

The perfect order



The Harrogate Bridal Show is northern Europe's most important event. Go there armed with a well-planned buying strategy, but first, says Maria Musgrove, take a long, hard look at what you've got... and get shot of anything – and any supplier – that isn't working for you

If “We've got another ten of these” sounds all too familiar then maybe it's time to re-assess how you get the perfect mix of gowns and accessories in your shop. What seemed a good idea at a fizz-fuelled fair in foreign parts often doesn't have the same appeal five months later on a foggy Friday afternoon in Fife or Folkestone when your first stock order lands! So what do you do to get the perfect mix of stock when you next go buying?

Stock pre-show, take stock and I don't just mean a stocktake. Be brave and pull out ALL the dresses you've never taken an order on and think what it would be like if you were a start up.

Imagine you're just opening your shop and ask yourself “Who is my target bride?” and decide what of your remaining stock would appeal to her. Only after this cull (possibly a massive 50% has now gone) should you analyse your gaps. One of my Irish mentoring clients opening a new shop devised a spreadsheet (including photos) of styles and fabrics. This speedily showed that even with just four brands and an empty shop to fill there was a risk of too many sweetheart, lace, illusion back fishtails so she needed to consider the mix of her suppliers.

Decision time – she dropped one label and sourced different looks from another supplier. If your suppliers are offering more of the same then it may be time to work out an elegant exit strategy and start scouting for new talent.

If you've discovered a new label don't be complacent – several of your competitors may also be circling. So you need to have a seduction strategy.

Acquiring a new label is a seduction – you may have to sell yourself to them as much as they need to sell themselves to you. Think about how you position your brand and what will differentiate you from other boutiques who may want that collection. Being proactive pre-show. Booking early appointments has secured four labels for me over the past two

years. Get in early to secure the label before anyone else does.

You need to stick to the schedule. Plan your time at the show like a military operation and finalise orders at the end of the show or as soon as you're back in the shop. Often we're into another buying round before our last stock order has been delivered. Make sure that you have visuals of what's already on order and take photos of all the gowns you are considering buying. Before signing off new orders, compare all these images otherwise that savage cull may need to start all over again. This means burning the midnight oil with little time for socialising.

Ask yourself if this a buying trip or a boozing trip? Even stopping off for a quick gossip whilst walking around the aisles loses valuable time and can often mean little time to sweat the small stuff. It's important also to allow time to buy accessories as they can help elevate the average sale by as much as 50%.

Size matters so analyse what you repeat in. Some brands attract size zeros and others size 16 plus. Experiment with ordering 8s and 10s in certain styles with larger sizes in others instead of the automatic “size 12 or 14”. Our repeats soared when we did this with a well-known Spanish brand.

And finally, if all else fails, employ a savvy soothsayer, preferably with extensive bridal experience complete with crystal ball who can predict next season's trends and pick out the best sellers. Anyone know where to find one?! ■

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