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IGNITING *A Bridal Business*

Weddings keep Spark Fine Stationery's business burning bright in South Bend, Indiana.

WHEN 80,000 FANS fill the University of Notre Dame's football stadium, Joya Helmuth has learned not to count on any of them to shop at her South Bend store, Spark Fine Stationery. As a matter of fact, football weekends are her worst retail days of the year. However, while football and stationery might not be a good mix, the Basilica at Notre Dame and weddings certainly are and nearly half of Spark's bridal business comes from out-of-town alumni getting married in the famed venue.



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"More than 40 percent of our bridal customers live in another state," Helmuth remarks, noting that when a couple decides to get married on the Notre Dame campus, they – and many times the bride's mother – will come to South Bend three or four times before the wedding to meet with local bridal vendors. It's really convenient to spend a few weekends together here meeting with local wedding industry professionals and making decisions face-to-face. There's been a side benefit, too: we typically charge a lot less for our wedding services here in South Bend than in other parts of the country," she says.

It was Helmuth's professional con-

nections within the local bridal industry that helped motivate her to transform her graphic design business into a retail establishment in March 2007. "I had done numerous custom graphic design projects for event planners, florists, DJ services and other local wedding professionals in the city and they were sending me tons of referrals to do custom invitations. Having been self-employed for eight years, I had an itch to do something different and more socially interactive," Helmuth states.



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The process of turning Spark Design Studio into Spark Fine Stationery was an eye-opening experience for Helmuth. Within two years of opening, she expanded the days the store was open (from three days to five); added fine writing instruments, bulk paper and greeting cards to her product mix; and

1. Joya Helmuth, owner of South Bend, IN-based Spark Fine Stationery turned her of the knowledge of graphic design and her love for fine stationery into a booming business.

2. Spark Fine Stationery is 1,500 square feet and has a product mix comprised of wedding invitations, other paper goods, greeting cards and writing instruments.

3. Spark's convenient downtown location in South Bend, IN, is not far from the College Football Hall of Fame.

Store Scene



moved from an isolated location off the beaten path to a well-trafficked storefront in downtown South Bend near

the College Football Hall of Fame and the city's convention center. "Retail is always unpredictable, but independent

LOCALISM: INDEPENDENT RETAILERS UNITE!

During the fall of 2008, Helmuth and other local retailers in South Bend, IN were really feeling the effects of the down economy. Customers began telling them that shopping at their collective stores was their way of consciously supporting independent retailers and thanking them for hanging in and keeping their doors open. A group of those independent retailers decided to build on that idea and formed ShoLo (a derivative of Shop Local). Helmuth explains that free ads on most of the local radio stations and great editorial coverage in the local newspaper was one of the few positive things that happened that holiday season for the group's 35 original members.

Helmuth describes ShoLo's mission as twofold. Its first goal is to educate the community about the power of shopping locally. Its second objective is to identify businesses as being locally and independently owned by listing them on the group's website (www.sholo.org) and giving them a decal to put in their store window.

"Most people just don't realize the value we bring to the community," Helmuth declares. "We use more local vendors which keeps more money circulating locally instead of going to corporate offices elsewhere; we're more involved in our own communities because we live here; we tend to pay our employees more; and most visibly, the unique character and local flavor of a community are found at independent businesses. Think about it: No one travels to an area and eats at a fast feeder or shops at a big chain store to experience the unique nature of a community...they look for distinctive boutiques, quaint hotels and restaurants where the locals eat."

ShoLo currently has approximately 65 members and is working hard to gain exposure. "We hope to influence our state and local economic development offices to provide things like tax abatements and incentives to us, something that happens frequently for big box stores but rarely happens for independent, local businesses," Helmuth says.

store owners need to do everything possible to create an environment that is conducive for people to come in and shop – that includes having a name that lets them know exactly what we have in store for them," Helmuth asserts. She explains that she learned that lesson because people were associating her first store name with interior, not graphic, design.

With 1,500 square feet of space in her downtown location, Helmuth decided to create a wedding "section" on the sales floor to make bridal customers more comfortable while shopping. "Brides love to open these huge albums and spread out," she describes, which is why she brought in an expansive wood table with lots of chairs and surrounded the space with all her albums and wedding-related products. She situated the section towards the rear of the store for "privacy" reasons because bridal customers tend to talk about sensitive issues like "budgets, family dynamics and wording for special circumstances, like divorced parents."

Tag & Company and Vera Wang are Spark's best-selling wedding albums and Helmuth sees a common factor in their success: flexibility. "If an engraved invitation from Vera Wang pushes a bride's budget too far, we don't have to switch to another album because the company offers the same design using lower-priced printing options, like letterpress and thermography," she says. Helmuth adds that Tag's flexibility comes from offering every design in their album at the same price, no matter a card's shape and size. I don't believe I've ever had a customer turn down an order estimate from Tag because of price."

Helmuth also likes working with Envelopments, a line she considers extremely versatile because it can be used for wedding invitations entirely on its own or it can be mixed-and-matched with other vendors' designs. Familiar with Envelopments because she had worked with them even in her early

graphic design days, Helmuth found offering customers complete custom design services led to extended ordering time, something that subsequently infringed on her profitability. “Extensive experience working with Envelopments allowed us to select 10 to 15 popular designs, put them on boards, and create our own standardized album. This way our clientele gets a lot of choice while we’ve streamlined the ordering process,” she says.

Making the ordering process simpler and avoiding intensive in-house production is the reason behind Helmuth’s decision to offer limited imprints. “Imprints are too much work for a business with a small staff and limited production space. I prefer using my time with brides giving them my expertise on wedding etiquette and wording instead of nitpicking production details,” she states, noting that Spark does carry fill-ins for customers to do at home along with some themed imprints.

As Helmuth enters her fourth year of retailing, she sees her bridal customers coming back for birth announcements and holiday cards. “Our tagline is ‘Leave a paper trail,’ and returning customers are proof that Spark is doing its part. Knowing our clientele relies on us to make their special occasions memorable is the fire that keeps us going.” ■

NAUGHTY & NICE

In the back corner of Spark Fine Stationery is a hutch with a long, beaded curtain in front of it and a sign hanging nearby saying, “Shop at your own risk.” While Helmuth smiles to herself when regular customers make a beeline for the hutch, she politely warns new customers walking towards the area not to be offended by what they find behind the curtain.

“We introduced our ‘Improper Etiquette’ section six months after we opened and it’s been a hit with our customers ever since,” Helmuth notes, happy that the “offensive” section has given her high-end fine stationery store a healthy alternative “buzz.”

“We created the area because we couldn’t risk putting out cards with [offensive language] on them in our regular card sections,” she explains.

Some of the products and vendors behind the curtain include: Knock Knock’s Shit List and Why I Must Have Sex With You; risqué cards from Oh My Word, Ella Studio and O+D (Offensive Plus Delightful); raunchy books from Chronicle Books; and lots of titillating things from Cerebral Itch.