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Brides aren't skimping on big day!

European Bridal in Reading thrives

By Val Previsi • Enquirer contributor • March 1, 2009

READING - Even a sour economy can't dampen the spirit of Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky brides-to-be.

European Bridal in the Reading bridal district posted record sales in 2008.

Part of the secret of the store's success lies in the emotional investment brides make in their wedding plans, said Tina Gutierrez, owner and founder of European Bridal, making them reluctant to cut corners even when times are tough.



But Gutierrez said she also took steps last year to counter the slow economy by aggressively marketing her store to attract more customers.

Her efforts - which included increased advertising, adding new lines from popular gown designers, more diligent training programs for her staff and interior remodeling at her Benson Street store - resulted in a 25 percent increase in sales in 2008, although she declined to give sales figures.

Gutierrez said she has even been adding staff in the last few weeks to gear up for the shop's busiest season. Perhaps a sign of the times, Gutierrez said she was surprised to find that more than two dozen applicants inquired about an open sales job that would normally attract only five or six candidates.

The steady stream of bridal customers doesn't surprise her, however, because she feels her shop has a reputation for top quality gowns and service, and because a stylish wedding is still a priority to many brides no matter what it costs.

"The social pressure to have a big wedding is very strong," she said. "People will go into debt to have a formal wedding."

Despite a strong desire on the part of brides to go the extra mile for a fairy tale wedding, Gutierrez said she knows that it takes a lot of work on her part to keep them coming in as customers each week.

"It's a very difficult job. It's not just about playing dress-up," said Gutierrez, who founded the shop in 1991 shortly after her own wedding, which she said frustrated her because of the dearth in selection of gowns locally.

Sales personnel at her shop, which sold roughly 800 gowns last year at prices ranging from \$800 to as much as \$5,000, are trained to find the right gown to match each bride's figure and tastes.

In addition to fashion sense, staffers need strength and stamina to stay on top of the day's appointments, as the gowns themselves are heavy and cumbersome, she added.

The historic and elegant interior of the store inspires a sense of formality and tradition that enhances the shopping experience, she said. Additionally, to make sure that no family stress spoils the occasion for the brides, Gutierrez said her sales staffers are trained to defuse any negativity if it comes up between family members helping the bride make her selection.

Gutierrez knows there is a lot riding on each bride's purchase. They need to feel that they've made the perfect selection, she said.

Michele Cooper of Lexington, who is planning a July wedding in Louisville, said the help she got from European Bridal made her gown shopping easier.

"It can be a little bit overwhelming," she said of the number of gowns she was looking at. "They're the experts. They see brides on a daily basis. So they know what looks good. The one I ended up getting I wasn't even going to try on until they recommended it."

Anne Schutte of Philadelphia, who grew up in Hyde Park, said she recently chose a dress for her August wedding here in Cincinnati. She chose European Bridal after both her sisters purchased their dresses there.

European Bridal "has the feeling of an upscale shop and yet it had lots of things in my budget," said Schutte. "They have a huge selection and also an intimate atmosphere."

Although both women said they were mindful of the economic slump, they said it did not limit their choices when it came to their wedding gowns.

"One of the most important things as a bride is the dress," said Cooper. "If I have to cut back on other things, I will."