

MERCHANDISING FOR CHILDREN'S CLOTHING

by Liesl Gibson

When we meet retailers at Quilt Market each season, we hear more and more of them talk about expanding the products they carry to include sewing patterns and supplies for children's clothing. As you know, quilt shops that want to build a pipeline of customers for the future must draw younger shoppers into their stores, and offering supplies for children's clothing is one way to do that.

You probably already merchandise your quilting inventory effectively, but are you prepared to merchandise to this new market? Here are six strategies that we recommend for maximizing sales in this growing category.

1. Use a sample to sell. You already know this. It's the oldest trick in the retail playbook. Make up a sample, and the fabric and pattern will sell themselves. "It's almost frustrating," said Theresa Bakos of Quilt Essential Fabrics in Abbotsford, B.C. "If we have a fabric that's not selling, we'll make a sample from it. And next thing you know the fabric is gone. You make the sample, and it's sold."

This definitely holds true for children's garments. We recently made two samples for Purl Patchwork in New York. We sewed our "Birthday Party Dress" in a spectacular (and commensurately pricey) Liberty lawn print that the store's owner, Joelle Hoverson, selected. Two days after displaying the sample, Purl sold out of the fabric — at \$40 a yard!

2. Think about the whole. If one sample will sell fabric, two will sell more. If you're making multiple samples, you get additional effect — and drive more sales — by creating a cohesive collection in a unified palette. "We make our samples in coordinating fabrics," said Rhea Daiute of Alewives Fabrics in Nobleboro, Maine, "so that the samples look good as a collection. I can use them in various ways to make attractive, attention-grabbing displays." A unified collection makes a more profound impact on your customers. Don't just mix and match when making samples. Coordinate the collection.

3. Use props wisely. You can take garment displays to the next level by dressing them up with simple but effective props. "We have a closet full of props that I've collected over the years," said Bakos. "I use them to make up little vignettes that highlight the samples I'm showing. I recently sewed a set of pajamas in an elephant print. In my prop closet I found a little elephant that just happened to be the exact color of the

PJs. Little things like that provide eye candy and inspiration for customers."

When we merchandise Oliver + S samples for trade shows, we do this, too. We use small and simple props that underscore the names we give each design. For example: toy sailboats for the Sailboat Top, Skirt, and Pant; a couple of small wrapped gifts for the Birthday Party Dress; bunny slippers with the Bedtime Story Pajamas. These little touches, so subtle most customers won't specifically comment on them, can take a merchandised display from simple to visually powerful.

4. Ask employees to make your samples. Who is your front line when customers are interested in, but fence sitting about, starting a new project? Your employees, of course. They need to be able to convince a waffling customer that she can, indeed, be successful — even if she hasn't ever undertaken a project of this nature. "I made my first few garment samples myself," said Daiute, "and then I had each of my employees make at least one. That way all of my employees were in a good position to advise customers who were on the fence about purchasing."

Having sewn the samples helps your staff answer questions and convince new sewers that they can, indeed, be successful. A simple, "It's really not that hard. Look, here's one I did myself," says a lot. It also gets them excited about the projects you're pitching to your customers with your merchandised display.

5. Showcase your customers' work. Who doesn't love to participate in a sew-and-show? One of the most popular sections of our Web site is the Oliver + S Flickr group — an online forum where consumers post photos of the garments they have sewn from our patterns. This Web site feature gives them the opportunity to highlight their work, and it provides inspiration for people who are considering their next project. You could do this same thing from your shop's Web site. Or, you could turn this virtual forum into a physical showcase in your shop by having a fixed merchandising display where you swap out customers' work every week or two. Give your customers credit for their work by placing a small name card next to their garments.

Having your customers provide you with sample garments allows you to rotate your displays more frequently, it incurs

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no cost for you, and it's an easy way of creating loyalty among your customers. If your customers aren't ready to part with their prized garments for a week, or if space is tight, consider showcasing a small, frequently changing collection of photos of your customers' finished projects.

6. Pick fabrics you can continue to stock. If you're investing in making a sample to help move your fabric inventory, make sure that you'll continue to have access to that fabric.

"I find that around 50 percent of the time, customers fall in love with the exact look of our finished sample and want to make their garments from the same fabrics that we had used," says Daiute of Alewives Fabrics. "I make all of my sample garments out of fabrics that I can easily re-order. That way I can get the most mileage out of the finished garment. And we certainly sell a lot of fabric that way, too!" There's nothing more frustrating than having customers tell you they want to buy a print from you that you can't stock anymore. Make sure that what's in your merchandising display is on your shelves — and that you can reorder as long as possible when you sell through your existing inventory.

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