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OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS!

by Linda Turner Griepentrog

As a shop owner, you need to always be looking for ways to expand your business and bring in new customers. Thinking outside the confines of your normal parameters is a way to do just that. Explore these two opportunities as ways to offer more to your current customers and bring in some new ones.

1. Patchwork Party

Good things come by the dozen — at least that's the philosophy of Deb Luttrell, owner of Stitchin' Heaven in Quitman, Texas, who started the online Patchwork Party in 2006.

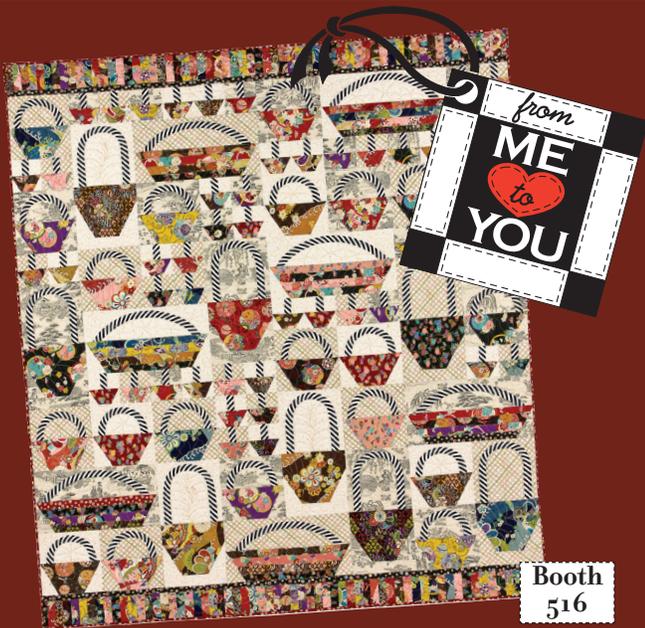


The program offers two online consumer "parties" a year, each featuring a particular fabric company's line and twelve 12-inch sampler blocks designed by Marti Michell. Each block is assigned to one of 12 participating shops, and they in turn develop their own quilt using all the featured blocks. The blocks vary from simple to complex, some with up to 65 or 70 pieces. Each store Web site then offers visitors a finishing kit with border/sashing fabrics and backing for their particular design. Most shops also offer the party guest templates, notions and other add-ons for the quilt-making process.

In addition to purchasing block kits and other items while visiting each site, customers can sign up for the shop mailing list, newsletters and promotional information, expanding the participating shops' customer base.

Like any party, the hosts are limited, but Deb has an ongoing list of shops interested in participating. To become a party host, your shop must have at least 10,000 customers on an e-mail list and must not be a fabric discounter. The fee to participate in the party includes all the finished blocks (made by Deb!), ongoing advertising and promotion for the event, and postcards for in-store use as bag stuffers.

The shopper numbers grow with each event, bringing thousands of customers to each store site. Deb describes the party guests as "fabric addicts," so despite the economy, they need to get their "fix," creating record sales (and a record number of visitors) for the party shop hosts. For more information, contact Deb Luttrell, www.stitchinheaven.com, (800) 841-3901.



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2. You Can Make It®

Chances are good some of your customers have asked, "Where can I go to learn to sew?" Some want to learn to create non-quilting projects or simply need help with fitting their pieced garments.



You Can Make It® owner, Pam Tripaldi, can help with either of these questions and help your store sales at the same time. The company licenses teachers to teach sewing, providing detailed manuals, lesson plans, handouts and other items for class use. As a shop owner, you can purchase the curriculum and offer classes in your store, and several employees may teach from a single program purchase. The focus of the lessons is to teach sewing skills, from beginning to tailoring, depending on the instruction level.

You Can Make It® offers a seven-level series of two-hour learn-to-sew lessons, available in VHS or DVD formatting. These can be used along with a live teacher to offer in-store classes, or the lessons can be sold to consumers. (Note: Regulations prohibit renting.)

The program uses commercial patterns as teaching tools, and, of course, fabric and notions to aid store sales. A separate lesson program, Make it Fit®, teaches customers how to adjust their custom sewn garments or ready-made purchases to fit their bodies. Currently, pant fitting is the only lesson available, but future topics include skirts, tops, jackets and evening wear.

Christine McClendon, a licensed You Can Make It® instructor, offers both quilting and sewing lessons at Sew Encouraged in Odessa, Texas. She notes considerable crossover between garment and quilting interests amongst students, especially when they see projects displayed on the wall. Since many You Can Make It® sewing projects utilize cotton fabrics, there's great opportunity for quilt shop owners to incorporate the lessons into their class offerings.

As a quilt shop owner, you may not have thought of teaching general sewing, but why send your customers elsewhere? Keep them in your store and expand their knowledge base. Use the You Can Make It® program and tell everyone "We teach sewing here!" — a perfect window sign as well.

For more information, contact You Can Make It®, www.youcanmakeit.com, (888) 576-2739.

Linda Griepentrog owns G Wiz Creative Services and writes and edits from her office outside Portland, Oregon. She is the author of four books and also leads fabric shopping tours for the American Sewing Guild. gwizdesigns@aol.com.




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