

**First impressions** are important.

In bridal retail, your first contact with a potential customer is crucial. You've spent precious advertising dollars to get that shopper to check out your Web site, send you an e-mail, call your store or walk through your doors.

Not making a good first impression on her can be costly. If you don't deliver your message the right way the first time, you may lose that bride and waste all of those precious marketing efforts and dollars.

Below, *VOVS* shows you how to make the best possible first impression on every customer you come into contact with—no matter how you meet her.

#### **Your First Contact: On the Internet**

In today's media-saturated world, the first contact you have with your brides may be when they log onto your Web site and click on the "Contact Us" section to e-mail you. How you respond to that e-mail may make the difference between servicing an entire wedding party and losing the bride to another retailer.

One of the biggest mistakes made by independent retailers is not answering e-mails in a timely, professional and personal manner. Always respond within one hour or sooner, says Kevin Stirtz, the Minneapolis-based author of *Smart Marketing: How to Get More Customers without Spending a Fortune* (Julia Press, 2007).

"Five minutes is best," Stirtz says. "No exceptions. If you can't respond within 5 minutes, use an auto-responder."

Stirtz's basic guidelines for e-mail response: Use numbers or bullets to make e-mail easier to read. Respond directly to the inquiry and offer useful information. Avoid big blocks of text. Print to paper and proofread before sending. Always give

potential customers a real person's name and phone number so they can follow up if they want.

Yes, this takes time, but the one thing you should always have time for is reacting to a potential sale, says marketing consultant Amanda Vega of Amanda Vega Consultants in Phoenix and New York ([amandavega.com](http://amandavega.com)).

Send the extra \$10 per month to have e-mails delivered to your cell phone, Vega suggests, so you or whomever you designate can respond quickly.

Another suggestion is to have an auto-responder on your e-mail. This is another chance to brand your store and personalize the contact with what the response says. One potential response to try:

"We're working with brides right now and we hope to give you the same undivided attention. We'll answer your query or get back to you within x amount of time. Feel free to call our cell phone."

#### **Your First Contact: On the Phone**

People do still make phone calls, although these days it's most likely to be on their cell phones while in transit. What you need to keep in mind is that today's consumer is busy and bridal shoppers are even busier than most. When they phone your store, what can they expect?

Call a bridal store anywhere in the USA and you'll hear everything from a basic "these are our store hours" greeting to a full-on production with music that guides you to different departments, offers details of upcoming events and delivers an in-depth look at the company's philosophy.

Experts in sales, marketing and branding suggest that you take a good look—or listen—to how you handle customer calls. Doing a better job may be as

simple as answering the phone more promptly, Vega says. If you're too busy to pick up, consider an auto-response system or outsourcing calls to a service that answers for you.

Ideally, however, "For something as personal as bridal, you want a real person who is friendly and acts like they're happy to hear from you, who actually helps you in some way," Stirtz says.

Barring a live human, being answered by a recorded message should do something for potential customers, Stirtz says. Rather than playing music or commercials, think about what information customers are looking for, what stressors they're feeling and what obstacles they're dealing with; then figure out how you can make their wedding planning experience better.

To tape or not to tape, that is the question. If calls to your store are sometimes or always answered by a recorded message, you need to insure that message is the one you want to send.

Some of you believe in never having a recording pick up during open store hours because it says, "We're too busy to bother talking to you right now."

Others think it conveys the message, "We think you're important but we also aren't going to interrupt the bride we're helping right now to catch your call."

**Consider providing a cell phone number to which your brides can text brief questions.**



## Making Web Sites Work for Bridal

**A big part** of making a good impression on your business Web site is paying attention to the details. Here are some ideas of what to do and what to avoid from marketing consultants Kevin Stirtz in Minneapolis, Amanda Vega in Phoenix and Janelle Barlow in Las Vegas.

**Avoid very dark and very bright colors.** For a bridal shop, softer, more feminine but still professional colors like pastel pink, sage green or baby blue are better choices.

**Make navigating easy.** Always have a search box, phone number, "contact us" and "help" link on every page in an easy-to-see place.

**Ask for their info.** Always have a place on your Web site to collect information about customers. "Then you can respond personally and your answer will have that full-service, we-care-about-you touch," Vega says. As well, when you are ready to launch the newsletter you have that refined mailing list."

**Ask for action.** The purpose of a Web page is to get the customer to do something: make contact, call to make an appointment, send an e-mail, or come to the store, Barlow says.

**Tell them who you are.** The site should make it obvious what you sell. "Like the well-written note or e-mail, the site should be friendly and engaging," Barlow says. The purpose of the first page of the site should be to get that person to click through to the next page.

**Know your audience.** "Your Web site should reflect your brand image," Vega says. Are you a one-size-fits-all bridal store or are you a high-end bridal shop? Your Web design and navigation needs to speak to that.

**Keep it quiet.** Don't put sound or music on your Web site. It's annoying, outdated and people do too much of their searching at work. Most of the time, they don't want their bosses to know about it, either.

**Keep it clean and simple.** Avoid inserting pop-ups and animation. They may seem like fun but the associations with them tend to be negative.

**Spend what's necessary.** The biggest mistake businesses make these days is making a Web site in Flash Free, Vega says. You'll miss out on all Internet contacts from users who won't know you exist. "Search engines cannot catalog Flash, so other than typing in whatever name and company name you registered when you bought your domain, people cannot see you," she says.

**Update your site regularly.** Your store wouldn't go years without changing, and neither should your Web site. "You need to update your site every week, at the least," Stirtz says. "You have to show that it's changing, and like a plant, that it's getting watered and cared for." If a site isn't updated, "it tells me, as a potential customer, that this company doesn't see enough value in their Web site or viewers to put current information up there."

**Measure your results.** You need to know how long people stay on your Web site, and if they click through, where they click to, Barlow says. It gives you a better idea of the information viewers want from the site. If Web browsers click onto your site and then click off quickly, it may be telling you that you didn't have a very well designed page and you may not be projecting the brand image you want for your store.



We know you'll want the same attention and courtesy!"

If you do use voice mail, make it as personal and friendly as possible, and change it on

the fly, Vega suggests. Try, "We're excited about working with you on your wedding. We're working with a bride right now and want to give her our undivided attention. If you have a question you can leave a voice message, e-mail us or visit our Web site. We'll get back to you as soon as possible."

Also, consider providing a cell phone number to which your brides can text brief questions. It's easier to interrupt for 20 seconds to text an answer than several minutes to take a phone call.

"We've found that the higher the disposable income, the more likely the shopper to be accepting of texting, e-mail, IMs, because their lives already revolve around this technology," Stirtz says.

Outside of business hours, recorded messages should give store hours and location (the most frequently asked questions), as well as refer brides to Web sites and e-mail options. Make sure to choose a voice that sounds professional, engaging, warm and friendly.

### First Contact: In the Store

Contact with your store begins at the entrance. Creating the right impression from the street and the parking lot is crucial. That can encompass everything from a clean and well-maintained parking area to clear signage to interesting window displays.

And, when a shopper walks in your door, what do they see? In the brick-and-mortar retail space, everything comes into play — attire, appearance, manner posture, what you say and how you say it. The person who greets the customer — the face of your business for that shopper — should be well-groomed.

Whoever greets the bridal shopper, "should flat-out enjoy people."

Continued on page 54

Continued from page 33

well-dressed, well-spoken and well-trained. What impression do you want to create?

Too often retailers, small and large, simply have the wrong people on the floor, Stirtz says.

"The best choice would be the store's owner, who lives and breathes the shop, the person who started the business, owns the business, loves the business, is the business," he recommends.

But since that often isn't possible, you should look for "first-face-you-see" people who are friendly, interested, knowledgeable and who have the same love of and enthusiasm for the

business as you do.

And Stirtz adds, "They flat-out need to enjoy people. Err on the side of people skills sets on the front line."

The basics: Smile. Greet customers right away. Initiate eye contact and match theirs. Offer a handshake, if that's appropriate to the culture.

Along with the right, well-trained person greeting shoppers, don't forget that the store itself speaks, says marketing consultant Janelle Barlow, author of "Branded Customer Service" (Berrett-Koehler, 2004).

"You need to look at your store from the customer's perspective," Barlow says. "For the customer, it's 'I'm getting married or going to a formal event.

What does this store say to me? What is the unspoken message? Does it make it easy for me?"

When a customer walks into your store, the sense they get should be, "This is a place where my needs can get met. They can help me reach my dreams."

Retailers should do everything possible to make that connection, Barlow adds.

"I think there should be some big, beautiful pictures of featured dresses near the front of the store," she says. "Graphics help the customer to walk in and imagine themselves in that picture. A lot of people have a hard time visualizing; they need to see it concretely."

Photos should reflect your store's demographic diversity in brides' ethnicities, sizes, shapes and ages. The same holds true for photo albums in waiting areas.

If the first contact is with a bridal consultant, who sees bride after bride, day after day, "she should constantly remind herself that this is a big day for the bride that is standing in front of her right now," Barlow says.

Finally, avoid judgments and categorization.

"Listen until you get everything they need to know to give the bride what she wants and needs," Barlow says. "Repeat back so that you are sure that the information you are collecting is accurate. There are subtle things - when customers walk in, look at their face not their bodies so they feel uncomfortable."

The bottom line with all types of contact?

"Act like you care, because you should!" Stirtz says.

In conclusion, he cited a survey of 2,000 consumers in 32 states that revealed what customers want most: Listen to me. Know more than I do about your product or service. Be easy to work with. Give me what I came for. Smile.

**Marketing photos should reflect diversity in your brides' ethnicities, sizes, shapes and ages.**

