

What Goes Around...

Denver-based The Bridal Collection operates with integrity – and thrives because of it.



Customers are greeted in the reception area, where refreshments are served on busy days.

Lynn Crandall, vice president of **The Bridal Collection** in Denver, knew something was wrong when the phone calls started.

It was June 2009. Concerned and confused brides kept contacting her store, asking if a particular designer was going out of business.

Crandall wrote off the first inquiry as bizarre. Once she received three or four identical calls, however, she began to suspect something odd was up and set out to uncover the truth.

What Crandall discovered was shocking and would provide The Bridal Collection, whose business philosophy rests upon operating with absolute honesty and integrity, with its biggest test to-date.

A regional bridal shop, located about 90 miles away, was failing to deliver paid-for wedding gowns to its customers. Instead, the storeowner, who erroneously charged brides' credit cards then eventually closed her doors in the middle of the night and left town, contacted more than 20 of her brides and told them to pick up their dresses at The Bridal Collection.

"I assume (the owner) believed she was washing her hands of the situation and was hoping to pawn off the panicked and irate brides to someone else," Crandall says.

When a bride drove almost two hours to get to The Bridal Collection and walked in demanding her dress (which the store knew nothing about), Crandall and her mother/co-owner, GayLynn Rediger, the store's president, had to make a decision: either tell brides who were affected by another store's misdeeds that they couldn't help

them, or rise to the occasion and do everything in their power to make sure these brides had something beautiful to wear on their wedding day.

"We couldn't just say, 'No, we're not going to help you,'" Crandall says. "That's not why we started this business. That's not why we're here."

Instead, the mother-daughter duo immediately got to work, attempting to remedy the situation. After discovering the designer was unable to send brides' pending orders to The Bridal Collection, Crandall and Rediger decid-

Where is it?

Colorado-based The Bridal Collection, which opened in November 2000, is located in the Denver Technological Center (DTC), a bustling business and economic trading center approximately 15 miles south of the capital city. Surrounded by major businesses and corporations, with a picturesque view of the Rocky Mountains, the 6,200-square-foot store attracts brides from the entire Denver-Metro area (population 2.5 million), as well as up and down the Front Range, from Fort Collins to Colorado Springs (an approximate 135-mile span). As well, The Bridal Collection regularly helps Wyoming and Nebraska brides, and has even served customers who live as far away as Australia. "There are lots of conferences, especially in technology, that happen (in the DTC)," says Lynn Crandall, the store's vice president. "Because of that, we get people stopping in from all over the world."

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ed to give away dresses to any bride whose wedding was within six weeks.

They also did their best to help other brides start over in the shopping process and find the most beautiful dress within whatever remained of their budget.

Designers helped out, too, sending discounted merchandise or shipping items within 48 hours at no charge. Seamstresses (including one who was pregnant) racked up overtime hours. And Crandall even cancelled a three-week leave of absence, which she had taken to care for her sick infant son, and spent time traveling between the store and hospital with a folder of all the brides they were trying to help.

"It was absolutely insane and really stressful," she recalls of the time, made even more difficult by the fact Rediger had taken an extended leave of absence to care for her pregnant daughter-in-law, who was on bed rest, and one-year-old grandson. "And of course it had to happen in the middle of the summer when we were slammed."

Fortunately, this chaos had a happy ending. By the time the crisis had waned, The Bridal Collection had helped 42 brides, 11 of which received their gown free of charge, and 19 of which received some sort of discount and/or special concession. (To hear one bride's story, see sidebar, "Most Memorable Moment," page 88).

Altogether, the incident cost them about \$17,000 and countless man-hours. The end result, however, was priceless.

In addition to the joy, happy tears, hugs and (later) Christmas cards and wedding pictures sent from grateful brides they assisted, there were the intangible rewards that, quite possibly, can only be explained through good karma.

Crandall's sister-in-law delivered a full-term, healthy baby girl; Crandall's infant son made a full recovery; and the store's business is booming - far surpassing the summer's expense.

"We don't understand why we're so busy," Crandall says. "(We just had) our best November ever. We were turning people away on Saturday in December. That's never happened before."

Still, despite being pleased by these

outcomes, Rediger and Crandall reiterate that's not why they chose to help out.

"I'm just thankful we had the opportunity to rise to the occasion and uphold our business philosophy," Crandall says. "Sometimes, it's just the right thing to do."

The Beginning Of Something Great

Doing the right thing has always been important to The Bridal Collection, whose roots took shape in 1999. Then 22-year-old Crandall was studying for her master's degree in Biblical

Counseling at Colorado Christian University, and having a hard time.

"(The subject matter) was kind of depressing and dark, so I got a job working at a bridal store part-time for something uplifting and fun," Crandall recalls.

Quickly, Crandall realized she loved everything about bridal, from the magic of helping customers find their dream



The store's new special-occasion section, which displays bridesmaids' dresses and special-occasion evening gowns, attracts some younger mother-of-the-bride shoppers as well.

The mother-of-the-bride area has three display cases featuring dresses in different sizes, colors and formality levels. Prices range from \$190-\$1,500.



dress to the challenge of putting together eye-catching ensembles.

The idea of going into business began to form in her mind. But Crandall realized that, due to her youth, she would need a partner to be taken seriously. So she approached her mother, GayLynn Rediger, with the idea of opening a bridal shop.

Rediger, a certified Colorado Master Gardener, was nearing the end of her professional stay-at-home mom career (her youngest son, Christopher, had recently turned 16) and looking for a new challenge.

"The idea appealed to me because (Lynn) had bridal experience and I had business experience due to all of the fundraising, volunteering and organizing special events I had done as a stay-at-home mom," Rediger says. "We made a good team."

Maybe, but the duo admits they still didn't know much about opening a bridal shop. So initially, they relied on books such as "Small Business for Dummies," as well as discussions with their tax accountant and attorney, to get started.

"One thing that really helped is that we approached it as opening a business, not just a hobby or passion, which we do have," Crandall says. "We really focused on a plan and worked on all aspects, not just buying dresses."

"We've always tried to be proactive, not reactive," Rediger agrees. "It's important to start with a structure or framework, then grow. It's much harder to put the skeleton in after the body is grown."

Rediger and Crandall, who created an employee manual before opening their doors, knew they wanted their store to be located in the South Suburban area of Denver, which they felt was a "very underserved but highly affluent" area.

Their initial location, a 1,900-square-foot space near major highway I-25, opened its doors in November 2000 with a total of 16 wedding dresses; three dressing rooms; and one employee, inventory associate Marge Bezdek, a friend from Rediger's church who still works there today.

Their goal was clear: to become the tradition for each Denver family, the go-

to salon for all weddings and special events. So Rediger and Crandall worked extremely hard, treating each woman who walked through their doors with the utmost respect and caring, doing everything in their power to make each bride's dream come true.

And the hard work paid off. The Bridal Collection performed remarkably well in its first year of business, grossing \$500,000 in sales for 2001.

"We grew far faster than we thought we were going to, which was why we knew at end of first year we had to expand," Rediger says.

It took three years, until February

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2004, to find and move into their new location: a brand-new 6,200-square-foot salon located in the same shopping center as their old store.

This new salon boasts more than 500 gowns (a mixture of wedding, special occasion, flower girl and mothers); nine dressing rooms; and 18 employees, eight of which are full-time.

And these aren't the only numbers that have exploded. Despite the recession, The Bridal Collection grossed \$1.7



The cases along the left wall of the front bridal area feature private label collections so customers view them first.



The Bridal Collection carries private labels Elizabeth Darcy, Gavin Michaels and Isabella Chessari (all divisions of 2Be Bridal), as well as their own label, Kathryn Elizabeth. Prices range from \$900-\$2,900.

million last year, a 3-percent increase over 2008.

"Our normal increase is between 10-15 percent each year, but we're still increasing, which we're thrilled about," Crandall says.

Numbers, however, aren't the most important part.

"This is a business, but it's also our calling," Rediger says. "We think overall there's a lack of integrity in business and personal relationships. We want to prove you can be successful and still

have integrity, being kind and courteous toward customers, each other and staff."

Carving A Niche With Kindness And Love

The Bridal Collection believes shopping for a wedding dress is a life experience that should be full of joy and excitement. And they aim to treat it as such, providing impeccable service and attention to detail for every bride.

All customers are greeted warmly upon arrival. Refreshments, such as apple cider and cookies, are available.

"(Each bride) has a consultant that stays with them the whole time," Crandall says of the store, which strongly recommends appointments, but does everything in its power to accommodate walk-ins.

"We want the store to feel like a home, personal and intimate, with rooms," Rediger says of the layout, which is decorated with richly colored carpets, crisp white wooden moldings

and dark cherry furniture. There are also private viewing areas so brides can have guests with them.

Bridal gowns range from \$600-\$4,500, with an average price point of \$1,750. Special-occasion gowns, showcased in their own brand-new boutique, range from \$128-\$1,500, many of them one-of-a-kind designs.

"The merchandise we have is absolutely the best quality at its price," Crandall says.

The Bridal Collection also sells mothers and flower girls, but steers clear of tuxedo and prom.

"We got out of tuxedos in November 2009 because we felt it was too labor intensive and the gross margin wasn't good enough," Crandall says.

As for prom, "We don't have space to separate it and we don't want to interfere with the serious business of getting ready for summer weddings," Crandall says. "With our one-of-a-kind dresses, we're thinking word might get out. But I'd want prom to be a separate



The mother-daughter team of GayLynn Rediger (seated) and Lynn Crandall, president and vice president of The Bridal Collection.



The Little Black Dress Collection, tucked in between social-occasion dressing rooms, is available to purchase off-the-rack for guests of the wedding. It can also be ordered for bridesmaids.

In The Spotlight: *The Bridal Collection*

Business Established: Incorporated on June 23, 2000; opened in November 2000.

Store Size: 6,200 square feet.

Total Staff: 18 (eight full-time and 10 part-time), plus two owners.

Compensation: Salary and bonus incentives for managers; hourly plus commissions and bonus incentives for sales consultants; hourly for seasonal workers and support staff. In addition, employees receive benefits including health insurance, IRAs, flexible scheduling and paid vacation.

Alterations: An in-house seamstress handles customer-service issues and emergencies/special needs, as well as maintains stock. Sub-contractors take care of all traditional alterations in their studios, although appointments are held in-store.

Marketing: Web site (www.coloradobridalcollection.com), blog, Facebook/Twitter, and promotional events such as designer trunk shows, sales and fundraising for charities.

Recent Good Business Read: "A Complaint is a Gift" by Janelle Barlow and Claus Moller (Berrett-Koehler; 2008), which details how to handle customer-service complaints and use them to improve your business. "It has really good language and lends it itself well to role-play," Crandall says. "It's required reading for all of our managers."

Local "Must See": In the winter, head up to Frisco and hit the ski resorts. In the summer, drive down to nearby Colorado Springs to see Garden of the Gods and hike Pikes Peak. "It's really majestic and a fantastic experience that you don't get to see other places," Crandall says.

Follow them on Twitter: @coloradobridal

Friend them on Facebook: www.facebook.com/pages/Denver-CO/The-Bridal-Collection.



*Hiring a
marketing director was
"one of smartest business
moves we've made."*

section. Its functionality is completely different."

Another secret to success is Rediger's and Crandall's aim to create a good work environment for their employees, who include six former brides that left the corporate world to work there.

In addition to providing benefits including health insurance, IRAs, flexible scheduling and paid vacation, work hours are family friendly: The store is closed Sundays, open only two nights a week (Tuesday and Thursday), and closed the entire week of Christmas.

"Our personal belief is that we have to keep our lives balanced in order to keep our business balanced," Rediger says. "We're very sensitive to the fact people have other lives. Faith first, family second, then everything else."

Speaking of family, Rediger's entire extended family assists in many aspects of The Bridal Collection, from financial planning to modeling.

"At one time or another, every cousin or sibling has helped out," Crandall says. "Having a family that works together is a blessing."

That's not to say there haven't been difficulties.

Balancing cash flow is the biggest challenge, although the store helps itself by operating debt free and staying current on every bill.

"That's how we've been from day one, and we're going to stay that way," Rediger says.

They write off dresses in the store as the cost of doing business ("Like paper clips," Crandall says), donating lots of merchandise to a variety of causes, including Oprah's Angel Network.

The Bridal Collection also supports breast and pediatric cancer research, the Red Cross and World Vision, a Christian humanitarian charity organization that serves 100 million people in nearly 100 countries around the world.

"Being involved in the community is very important," Rediger says.

Economic Realities Force Change in Business Model

Despite The Bridal Collection's success, the current recession has definitely taken its toll: Couture sales have dropped dramatically; girls are shopping more, but spending less; and overhead has gone up.

Additionally, at the most dramatic point (Oct.-Nov. 2008), the average price of a dress fell by more than \$500, further cutting into profits.

"Everything's off, from traffic patterns to sales," Crandall says. "It's taking more work to make less money."

Still, the duo remains positive, reminding themselves that gross sales are still increasing while taking a proac-

tive approach to cost-cutting.

"Before we expected anyone else to make cuts, we made cuts ourselves," says Rediger, who gave up her company car.

Then they asked employees for their ideas on how to save money.

Suggestions included forgoing birthday treats and buying cheaper toilet paper. Additionally, there was no holiday event last year.

The Bridal Collection, which had to lay off 10 percent of its staff, has increased its volume of private-label, higher-margin merchandise, and Rediger and Crandall buy differently now, "analytically, not emotionally."

"Before making a purchase we ask ourselves, 'Is it going to sell?' 'What's the gross margin?' 'What's the turn rate?'" Crandall says.

They have also cut their advertising budget nearly 80 percent by hiring a full-time business and marketing manager, Leigh Pete.

Under Pete's guidance, The Bridal Collection's marketing campaign has transitioned away from expensive print media and now focuses largely on the



The Bridal Collection staff: (L to R, back row) business manager Leigh Pete; bridal consultant Dee Jones; general manager Jaleen Thi; vice president Lynn Crandall; bridal consultant Christina Zwingleberg. (L to R, front row) inventory associate Sherri Furlong; seamstress Abby Krueger; bridal consultant Mackenzie Bonig; receptionist Meghan Carlberg; alterations manager Annie Gomez; president GayLynn Rediger; seamstress Serafima Sherback. Not pictured inventory associate Marge Bezdek; bridal consultants Ricki Mayes, Andrea Richardson, Ashley Weatherly and Melanie Jannicelli; seamstress Nhu Nguyen.

Internet. It includes everything from a Web site (www.coloradobridalcollection.com), blog and Facebook/Twitter presence, to promotional events such as designer trunk shows, sales and fundraising for charities.

"(Marketing) was always so hit and miss before because there wasn't one person to oversee all of it. And it was impossible for one of us to do it," Rediger says. "(Hiring Leigh) was one of smartest business moves we've made."

Focusing On The Future: Much Will Remain The Same

With a new year just beginning, Rediger and Crandall are concentrating on improving The Bridal Collection.

To accomplish this goal, Rediger is in the process of writing a comprehensive training manual, which she expects to complete in 2010.

"We felt we've been too busy to be as organized and structured as we should be," she says. "(This training manual) will help fix that."

The manual, which will be about 120 pages long, aims to make employees more efficient and accountable, as well as provide protection for the store by detailing exact expectations.

Other than that, not much else will change. The Bridal Collection will still operate ethically and with integrity, aiming to provide exquisite bridal attire with superior customer service in an elegant atmosphere.

They'll still provide a great work environment for staff while emphasizing the importance of a good work-life balance. And they'll continue to do all of this from the same 6,200-square-foot store that they've called home for the past six years.

"We don't plan on expanding into other locations," Crandall says. "If we ever expand, it's going to be in one larger building that we own and can divide into multiple sections."

"We thought we'd be in a position to move into a new building by now, but that's not going to happen because no one is loaning in Colorado," Rediger agrees. "(Expanding) is still our long-range goal, but for now it's kind of on hold. Our vision adapts to what's been going in the marketplace."

Jami Wiens, a 28-year-old business-development coordinator from Loveland, Colo., purchased her strapless, A-line wedding gown in February 2009 from a now-defunct regional bridal shop. The dress cost \$1,900, which Wiens paid in full upfront, largely because that price represented a discount of about \$600 that the "very friendly" owner agreed to give her if she bought the gown right away.

Wiens' dress was supposed to arrive in May. When it didn't show up, the owner said there had been problems with designer but that Wiens' gown would arrive in June.

"I'd never done this before, so I thought of course, that sounds reasonable," recalls Wiens, who also spent another \$300 ordering a veil and headpiece from the store.

However, June came and went with no gown. The store's story remained the same: The designer was having problems; now, Wiens' dress would arrive in August.

"By then I was getting a little nervous, considering my wedding was in September," Wiens recalls. "(The owner) kept telling me my dress had shipped, but what made me suspicious was that she couldn't provide a tracking number."

Finally, one day Wiens' twin sister called The Bridal Collection, which she knew carried the same designer, and asked if the store was experiencing similar troubles. The person who answered the phone said she'd received three or four identical calls from girls who'd purchased their dresses at that particular shop.

"That's when all hell broke loose," Wiens recalls.

Wiens immediately returned to the store with her father, sat down face-to-face with the owner and asked what was going on. The owner said she'd been working with The Bridal Collection and was going to release the gowns to that store.

She also gave Wiens a refund for her gown and accessories. However, Wiens says the owner later took the accessories refund away, leaving her out \$300. Fortunately, Wiens was able to close her credit card before the gown refund could be renege.

"At one point she also sent me a scathing e-mail saying her sister had died of cancer and she couldn't believe, given the circumstances, I was accusing her of this," Wiens recalls. "She's a pathological liar."

The gown refund, however, didn't solve Wiens' problem. Now six weeks away from her wedding, she still didn't have a dress.

Enter The Bridal Collection. Crandall stepped in, calling the designer and tracking down Wiens' gown. When it became clear the dress wasn't going to be released to The Bridal Collection, she invited Wiens to come to the store and pick out any sample gown she wanted for free, personally staying at the store well past closing time to help her shop.

Wiens found her dream dress, a sweetheart, strapless A-line gown with jewels throughout bodice, which Crandall gave to her and immediately rushed into alterations. She also rushed Wiens' mom and sister dresses at a discount. Everything arrived looking beautiful in plenty of time for Wiens' big day.

"The Bridal Collection is amazing, an absolutely professional class act," says Wiens, who has since referred three people to the store. "The kindness and compassion they showed us from the very beginning was amazing."

She continues, "Lots of companies say they care about their clients, but The Bridal Collection truly does. That's why they've been in business for as long as they have, and why they'll continue to be in business for years to come."



Jami Wiens (Jenni Maroney Photography).