

TRADITIONAL RETAILER LEVERAGES INTERNET

The Wedding Shoppe lets customers drive an online experience

BY JOHN P. PALEN

Retailers who decided to embrace the Internet early have learned an interesting thing about today's consumers. They are going online to do their homework and shop their options before they ever talk to a salesperson. Instead, they talk to their friends online and read reviews.

For something as important and personal as a wedding dress, future brides are definitely surfing and chatting.

The Fritz family knows this. Jimmy Fritz's parents started a bridal shop on St. Paul's Grand Avenue in 1977, and The Wedding Shoppe is still considered one of the premier bridal and wedding apparel shops in the Twin Cities. Competition in this industry has always been fierce, and Jimmy was ready to introduce new forms of marketing to his family's business after graduating from the University of St. Thomas in 2003.

"It used to be that we didn't allow for photos of the dresses or make the prices public," says Jimmy Fritz, now CEO. "When we did start showing photos of dresses on social media and publishing the prices, sales grew."

Within a few years of embracing online marketing, The Wedding Shoppe was experiencing double-digit growth while other retailers sunk with the recession. To keep the momentum, Jimmy Fritz began to solicit more feedback from customers and understand the price points that would best serve them.

"We were paying \$10,000 in yellow pages advertising and only getting 10 calls a month. We discovered we wanted to control the whole process: the dress designs, the pricing and promotion," Fritz says.

Shifting gears from traditional advertising, The Wedding Shoppe focused marketing dollars on Google ads, social posts, blogging and search engine optimization to help online surfers find them. They looked for ways to interact with customers proactively rather

"Rather than assume what our customers want, we get their feedback first to drive digital marketing and sales efforts."

—Jim Fritz



BIZ BRIEFING

WEDDING SHOPPE

KENNEDY BLUE, LLC; SUMMIT + FINN, LLC

LOCATION: St. Paul

REVENUE: Undisclosed

INCEPTION: 1977

EMPLOYEES: 75

LEADERSHIP: Jimmy Fritz, CEO

DESCRIPTION: Family-owned retail bridal apparel and accessories shop on Grand Avenue with two related companies: an e-commerce business and private line of bridal attire, and a digital sales consulting business

WEB: weddingshoppeinc.com
summitandfinn.com



Jim Fritz



LESSONS IN DIGITAL MARKETING

1. Just because a form of marketing worked in the past doesn't mean it will continue to work. Be ready to adapt to something new.
2. Start slow with simple online shopping apps and services that are easy to use and manage.
3. Get lots of feedback from customers through social media, blog comments and surveys.
4. Consistently promote and track customer visits to see what is catching their interest most. Do more of that.
5. Don't assume visitors can find your website. Learn about Google and other strategies to improve your search engine results.

than waiting for customers to find them. The consistent feedback is used as market research to stay ahead of style trends and service preferences.

In 2011, the company launched Kennedy Blue to provide a wide selection of custom formal apparel styles and sizes. The online platform has expanded to color selection and accessories, all at the touch of a button. Customers can shop online, try on apparel at home and/or come into the store for a more celebratory experience with family and friends.

Kennedy Blue now comprises one-third of annual revenue of bridesmaid dress sales.

There are pitfalls to expanding online, Fritz says. Digital media companies will promote a variety of expensive solutions and applications, but Fritz says to start slow with simple apps like Shopify as well as a blog and social media. The main goal is tracking visitors and understanding their search patterns. Retailers can run tests with special discounts, for example, to gauge audience interest. These online tests help retailers provide more of what visitors want, but it does take time and weekly attention to maximize results. In addition to Fritz, two employees focus exclusively on Kennedy Blue.

Through this process of learning the online space and engaging with customers, Fritz has found a new niche: digital marketing consulting. From wedding retailer to consultant, he is now working with other small businesses to embrace the online consumer world with his new company, Summit + Finn.

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That's the point. Whether in a store or online, retailers still have to keep their eye on what customers want and adapt to them. 🐘



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