

Develop Your Staff and Local Teachers and See Your Profits Soar

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Let your imagination take off with these easy, straight forward plans to have your shop buzzing with activity. Many of these plans require no additional up front investment. Others require a little investment, but will pay off many times over.

Some of the topics discussed below apply only to staff, others apply only to teachers, and many apply to both, especially when a person is both a staff member and an instructor.

Get Organized.

Learn and teach time management skills and efficient ways of working. Consolidate similar tasks to be done at one time. Don't chase around putting out little brush fires. Be proactive and not reactive. See two examples below.

- Keep a list of products you need to order. Order them at one sitting via phone, fax, or online.
- When cutting and folding many fat quarters, cut them all and stack them. Then, find a comfortable seat and fold them all. This goes so much faster than standing at the cutting table, cutting four or six from one fabric and folding those before cutting others. Saving time is increasing your profits.

Define Staff Responsibilities.

Customer service is job one! Once all the customers are served, staff can attend to other duties, returning immediately as necessary to serve customers. Answer the telephone promptly, but if you have customers waiting, take messages and return calls after dealing with customers who are in your shop.

Always have more than one staff person working when shop is open. Never expect a person who is teaching a class to operate the shop at the same time. Have another person available for sales, etc.

Set priorities and assign duties. Make sure you are communicating. Assign responsibility of sections to individual staff persons, i.e., notions, books, patterns, class sign-ups and supplies. For instance, if one is assigned the notions, notions should be the priority of that staff person. After tidying and making sure everything is in stock as necessary she can assist in other areas. Always emphasize that first and foremost she must attend to customers in the shop. Your staff needs to constantly communicate. The person assigned the notions must be told by the person in charge of class sign-ups and supplies about any new notion needed for a class, and she must be kept informed about how many classes are requiring a specific notion so that the inventory is well managed and the store remains stocked.

Organize and tidy the spaces. Have a well stocked, not overstocked, store. An overstocked, cluttered store makes it difficult to “see the forest for the trees”. In other words, when you are looking at everything, it is hard to see anything. Organize your products. If you sell gift items, have a special area for them. If tins, coffee mugs, calendars, jewelry, etc., are sprinkled all around, customers may assume they are cute decorations and not items for purchase. Small vignettes are the places to display several items in a group to show the customers how to use them.

Change displays frequently. My local shop had two chairs flanking the front door. Every week the store manager would place six to ten bolts of coordinated fabrics in each chair. These fabrics were not necessarily new in the shop, nor were they from the same line or manufacturer. They were just an attractive grouping. Regular customers checked the chairs every time they came to the shop to see what Sherry had put in the chairs. The most frequent comment went something like this, “I love these. I don’t know what I will do with them, but I need two yards of each!” The moral of this story is to learn how to sell what you have.

Even when there are no customers in the shop, there should always be something your staff can do. Do not allow them to sit and sew or quilt on their own projects! Customers will hesitate to interrupt them.

Encourage education.

Offer free classes when there are open spaces. Make a policy agreeable to all of your teachers. If there are any available spots in the class after all paid customers have registered, allow your staff or teachers to take the class for free. Your staff will be more able to assist customers when they come to the shop after class with a question or when a new customer inquires about taking that class when it is offered again in the future.

Pay half or the entire fee for classes with guest teachers. Whether the class is in your shop, another shop, or hosted by the guild, your shop will benefit by sending one of your staff or instructors.

Sell books, patterns, and tools to staff and teachers at cost. Sell fabric at a discount, but not at cost.

Assist your local teachers in acquiring books, teaching outlines, tools, etc., from the manufacturers. You may be very surprised by what information is available on the internet to support publications or how generous publishers and manufacturers may be with free products to be used as teaching tools.

Encourage ownership.

Pay teachers a percentage of the class fee (75%) not an hourly rate. Individuals who are both shop employees and teachers should be paid hourly when working the shop and a percentage when teaching.

To acquire shop samples, provide the pattern and fabric at cost or less. Consider providing the fabric and pattern for free with the deal that the staff member may have the model when it is no longer of use to the shop.

Delegate and outsource. Do what you do best and outsource the rest. Here are three examples.

- Newsletters and Websites – Do you have great publishing and internet skills? Even if you do, is that the best use of your time as a shop owner? Often outsourcing such jobs results in a more professional job which will attract more business and is done in a much shorter time frame. In the end you come out ahead.
- Payroll and Accounting – In the same vein as outsourcing newsletters and websites, unless you have great bookkeeping skills, using a payroll and bill paying service and/or hiring an accountant to audit your books and prepare your tax return is well worth the money. Usually an accountant finds ways to save you more money than his fees will cost you. A bill paying service can help you maintain great credit and avoid late charges and COD fees.
- Cleaning – Yes, you and all of your staff know how to clean, but is that the best use of your trained staff? Again, hiring a service can be economical if they are faster than your staff and provide all the tools and cleaning products.

Encourage and allow creativity.

As a budding local teacher I had a wonderful mentor, my local shop owner Linda Liebeg. She opened her store to experiment. She gently pushed her teachers into publishing books and patterns and marketing. It is because of Linda that I have published twelve books, dozens of patterns, and more than 150 mystery quilt patterns.

Here is an example of Linda's vision. Linda organized a “Just Beginning” class. She recognized that beginning quilters needed a good foundation and that they bonded with their first teacher. Linda promoted her four core teachers by having each teach two sessions of an eight week comprehensive class. At the end of the series, each quilter felt confident in her abilities as well as familiar with all the teachers and ready to jump into any future class offering.

Create time for your staff.

Use your distributor reps. A Checker rep that I knew from Oregon would go into her customers' shops and take inventory for them. She told the shop owner what was missing and what should be ordered. The shop owner gave the order approval, and as easily as that the task was finished.

Use (involve) your customers. Some of them are really great for making displays and samples or reorganizing the shop.

Encourage camaraderie.

Do things to retain a good and happy staff. Celebrate staff appreciation. Have employment anniversary and birthday parties and give gifts of store products.

Have a quilt 'til you wilt event just for the staff. Use this event to make samples for the store and upcoming classes. Staff and teachers can learn from each other as they work. During the event you can discuss many things such as problems/problem customers and how to deal with them. Conversation will flow much better while working than in a typical staff meeting.

Budget for and provide profit sharing for management or long term employees.

Take staff members to Market. Make it a road trip instead of flying. A party of four can drive roundtrip for little more than one can fly, including a night in a hotel each way for long trips. Look into it. At Market you can send everyone on a scouting mission. They will find things you miss and get details about things that excite them. Nothing will be lost in translation like it is when you try to bring ideas back to them.

I have organized and scheduled a professional level quilt retreat, Your Quilting Business (YQB) to teach and encourage peer learning and sharing. I love teaching shop owners, staff, and quilting instructors. I cannot possibly teach all of the quilters, so I rely on you. Classes and retreats where teachers, staff, and shop owners are among only peers can address issues differently than those where they are intermingled among hobby quilters. Pick up information in our booth, or find out more on our website.

We are happy to answer questions!

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