing the colleague who left because they were friends.

Turnover also comes with costs that aren't always immediately obvious. Every experienced employee who walks out the door takes store knowledge, product expertise and customer relationships with them. You then have to spend time and money recruiting and training a replacement, while other employees may have to pick up the slack. Paying more to retain a strong employee can ultimately cost less than continually replacing one.

Ann Campeau, owner of **Strut**, which has stores in Long Beach, Calif., and Chandler Ariz., positions jobs in her store as careers so she pays above the average hourly rate, plus bonus pay and tips. She also offers PTO, sick time and health insurance, which includes dental, vision, life insurance and mental health coverage. Staff progressively reap more benefits the more years they work for her, and her top employees regularly make more than \$60 an hour.

Laura Calderone, owner of **Laura & Leigh Bridal** in Cherry Hill, N.J., also likes to spend money on employees.

“Employee happiness directly affects success,” Calderone says. “Using money to boost morale and keep it high is always money well spent.”

Compensating staff well pays off in many ways, says Cassie Cleary, owner of **Honest In Ivory** in Spokane, Wash.

“When my team has been with me for years, they know our inventory, our alterations partners, our systems, and – most importantly – how to make someone feel calm during a stressful process,” she says. “That consistency is something you can't buy.”

It also affects sales.

“People can tell when staff are engaged versus just clocking in,” Cleary says. “That energy translates directly into how a bride feels in the shop, which translates into sales and referrals. My conversion rate average right now is 70%.”

Social media

AI has been a godsend for



*Coreena Ferrata invests in her employees through outings, annual events and awards. Pictured: stylist **Hallie Burgess**.*

*Let AI
assist your voice,
not replace it.*

many small businesses. Not only can it save time and money by quickly automating tasks, like social-media posting, but it can also examine metrics, provide suggestions and analyze performance.

However, there's a big downside: As more people use it, business social-media posts start to look similar. Many people can easily spot an AI-generated post, and it can make you seem less authentic and lacking emotion. They might even wonder how much effort your store is really putting in.

That matters because social media may be a bride's first meaningful interaction with your store.

Long before she walks through the door, she's forming an impression of your personality, expertise and whether your boutique feels like a place where she belongs. Saving money by producing generic content can come at a high cost: You're economizing on one of the very tools responsible for convincing brides to give you a chance in the first place.

To get the most out of AI, use it selectively. Tools like Buffer or Hootsuite can help with scheduling, and AI can track audience en-

gagement to see what resonates. It's great for brainstorming, too, although content should always be created by you and in your own words.

Many retailers, such as Campeau, eschew AI entirely for social media.

"Most of our models and staff members don't agree with the use of AI to modify their images, and it doesn't vibe with our heavy emphasis on authenticity and transparency; we don't even use it for our captions," she says.

Jennifer Thompson, owner of **Facchianos** in Broken Arrow, Okla., experimented with using an AI company but some of the photos were too clearly artificial "and I did get some blowback from a few customers that said it wasn't trustworthy," she says.

So now she and her employees handle the social media and it's much more authentic, she says.

Campeau invests heavily in social media, because it's because it's a major source of new business. She has a social-media manager, social-media coordinator and stylist/video editor. She also pays for professional models and, sometimes, a content creator, as well as equipment like light boxes and microphones. She spends around \$5,000 per month on this, she estimates.

Ferrata pays an employee an additional fee on top of her salary to handle the social media for her stores. This employee has been with the stores for four years so she understands the ethos, what happens behind the scenes, Ferrata says.

Marketing

The Small Business Association suggests that small businesses



Paying employees well pays off for **Honest in Ivory**, which has a staff brides can trust and rely on.



Employee compensation has a direct result on morale, says **Laura Calderone**, owner of **Laura & Leigh**. Pictured: **Natalie Swiernik**, lead stylist

*Market consistently
to remain visible, relevant and competitive.*

spend 7% to 8% of their annual gross revenue on marketing and for newer businesses hoping for faster growth, that number should be closer to 12%.

It's tempting to view marketing as an expense that can be reduced when business slows. But that's precisely when visibility becomes particularly important. A boutique can offer exceptional service, carry the right inventory and have talented stylists, but none of those things generate revenue if enough brides don't know the store exists or aren't persuaded to make an appointment. Marketing is what keeps feeding the pipeline on which everything else depends.

Marketing is one of the largest investments for **K&B Bridals and Tux**, which has three stores in Bel Air, Takoma Park and Hagerstown, Md., "because it's what keeps new brides discovering our business," owner Bridget Moore says.

Moore invests in SEO, paid digital advertising, Google Business Profile optimization and sales funnels through Engaged Marketing "to ensure we're consistently being found online and generating qualified leads."

She also pays a website provider to keep her site current and user-friendly.

Internally, the store has a full-time marketing coordinator who manages social media, e-mail and text marketing, event promotion, content creation and community partnerships. Moore also hosts monthly in-store events to create excitement and drive appointments.

"It's a comprehensive strategy because today's brides interact with your brand in many different ways before they ever schedule

an appointment," she explains.

Stephanie Long, owner of **Mirror Mirror** in Baldwinsville, N.Y., agrees.

"This is one area many business owners look at cutting first, but to me it's like cutting the roots of your money tree," she says. "If everyone else is pulling their advertising, this can be a chance to really stand out."

Long pays The I Do Society to take care of things like Google and Meta ads, which provides her with a monthly report, sends out newsletters and answers questions from her, as needed. This costs around \$1,000 per month but it's worth it for the peace of mind, knowing someone is tracking her analytics, she says. And now the company is using AI, so the analytics results are more precise and detailed.

"If you want to get a professional job done, hire a professional," Long says.

A beautiful store

The purchase of a bridal gown is one of the costliest things a woman will ever buy for herself,

and she often looks forward to the experience of buying it for years.

This is her time to pamper herself and feel special, after all, and it's vital that your boutique lives up to – or exceeds – her expectations.

Appearances matter. Brides inevitably make judgments about a business based on their surroundings. Worn furniture, poor lighting or neglected details can undermine the premium message you're trying to communicate, while a polished environment reinforces it. If you're asking a bride to spend thousands of dollars on a gown, the setting should make that purchase feel worthy of the price.

Interior decorators suggest you focus on – and spend money on – the things customers see. Pay attention to décor items between two and seven feet off the floor, especially if brides will actually touch them because quality will come through.

This extends to the bathrooms. Make sure they continue the feel of the store, with feminine, rather than functional, décor and a few nice additions such as some cute wall art.



Heart to Heart Bride employs an external cleaning crew to make the boutique sparkle.

Invest in the details brides see, touch and remember.

It's very important that the interior of the K&B Bridals stores looks beautiful.

"A clean, beautiful, well-maintained space communicates professionalism, builds confidence and elevates the perceived value of your products and services," Moore says.

Every fourth quarter, she conducts a full store evaluation and reviews everything from paint to signage, lighting and overall presentation. She creates a checklist for each boutique and prioritizes projects so the stores are refreshed before the new year begins.

The cost for this varies. It could be as low as \$500, if she's simply making small updates like touching up paint or refreshing displays. But

some years she hires painters, replaces furniture and brings in maintenance professionals, when the cost could "easily" exceed \$5,000, she says.

A fresh coat of paint can make the biggest transformation, she says. But replacing worn seating, updating artwork or decorative accessories, adding healthier plants, improving lighting and keeping displays uncluttered "all make a noticeable difference without requiring a complete remodel."

Madison Stoltz, owner of **Madison Marie Bridal** in Berlin, Md., recently opened a second boutique, Runaway Bride Berlin, and really focused on what matters most to brides in her interior décor. She repainted the walls so the store was lighter and brighter and reflected light better.

"Lighting is one of the most important investments you can make," Stoltz says.

She intentionally placed a large mirror near the windows to take advantage of natural light, added soft ambient lighting throughout the boutique, and avoided harsh overhead lighting so brides see the most flattering version of themselves.

She also invested in beautiful

draperies for the dressing room and statement lighting above the checkout counter.

"Those details may seem small, but they create an elevated atmosphere and make the experience feel more special," she says.

But at the same time, she was careful not to spend a lot on every single item. She found her couch on Facebook Marketplace and her large mirror at HomeGoods.

Networking

As busy as you might be, it's worth taking time to talk with other business owners and spend money on dinners, coffee dates and events.

The return on that investment isn't always immediate or easily measured, which can make networking easy to push aside. But relationships can produce things money alone can't buy: trusted advice, referrals, introductions, information about what's happening in your market and people to call when you encounter a problem. For an independent retailer who otherwise has to figure out many challenges alone, that network can become a particularly valuable asset.

At a conference or bridal meeting, start a conversation with the owner of another boutique. You could swap business stories and tips and extend that business relationship to e-mail and texts once you leave the event.

Also make a point to meet other small business owners in your area, both bridal related and in other industries. Some of the best ideas come from outside perspectives, after all.

You can also network by joining local organizations and boards or



When **Madison Stoltz** opened **Runaway Bride Berlin** she invested money in making the interior decor perfect.



Skimping on marketing to save money is a mistake, says **Stephanie Long**, owner of **Mirror Mirror** (pictured fourth from L).

Hire experts so you can focus on leading and growing.

by volunteering. Your local Chamber of Commerce will not only introduce you to other business people nearby but will also likely offer resources and support.

You could also sign up to be on the boards of your local museum, library, parks, etc., where you're likely to meet like-minded people.

And, equally as important: whenever you make a new connection, nurture it. Send information you say you'll send and drop a note to say hi from time to time rather than getting in touch only when you need something.

Hiring Professionals

Just because you can do something yourself doesn't necessarily mean you should. An owner's time is valuable. Hours spent cleaning, reconciling accounts or struggling through a specialized task are hours that can't be spent selling, managing employees, building relationships with brides or planning for growth.

The real calculation isn't simply what it costs to hire a professional; it's what your own time could produce if someone else handled the job faster or better.

One area frequently outsourced by boutique owners is finances. Hiring a bookkeeper, accountant and/or tax expert can save valuable time and prevent potentially costly errors.

Three years ago, Jenn Walker hired a bookkeeper because she couldn't keep up once she'd opened her second store, especially with the credit card entries.

Walker, owner of Charlotte's Bridal & Formal Wear, which has stores in Eau Claire, La Crosse and Madison, Wisc., said she was "watching every single penny that is run through the stores."

Now, she sends the bookkeeper her statements and she handles everything, saving Walker at least two days of work every month.

At \$400 per month, Amy the bookkeeper is not an insignificant cost, but she's worth it.

Beyond giving Walker more time, "I feel safer knowing there are all of the checks and balances," she says.

Another professional service that can make a big difference is hiring cleaners to make sure your store sparkles.

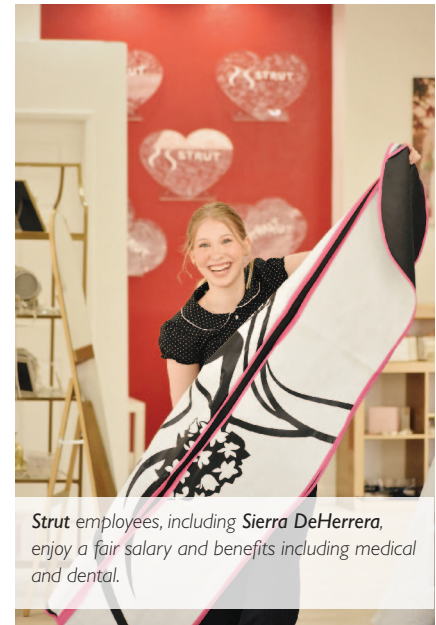
Sarah Ashworth spends around \$650 per month for a cleaning crew to come in and work on the customer-facing spaces of her store. This not only saves her employees time, she says, but it also leads to happier employees.

Environment, after all, can absolutely impact perception, productivity and mood.

Ultimately, spending wisely doesn't mean spending freely. It's about recognizing which investments have the greatest impact on your employees, customers and long-term health of your business — and which ones don't.

The least expensive option can sometimes carry hidden costs, whether that's an employee who leaves, a bride who isn't impressed, a task that consumes hours of your time or marketing that fails to bring customers through the door. At the same time, spending more simply for the sake of spending more makes little sense.

The key is knowing the difference: Invest in the things that create real value for your business, and don't be afraid to save on the things that don't.



Strut employees, including Sierra DeHerrera, enjoy a fair salary and benefits including medical and dental.



Every year K&B Bridals performs a full-store evaluation and reviews everything that needs fixing or changing.

Top designers and industry retailers gather to display, admire and secure the latest bridal & special occasion collections.

Spring 2027 Bridal Market Updates

National Bridal Market celebrates 50 years with successful Market

National Bridal Market Chicago (NBMC) commemorated its 50th anniversary with a highly successful sold-out show August 16–18, featuring more than 145 designers and brands across 11 categories, and the return of Allure Bridals and Justin Alexander Group to a newly designed, upscale exhibit space on the fourth floor of the Merchandise Mart.

According to Jane Heflin, managing director of NBMC, buyer attendance increased 30% over last year, reaching a new record high, while an expanded show floor and a full calendar of anniversary celebrations generated excitement throughout the market.

"National Bridal Market Chicago is the #1 bridal trade show in the United States, bringing domestic and international designers together under one roof," explained Heflin.

"This season, we welcomed several new companies with exciting products designed to help retailers differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace. Our show provides buyers and designers with a beautiful, ac-

cessible environment where they can connect, collaborate, and build lasting partnerships."

The Quinceañera category was also prominent, with 10 creative companies showcasing enchanting, show-stopping designs. Ragazza captivated attendees with the unveiling of a special anniversary gown created to commemorate the National Bridal Market Chicago's 50th anniversary, featuring a striking tribute to Frida Kahlo.

The market's 50th anniversary celebrations contributed to the energy and enthusiasm throughout the event. A special lobby exhibition, "5 Decades of Bridal," traced the evolution of bridal fashion through the years with curated vintage gowns and signature designs from past and present National Bridal Market Chicago exhibitors.

The anniversary festivities continued with a black-tie masquerade at Navy Pier's Offshore Rooftop, which welcomed 850 guests. With perfect weather and sweeping views of Chicago, the evening featured a 16-foot stilted violinist dressed in a stunning Maggie Sottero gown, a 360-degree interactive video ex-

perience, a 20-foot interactive mask installation, and a red carpet hosted by Monte Durham and Jay Walsh. Five live models showcased gowns from Elissar, Evelyn Bridal, La Femme, Hikaru Bridal and YC Bridal – Curve Couture. A 12-piece band kept guests dancing throughout the evening.

"We are thrilled with the results of this market," explained Monique Kielar, vice president of marketing for National Bridal Market Chicago. "The support and enthusiasm for the 50th anniversary celebrations and activations has exceeded our wildest dreams. We believe the overall experience of attending market is nearly as important as the business itself. Buyers want to have fun, be inspired and make meaningful connections. We look forward to seeing what 2027 and beyond brings."

The next National Bridal Market Chicago is scheduled for March 14–16, 2027. Show hours are Sunday and Monday from 9am to 6pm, and Tuesday from 9am to 3pm.

For more information, visit nationalbridalmarket.com.



Lobby exhibition, "5 Decades of Bridal," traced the evolution of bridal with curated vintage gowns and signature designs from past and present exhibitors.



Activity in **Allure Bridals'** booth on the newly designed 4th floor.



Buyers enjoyed an afternoon gelato break.



Evelyn Bridal



Helena Davialis



Justin Alexander showcased 2027 styles in its return to **National Bridal Market Chicago**.



Hikaru Bridal



Alyce Paris



NBMC provided several locations for photo ops during the program.

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Continued from page 77



Kitty Chen Couture



Madi Lane Bridal Group



Maggie Sottero Designs



Justin Alexander Bridal Group



Randy Fenoli Bridal



Teresa Atelier



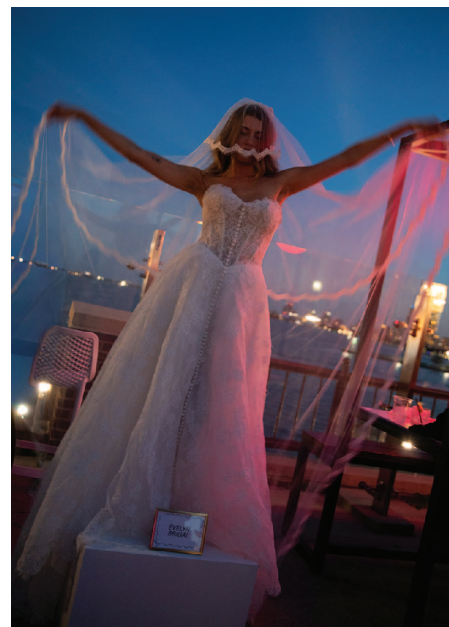
Martin Thornburg for Mon Cheri Bridals



Morilee New York



Veni Infantino



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Atlanta Apparel and Formal Markets Close Out a Dynamic August 2026 Market Week

ANDMORE's co-located **Atlanta Apparel Market** and **Formal Markets** wrapped a dynamic August 3-7 market week at AmericasMart Atlanta, delivering a multi-category sourcing experience across contemporary apparel, footwear, accessories, bridal, prom, Quinceañera and social occasion.

The August market also delivered strong buyer growth year-over-year according to ANDMORE's Marketing team, with prom, pageant and bridal formal categories each seeing increases in buying accounts compared to last August.

"This August market reflected the strong momentum Atlanta Apparel and Formal Markets have built all year – from the energy on the show floor to the excitement surrounding Quince on the Block," said **Caron Stover**, ANDMORE® senior vice president, Apparel Leasing. "Buyers came ready to source across every category, and the response to our expanded Formal programming and First Finds debut showed just how much this market continues to grow as a destination for the industry."

Kicking the combined Market week off, the "Quince on the Block" celebration on Ted Turner Blvd. was one of the week's standout moments, bringing the energy of Quinceañera culture outdoors in a vibrant, community-focused setting that reinforced the growing importance of the Quinceañera category to both Atlanta Apparel and Formal Markets buyers.

ASHLEYlauren's 15th Anniversary White Party brought another highlight to the week, celebrating a major milestone for

the brand and underscoring the Market's role as a place where longstanding relationships and new chapters are recognized and celebrated.

Across both markets, buyers experienced a vibrant, interactive campus, with nonstop programming, hospitality touchpoints, category lounges and themed activations designed to spark connection and trend discovery. This market, Atlanta Apparel expanded its formal and bridal programming with new lounges, education and daily activations, packing the calendar with can't-miss events from morning to night.

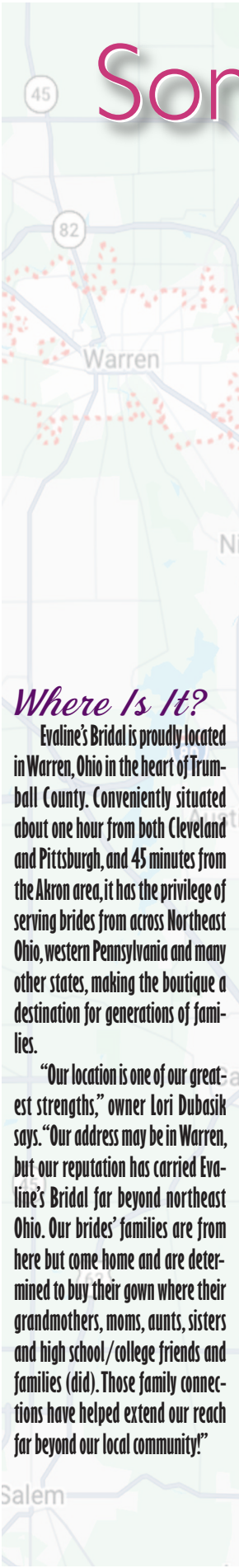
This market also marked the debut of First Finds on Floor 5 in Building 3 – the newly rebranded home for temporary exhibitors, including Formal, Bridal and Accessories – creating a high-traffic hub for discovery.

Education programming was a standout feature of the event, highlighted by The Wedding Masterclass, a bridal business strategy series led by **Steve Lang**, CEO of **Mon Cheri Bridals**. Across three morning seminars, Lang shared actionable insights on topics ranging from improving closing ratios to effective inventory management. The sessions drew strong attendance and engagement, reflecting Lang's respected industry expertise and loyal following.

Registration for Atlanta Formal Markets return on Tuesday, April 6 through Thursday, April 8, 2027 is available at www.Atlanta-Apparel.com and www.formalmarkets.com.

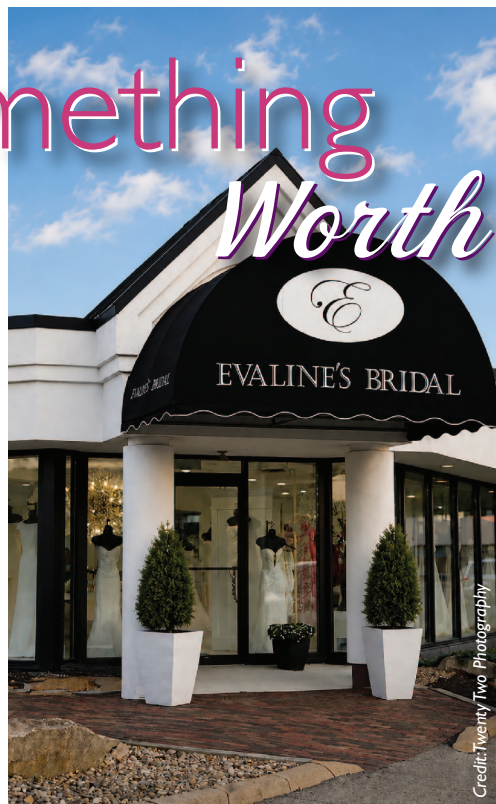






Something

Worth Preserving



Credit: Twenty Two Photography

Where Is It?

Evaline's Bridal is proudly located in Warren, Ohio in the heart of Trumbull County. Conveniently situated about one hour from both Cleveland and Pittsburgh, and 45 minutes from the Akron area, it has the privilege of serving brides from across Northeast Ohio, western Pennsylvania and many other states, making the boutique a destination for generations of families.

"Our location is one of our greatest strengths," owner Lori Dubasik says. "Our address may be in Warren, but our reputation has carried Evaline's Bridal far beyond northeast Ohio. Our brides' families are from here but come home and are determined to buy their gown where their grandmothers, moms, aunts, sisters and high school/college friends and families (did). Those family connections have helped extend our reach far beyond our local community!"

More than eight decades ago in the United States, a gallon of gas cost 21 cents, World War II was still raging and Jackie Robinson had yet to break the color barrier in Major League Baseball.

And, in the bustling town of Warren, Ohio, a shop called Evaline's Bridal opened its doors.

Today, that boutique — generations of brides, countless wedding gowns and one change of ownership later — remains, its name and purpose remarkably intact.

That longevity is impressive on its own. But the story of Evaline's Bridal is about much more than simply surviving for eight decades. It's about the power of legacy: what happens when one generation builds something worth preserving, another recognizes what makes it special and the next steps forward determined to carry it on.

"Forty years ago, I thought I was being asked to look at a business but instead I found my life's work," owner Lori Dubasik says. "I get so emotional when thinking about this whole journey and everything that has happened. It's like WOW! I did all of that???"

The moment everything changed

In March 1986, Lori was a stay-at-home mom to two young children, Holly and

For more than 80 years, Evaline's Bridal has evolved with the times while holding tight to the relationships, family values and personal service that built its legacy.

Nathaniel. She and her husband Steve, whom she'd met at a wedding, owned Rite Dry Cleaners, a long-standing family business that he ran and she occasionally assisted with.

They dry cleaned wedding gowns for all bridal stores in the area, more than 13 of them at the time. One day, when Steve went to pick up gowns from Evaline's Bridal, the family that owned the boutique pulled him aside for a private discussion. Evaline's health was declining and they needed to sell the store. They offered it to him because they thought dry cleaning and wedding gowns would make a perfect match.

Steve, Lori recalls, sat there listening to them trying to sell him on this concept and instead he was thinking of her — her love for helping people dress and find things, her desire to help others, the interior decorating she enjoyed doing from home for people and offices.

"So that night he came home and goes, 'I bought you a bridal shop today!'" Lori says. "And I think I started laughing and was like 'what did you do?'"

Steve explained how well he believed the shop fit Lori's passions, adding that they needed to keep growing as a family. He encouraged her to try it out the next day, with no obligation to continue if she didn't like it.

So, Lori went to Evaline's Bridal, and as

Word of mouth built what advertising never could.

she sat there watching people buy wedding dresses and crying that first day, the emotion really stuck out.

"I was there maybe a few hours and I just knew - this was meant for me," Lori says. "I fell in love, not just with the gowns but with the chance to be part of one of the most exquisite items a woman will ever buy for herself. I started calling it the 'dress of all dresses - your wedding gown.' It felt so very natural for me!"

Learning as she went

The original Evaline's Bridal, which had been in business since 1944, was located in downtown Warren and about 2,000 square feet. It carried bridal, bridesmaids, some moms and flower girls, as well as headpieces and veils. Alterations were done in house, and there was a steep curve for Lori to learn all the hats in the industry.

"Obviously, I had to eat, sleep and drink it," she says. "I didn't know anything about running a business. All I knew how to do was help people look good and sign my name on a credit card, so that's what I did."

She applied the skills she'd learned as a mom - paying bills, keeping kids accountable, selling people an experience they could have - and worked tirelessly at the boutique, often bringing Holly and Nathaniel, who spent many after school and summer days alongside her, watching brides find a dress.

In fact, some of Holly's earliest memories involve coming to the shop with her mom, where her first job was picking up pins and beads so they wouldn't break the vacuum.

"Over the years I've literally done every job in this store and it gave me a deep appreciation for all the work my mom does just watching her and seeing why she'd come home tired because of all the stuff that went into her day," Holly says. "It made me appreciate how hard she worked for us and I liked watching her make brides smile and being able to do all the things."

Fairly quickly, it became obvious that Evaline's Bridal's greatest strength was its legacy.

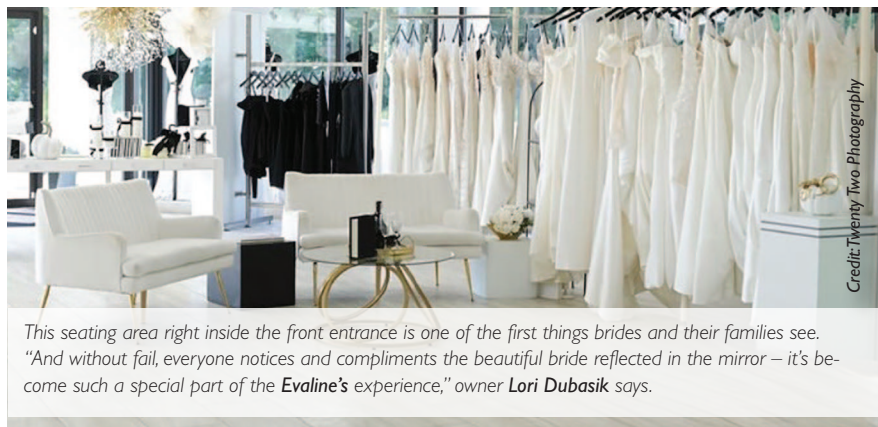
"We have eight decades in this industry and I think relationships beat advertising," Lori says. "Generations of customers and word of mouth has truly been the thing that has kept us successful."

Brides would come in, referencing mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters who had bought their gowns

there.

"A lot of our customers already know what to expect when they come here and that's why they keep coming back," Holly says. "We just want to help make them feel like the very best version of themselves on their most important day. They know they're going to get that when they walk through our doors."

With time and customer demand, Evaline's began adding niches, including tuxedos and prom, as well as focusing on the entire wedding ensemble, although the biggest percentage of sales remains on bridal.



This seating area right inside the front entrance is one of the first things brides and their families see. "And without fail, everyone notices and compliments the beautiful bride reflected in the mirror - it's become such a special part of the Evaline's experience," owner Lori Dubasik says.

Credit: Twenty Two Photography

Most Memorable Moment

Owner Lori Dubasik's most memorable moment is absolutely the day her husband Steve came home and told her he'd bought her a bridal shop, because that story, detailed in the beginning of this article, "changed my entire life."

But it certainly isn't the only memorable moment that stands out after decades in business.

Another favorite story, which illustrates the power of Evaline's Bridal's legacy, occurred when a bride came in to the store, accompanied by her grandmother, mom and aunts. After greeting the bride enthusiastically at the door, Lori was trying to get everybody in the right place to see who was going to work with her when the bride blurts out, "I'm so excited; I have to find my dress today!"

"And we were like, 'Oh, we're going to help you! You will find your dress!'" Lori recalls.

The bride replied: "No, you don't understand. My grandmother bought her dress here, and so did my mom, aunt and two sisters. I have to find my dress here today. They said you're the lucky charm; they're all still married and they all found their wedding dress the first day they came here to shop at Evaline's!"

"So, it's kind of like 'what??'" Lori says. "To be a part of someone's history and tradition like that is incredibly cool!"



They strategically purchased wedding gowns with complementary mothers' or bridesmaids' dresses so that pictures looked united and purposeful, not just thrown together. And they really started educating customers on how their wedding ensembles should look.

"And I think that's where the grandmothers and moms would come in," Lori says. "It wasn't a question to go anywhere else and adding all those extra things into the business, customers saw their wedding

pictures and shared that."

In 2015, Lori moved Evaline's Bridal from its original location in downtown Warren to a 6,000-square-foot building on the same street a few miles down the road, where it remains to this day. The boutique sits like an island in a plaza with 52 windows surrounding it and mannequins changed in each one two times a week.

In May 2025 there was another major change: Holly, who loved the store so much she had continued to assist in various capacities throughout high school, college and being a stay-at-home mom, officially came on board as co-owner with her mom.

"(It's) one of the greatest blessings in my life and I don't take it for granted," Lori says. "Working beside Holly and watching her bring fresh ideas while honoring the tradition that built this business is incredibly rewarding, a rare gift."

More than a transaction

For all the emphasis Evaline's places on its own history, Lori and Holly understand something equally important: When a bride walks through the door, the story is no longer about them. It's about her.

"Evaline's is about family, and we want our customers to feel like part of our family," Holly says. "We want to be included in their story as much as we want them to be included in ours. So honoring our legacy and celebrating their story is a huge thing."

That experience begins with a warm greeting at the door:

"We get hugs all the time, and I think it's because so many people know us," Lori says. "When a bride comes to us, she already has searched us out on the internet and talked to her family and friends about their experiences, so she is prepared. The minute she walks in the door – and they say this all the time – we hear, *I just felt so good, so calm, like this is where I want to buy my dress. My grandmother/mom got her gown here...*"

Alterations are still done in house, by seamstresses on staff. Although – fun fact – Lori does 90% of the pinning.

"I love it; it's probably the funnest thing I do," she says.

And she'll never admit to being the owner.

"If you know who I am, you do, and if you don't you just think I'm the seamstress pinning you," she says. "It's always fun to hear their story: How they found their dress, how they think things are going. It's great insight to keep my pulse on customer experiences."

Evaline's Bridal is big on customizing dresses, sculpting them to the bride's figure and explaining how certain changes will help achieve the exact look they want.

"I think it's such an important department to have in your store because if a bride takes that dress elsewhere that message could get lost and her end product not be the same," Lori says. "I'm there when they're selling the dress; I know exactly how that bride wants it to fit and can make sure that happens."

That same philosophy extends to the people Evaline's puts on the sales



The spot where brides gather with family and friends for celebratory pictures after saying "Yes!" to the dress.



A family photo of the whole crew. "Our children grew up at Evaline's, and now our grandchildren are making memories here too," Lori says. "For generations, our family has been woven into every part of this store. Evaline's has grown with our family, and our family has grown with Evaline's. It will always be part of who we are."

Removing commission lets stylists fully focus on each bride.

floor – and, importantly, the incentives it gives them once they're there.

"They're amazing – just happy people and we all get along," Holly says. "We feel like a family because we're laughing together; we share our personal lives, support our ups and downs and stick together as a family."

In terms of hiring, due to its long-standing reputation and community involvement, Evaline's is constantly approached by people looking for work. And bridal experience isn't nearly as important as one factor:

"I hire really great, kind, respectful people who honor the Golden Rule – treat others the way you would want to be treated," Lori says. "And that's how we run our business."

Training is constant, with a focus on support and continuous evolution. Holly's schoolteacher background provides plenty of inspiration, and they're big fans of peer-to-peer training, occasionally teaming up with other bridal stores to group train at Evaline's.

In terms of compensation, Evaline's operates strictly on hourly and bonuses - no commission.

"I don't want my staff to feel like their job depends on a certain forced sale to our customers," Lori says. "The pressure to meet a goal... that's not what bridal sales are about, and a bride shouldn't be forced into purchasing a dress so a stylist can keep her job."

Rather, bonuses are given randomly at different times throughout the month or year. There might be promotions or contests, or they'll spot someone do something extraordinary and randomly reward them.

"It's unexpectedly earned," Lori says. "Our staff loves and cares about what they do, and I want them to know I recognize it and appreciate them. The bonuses are very good. They love them and they're always excited!"

Changing with the times

Surviving eight decades requires knowing when to change. Perhaps just as importantly, it requires knowing when not to.

Some changes at Evaline's Bridal have been practical. Alterations, once offered for free, now carry a charge out of necessity. Others reflect an entirely different customer journey. Brides who once entered the store clutching magazine pictures of the dresses they wanted now arrive with inspiration pulled from social media and the internet. And customers' opinions and feelings, while always important, are listened to and evaluated much more closely today.

But Lori is equally conscious of the things Evaline's shouldn't modernize.

The store, for example, still accepts walk-ins "because grandma never needed an appointment."

And while style trends have come and gone, "I truly feel like the emo-

tional part of working with brides is still the same," Lori says.

Sometimes, she'll pull out old documents from seminars many years ago "and it's so funny – the training is the same, the issues we're facing are the same," she says. "Brides can't decide, the right people couldn't come with her to her appointment, she's not sure if she should buy today or keep looking."

The tools surrounding the bridal experience may have changed dramatically. The emotions surrounding the purchase haven't.

Technology, however, has allowed Evaline's to address those age-old needs in quicker and more efficient ways.

The store recently adopted Phone Clarity, a communication platform created by Nathaniel and customized to the bridal industry that analyzes calls and texts to recover missed opportunities.

"I feel like the phone system is something we pay the least attention to because it's just there," she says.



In The Spotlight: **Evaline's Bridal**

Established: 1944

Owners: Lori Dubasik, Steve Dubasik, Holly Naples

Size: 6,000 square feet

Rent or Own: rent

Number of Dressing Rooms: 11

Price Range of Gowns: \$1,500-\$8,000

Other Niches Carried: bridal, bridesmaids, mothers, evening gowns, prom, homecoming, flower girls, tuxedos, veils, accessories, jewelry, headpieces.

Total Number of Staff: 8-15

Database Management System: BridalLive

IP Phone System: Phone Clarity

Alterations: In-house

Website: evalinesbridal.com

Instagram:

@evalinesbridal (3823 followers)

Facebook:

@evalinesbridal (4.4K followers)

TikTok:

@evalinesbridal (1,130 followers)

Goodwill Causes: The Dubasik family's three businesses - **Rite Dry**

Cleaners, Evaline's Bridal and Market

House Caffe – all participate in putting together an annual Christmas

Party called "A Brighter Christmas."

Everyone in the community – family, customers and friends – attends and brings presents for all-age children unwrapped. Lori's husband and grandchildren then deliver them to local children services, Warren Family mission and Akron children's Hospital.

Family shapes every business decision Lori makes.

"But if you think about all the money used to bring that customer to dial your number, it's so important to handle that well."

And while Lori and Holly, with staff input, handled social media themselves for years, Evaline's recently hired its first full-time social-media person.

At the same time, one of its longest-standing marketing traditions remains very much alive: its premier bridal show, an annual event that began when Lori and Steve bought the store.

Held at a local venue, such as a hotel, the event includes 30-40 local vendors plus a live one-hour fashion show. Models are all past customers or friends, and bridal party scenes are put together intentionally so a bride can envision an entire ensemble.

"I think it's so important," Lori says. "We try to make our bridal show an experience they'll go home with, and that allows them to meet the best of the best vendors in the area."

Something else that hasn't changed with time is Lori's desire to keep learning. She continues to attend all kinds of seminars, related to many topics, bringing those lessons back to the store.

"There's always new ideas to try,

although you have to maintain that consistency too because customers expect it," she says. "We have generations of customers who respond to our legacy; they have so much trust in us and have turned into the kind of family that brings you their daughters and granddaughters. It honestly means the world."

Beyond bridal

Speaking of family, Evaline's Bridal isn't the only business the Dubasiks are involved with. They also own and operate Market House Caffe, which opened in Fall 2019 a half-mile up the road from the bridal shop.

And it truly is a family endeavor.

Holly and her husband own the 100-year-old house it's located in, and the origins began when their tenant left and Lori volunteered to rent the house from them.

Her intention was to display her discontinued merchandise in individual rooms. Steve thought it was a great idea and suggested they serve coffee there too. Ultimately, their plan evolved as they began planning the aesthetics – a fireplace, old wooden

floors and uniquely themed rooms, with dresses relegated to just one area.

"He knew I always loved the gift industry so he said you can put all your gifts and flower arrangements and things you loved to do before here at the house," Lori says.

They ended up traveling for months to coffee shops across the country, purchasing an Italian machine maker and "the best coffee in the whole world!"

Today, the rooms at Market House Caffe are decorated by theme – a cooking/kitchen room, gift room, reading room, tree room where everything looks like a forest. When customers first walk in, they see a big dining room table.

"And it's so cool, I remember the first day we were open an older couple came by and sat down and said they live down the road and had been watching us get this place ready and couldn't wait to come here and have some company," Lori says.

Suddenly, more people started gathering, and pretty soon everybody who'd been in that room by themselves joined together at the dining room table talking together.

"And Steve and I were like, this is what the house was meant to be – a place where you can bring your family and friends and gather together at a table, or sit by yourself to rest and be peaceful," Lori says. "I purposely display things on the wall that people will read and it will change their day. I want them to walk away with good feelings."

And while Market House Caffe did start out with bridal merch, that was discontinued after a couple of years, as they realized customers needed more space. That doesn't mean, however, ties to the bridal store are severed.

Recently, a group of eight ladies, who meet weekly at the cafe, visited. One recognized Lori as the owner of Evaline's, which spurred a lively discussion about who had bought their



Credit: Twenty Two Photography

Private bridal suites give each bride and her guests their own comfortable space to relax, enjoy the experience and focus on finding the dress.



Credit: Twenty Two Photography

From an Evaline's Bridal "Stanley" to bridal purses, makeup bags and keepsakes, special little surprises can be found throughout the store to help the experience feel special.

gown there and who had helped them.

"It was so funny," Lori says. "I'll bet that maybe only one or two people sitting at that table didn't buy their dress from us. Hearing them tell their experiences of all of that was so cool!"

All in the family

Family is a huge thing to Lori, and it shapes not just the way she lives her life, but the way Evaline's Bridal operates.

"That's probably the biggest lesson I've learned: You can always make money," Lori says. "You can work harder or longer, but you can't get those moments back with your family."

It's a philosophy that has become increasingly intertwined with the business itself.

Lori and Steve have been married 48 years, and Steve, in addition to running Rite Dry Cleaners, handles the financial side of Evaline's and the coffee shop. Meanwhile Nathaniel works alongside his father in the dry-cleaning business and on Phone Clarity, which he customized to both the bridal and dry cleaning industries.

Holly, meanwhile, has five children of her own and, after officially be-

coming co-owner of Evaline's in 2025, now works side-by-side with the mother she grew up watching run the store.

For Lori, it's a little surreal.

"From the day Steve came in the house and said, 'I think I bought you a bridal store,' it changed all the dynamics of our family," she says. "And who would've thought today I'd be sitting across from Holly, being able to work with her and watch what she's become."

Their working relationship is sur-

prisingly and intentionally unfiltered. Rather than dividing the business into rigid areas of responsibility, mother and daughter tend to instinctively fill whatever role is needed.

"We just kind of feed off of one another," Holly says. "We know what needs done each day and we make sure it gets handled...it's very cohesive and easy because we did it for so long. It just kind of fell back into sync."

And already, another generation is becoming part of the picture.

Lori has eight grandchildren, in-



*with Evaline's Bridal Owner
Lori Dubasik*



What approach do you take with market buys? I love the bridal industry and love seeing all the new trends and designs! (I'm) still doing this for over 40 years and it never gets old; I still get excited! We love working with our trusted designers and adding current trends to our collection! When I buy, I buy with our bride in mind. Every gown is hand selected, not just because it's popular but because we stay ahead of trends and bring styles to our region so our brides don't have to go anywhere else. We are known for our fashion-forward look. That excitement has never faded and I think our brides feel that energy the moment they walk into Evaline's Bridal.

How is your business dealing with increased costs (due to tariffs and inflation)? We work closely with our designers to keep our prices fair and our service exceptional. We focus on providing value every step of the way with personalized attention, expert guidance and support every step of the way...after all we have been doing this for eight decades!

What is your advice for dealing with the indecisive bride? Indecision is normal. It is a big emotional decision so we slow it down. We show lots of patience, education and guidance and help our brides feel confident, and the clarity comes because our brides know about our store. Evaline's Bridal has been around over 80 years. Generations of brides recommend us and share their experiences and stories. So I truly believe they already feel good when they come in. I also feel that brides today have even more information than ever. They have spent months on Pinterest, Instagram and Tiktok before they even walk throughout our doors so our family environment gives them confidence that they are in the best place!

What is your business mantra? Today that mantra means more than ever because now it's being carried into the next generation of my family. Having Holly join me has reminded me that legacy isn't just about how long you've been in business, it's about passing your values on. We want to continue serving generations of brides with the same warmth, integrity and personal attention that families have trusted for over eight decades.

What do you like doing outside of bridal? Spending time with my family! My husband and I have worked hard and raised our children to remember to never miss anything that has to do with God or family. We raised them to value presence and share emotions with long hugs and long conversations. I treasure all the moments we share together, from cooking and baking together to family vacations to watching them all dancing at our bridal show. Those everyday moments that come unexpected...are the best! We also tell them: don't worry about tomorrow; God is already there!



Looks & Lines

The looks and lines

Evaline's Bridal carries vary from market to market. Its niche is offering a carefully curated selection of exclusive designer collections that blend timeless elegance with modern style, focusing on gowns that reflect exceptional quality and showcase the designers' styles to brides.

"Rather than carrying the largest number of lines we travel the world to major markets, we study global trends and we hand-select every collection to ensure our brides feel extraordinary," owner Lori Dubasik says. "It's important our brides feel on trend and completely themselves!"

Each generation carries Evaline's legacy forward with love.

cluding Holly's five children. Her granddaughter Sophie works at Evaline's and helps inform about the latest trends, including social media. On the day of the VOWS photo shoot, Holly's twins were at the store helping pull out decorations.

It's nothing new. Holly herself spent countless hours at Evaline's as a child, eventually purchasing her own wedding gown there. Nathaniel grew up around both the bridal and dry-cleaning businesses. Even Lori's daughter-in-law purchased her wedding gown at Evaline's.

"Literally, I mean, it truly is a family business," Lori says. "But that's what

weddings are, right? A family event!"

That connection between family and business goes deeper than simply having relatives involved with the store. Lori believes the values passed down through her own family have influenced the way Evaline's staff treats its customers.

"We're not here just to sell you a dress; it isn't just a transaction," Lori says. "Our generations of customers, they become our family, they become our friends."

For Holly, preserving that feeling as Evaline's continues to evolve is paramount.

"My goal isn't to change anything about what makes Evaline's special," she says. "It's basically just to honor the foundation that Evaline had started to build and my mom has just tremendously grown."

Perhaps the most fitting thing about Evaline's Bridal's story is that, after 80-plus years, its future looks remarkably similar to its beginning.

Evaline herself built the business with family around her, including daughters who worked alongside her in the store. Decades later, Lori is doing the same — working beside Holly, watching grandchildren grow up around the business and seeing another generation begin to find its own place within it.

It's one reason Lori never considered changing the name.

"When I bought it, I felt like it was Evaline's Bridal, like she's the one who started this," Lori says. "It's her name, her legacy. I'm just carrying it on and it's just going to keep growing."

And perhaps that is the secret to thriving after all these years. An 80-plus year legacy doesn't endure simply because someone keeps the doors open. It endures because each generation understands what was entrusted to it, adds its own chapter and, when the time comes, passes something meaningful on.

Along those lines, Lori and Holly have no plans to move locations or open a second store. Instead, they plan to devote all their attention to nurturing the boutique's legacy and helping people anyway they can, perhaps by adding regular educational webinars for brides.

"I just know that whenever you give Evaline's a little love she just grows," Lori says. "And now, with the power of Holly behind me, that growth can keep going. However we can make somebody's life better, that's what I want to do."



The Evaline's Bridal staff.

Credit: Twenty Two Photography



The family's other business, the Market House Caffe, is located in a 100-year-old house a half-mile away from Evaline's Bridal.

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