

Rare Finds



A unique niche helps these salons find success.

There are many amazing bridal salons throughout the country. Their customer service, gorgeous product, dedicated staff and elegant showroom floors all combine to create a first-class shopping experience for the bride. Every once in a while you also run into a salon with a unique niche. VOWS is thrilled to share the stories of four that have found success in some pretty creative ways.

Cherished Bridals Pompton Lakes, NJ

Where Consignment Meets Full-Service

Cherished Bridals has hundreds of brand-new gowns in stock, yet they hardly spend a dime on inventory.

Rather the 1,800-square-foot salon is New Jersey's only bridal consignment boutique — although you wouldn't necessarily know it from walking in the front door. Everything about the seven-year-old store, from its charming décor to its top-notch treatment of customers, screams "full-service!"

Cherished Bridals works with six local independent salons, who receive checks every two weeks.

"We have found a niche in the bridal wear world," manager Barbara Cassini says. "It's just a great shop."

Cherished Bridals moved to its current location 18 months ago, effectively doubling its size. It began, however, in the basement of a private home, where a woman consigned wedding gowns to make ends meet. After that woman passed away, her daughter, Michele Forrest, turned the business into a tiny storefront in order to fulfill her mother's dream. She worked it herself for a while before hiring Cassini as manager.

Since opening in late 2008 business at Cherished Bridals has taken off. Today, the salon has more than 400 gowns in stock, of which only two styles

are identical; 85 percent of dresses are new with tags and unaltered. As well they carry 200-plus veils and a variety of accessories including headpieces, sashes, shoes and handbags.

"If a bride's going to wear it, we have it," Cassini says. "It's nice because girls can do a total ensemble standing there in their dress. That's a huge plus!"

About 70 percent of their merchandise comes from independent bridal salons. Currently the store is working with six, all located within a two-hour range.

"We have wonderful relationships (with these salons)," Cassini says. "We're able to supply (them) a nice cash stream by selling their sample, discontinued and overstock gowns and accessories for them, thereby assuring their high-end customers don't end up looking through sale racks and spending less than they are capable of."

Altogether Cherished Bridals takes in about 40 gowns per month from independent bridal salons, pricing them at 50 percent of retail. The average gown sells for \$600-\$800 and when it



A bottle of champagne is given to each bride who purchases a gown. "They have become a fan favorite," manager **Barbara Cassini** says.



A bride donated these Yes/No paddles, which are used by entourages to vote on dresses. "They're very amusing to the girls," manager **Barbara Cassini** says. "They help create a fun atmosphere."

does, the seller gets half. Cherished Bridals, which sells about four gowns per week, is currently looking to work with additional independents that specialize in plus-size gowns.

"Every two weeks we print checks," Cassini says. "It's really a win-win for us and the bridal salons."

Cherished Bridals also receives consigned gowns from girls all over the U.S., both unworn with tags and once-worn bridal couture. The salon won't take a gown older than three years in order to ensure its styles remain current and gowns crisp.

"We have a huge and ever-growing inventory," Cassini says.



Cherished Bridals works hard to create a boutique-like feel, manager **Barbara Cassini** says.



A lot of the Bootique's merchandise crosses over into bridal and prom.

Since it's just Cassini and a seamstress in the store, appointments are handled one at a time, although walk-ins are also welcome. Girls can bring as many people with them as they want.

"This is not a high-pressured sale," Cassini says. "The gowns sell themselves at the prices we're at."

And the salon has worked very hard to create a boutique-like feel, from the picturesque way they display accessories to the plush, comfortable sitting and fitting rooms. Gowns are arranged by size, 2-26, and there are many special touches: If a girl buys a gown, she receives a complementary bottle of champagne and 50 percent off a veil. Adorable "yes" and "no" paddles, given by a former customer, are used by entouragees to vote on dresses.

They aren't immune from the typical problems of independents, either. Occasionally, girls looking to consign gowns show up with counterfeits from China.

"These are awful, awful imitations," Cassini says. "We won't take those gowns to sell but we do have two in our shop. However these are only to show the girls."

In many ways, Cherished Bridals is your typical independent bridal salon, simply with a unique approach to inventory.

"We put (our gown) pictures on our website and ship to people all over the world," Cassini says. "It's crazy that this tiny storefront is selling to people in Australia. It takes my breath away!"

Fiancée Bridal
Minot, ND

A Spooktacular Idea

Fiancée Bridal has been bringing quality Halloween costumes to the Minot, N.D. area for six years.

The "Fiancée Bootique" opens its Halloween store when the Downtown Minot Association has its annual "Winewalk." This event brings 1,200 guests through the store in just four short hours. Serving a one-ounce pour of wine paired with an appetizer at 29

different businesses "makes for the perfect opening night!" Owner Debbie Harris says. "People buy things that evening and wear it to the next store. Anything that lights up is a hot seller that night. That's great marketing free of charge!"

Fiancée staff spends one full week decorating two store windows and the "Bootique." This year's fireplace displayed ever-changing pieces of art scaring shoppers at the entrance (See a video on VOWS' Facebook page).

Fiancée employees enjoy doing the Halloween Bootique because it brings a different niche and customer to the bridal store at a normally quiet time of the year.

"Most formalwear customers end up going to the Bootique and are amazed at the quantity and quality!" Harris says.

Fiancée takes pride in their costumes and treats them like formals. Everything is steamed and a matching, colored crinoline goes under all face outs.

"Every Little Red Hood must have a picnic basket for her purse paired next to the Grandma Big Bad Wolf", Harris says.

Couples costumes and plus size are Fiancée specialties. Harris, owner for 31 years, attends the Halloween Expo in New Orleans every February to see the newest items. Not only does this help Fiancée keep on-trend with decorations and costumes, but bridal stores "would be amazed at the merchandise that crosses over into the bridal/prom industry at this market," Harris says.

"OppoSuits, for example, offers a three-piece suit in a very nice quality, in every color of the rainbow perfect for prom goers," she says.





The average person visiting Fiancée's Halloween Boutique spends \$100 to \$150. However there are some customers who love Halloween more than Christmas; they return each year for a new costume and decorations. Multiple visits by these customers often occur during the Halloween season just to see if new items are coming in.

"Fiancée loves it when Halloween starts and loves it when it ends. . . just like prom season!" Harris says.

Finery Bridal & Trend Waterloo, IA

A Perfect Marriage

Many bridal salons sell veils, jewelry and other accessories to complement their gown selections.

Finery Bridal & Trend, however, has taken a unique path. The 35-year-old store, located in an historic building in downtown Waterloo, Iowa, sells wedding attire on its lower two levels and trendy women's clothing on the third floor.

"Essentially, we are running two different stores out of one building," says owner Natalie Mormann, who purchased the business from its previous owner in June 2006 with her fiancé - now husband - Chad. "(This approach) has been really great. I think it's one of the best business decisions we've ever made."

While the bridal portion of Finery (previously called Bride's Corner) was already well established before Mormann bought the business, the trend boutique is a new addition spearheaded by her. The idea took root in 2014, when Mormann made a series of necessary renovations to the 140-year-old building. This "total gut job" gave the store an industrial, antique look while at the same time opening up the previously dormant third floor. The 3,900-square-foot store, which carries bridal, maids, flower girls, tuxedo and prom, suddenly found itself with an additional 2,700 square feet of selling space.

So a decision had to be made: what to do with all that extra room?

"I wanted to sell something that was not necessarily bridal that could help us get through the slower months," Mormann says. "With the amount of

Fiancée Bridal in Minot, N.D., has found great success with its Halloween Boutique



*The trend boutique gives
brides a reason to come back
after their weddings.*

women we have coming into our store on a daily basis, a women's trend boutique seemed like the logical solution."

So that's exactly what she created. Overall store renovations were complete in January 2015, and the trend boutique opened shortly thereafter. It carries hundreds of items including sweaters, shorts, scarves, jewelry, and, more recently, jeans. The prices range anywhere from \$10-\$65, "something you wouldn't feel bad about picking up on an impulse," Mormann says.

The way Finery is set up, all customers enter through the front door, where they can either stay on the main level and shop for bridal (the price point ranges from \$800-\$2,200) or take the stairway up to the trend boutique. Each section has its own fitting rooms, although staff is cross-trained to work both areas.

"I didn't want our bridal customer to be confused by trend racks in the bridal showroom and the trend customer to feel out of place shopping for regular clothing with women running around in bridal gowns," Mormann says. "I knew it was important that the two areas have separate but cohesive feels to one another."

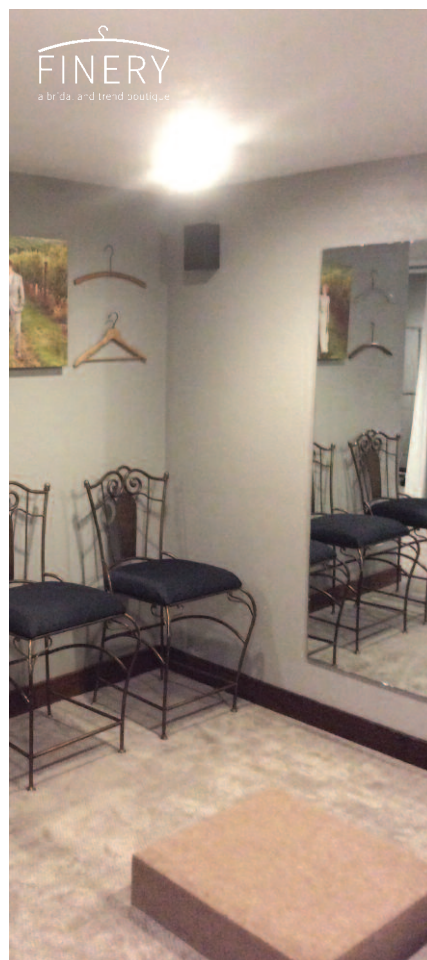
And although it's only been six short months since the trend boutique opened, it's already an undeniable hit. Approximately 75 percent of customers go upstairs to check it out; of those about 60 percent make a purchase on their first visit.

Quite often, Mormann says, bridal entourages run upstairs before leaving and return with a bag full of "Finery Finds." As well, brides look for outfits for their engagement pictures, showers, rehearsals and honeymoon. Additionally, Finery is creating quite the following of non-bridal customers, including those searching for an outfit for their senior pictures or even something to wear to work. Some of these women have later become bridesmaids or even brides.

"We are creating a loyal customer base," Mormann says, adding that she loves it when brides stop back in after the wedding to shop for everyday wear.

"It's great to be able to talk with them and see how married life is going," she says. "(The trend boutique) gives them a reason to come back and continue that relationship."

Finery's positive momentum keeps building as the word about their new unique niche continues to spread. The store recently won three local "Best of



When remodeling, owner **Natalie Mormann** elected to decorate with industrial and antique furnishings. "People love what we have done and we have had several people just bring others in to simply look at the space," she says. "It has been amazing and I literally pinch myself every morning I turn the lights on."

the Best" awards: second place in both the bridal store and women's clothing categories, and third place for women's accessories.

"I think that's great for our first year, and now that renovations are done I'm really excited to see where things take us," Mormann says. "(This store) is really something I'm proud of and passionate about. We are now a very unique business with a lot to offer our community."

Victoria's Bridal Couture Seattle, WA

Pet Store

The most popular staff member at Victoria's Bridal Couture in Seattle is sometimes never even noticed.

Rather 50-pound Mickey, a 10-year-old Xolo mix, spends most of his day quietly hanging out behind the salon's front desk.

When customers do spot him and he comes out from behind the baby gate to say hi, "people get really excited," owner Victoria Glenn says. "Everyone who notices him falls in love with him."

Glenn didn't intend on getting a

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store pet. Rather Mickey belongs to her manager, Stephanie, who rescued him years ago. At the time, Stephanie had a boyfriend and the two shared custody of the dog. When that relationship ended, she didn't want to leave Mickey at home alone, so he has accompanied her to work everyday since.

Glenn says she was initially open to the idea of Mickey being in her store because the dog was pretty mellow and "my manager is very important to me." The reality of Mickey's presence, however, has proven even better than she expected. As a result he has spent every working day in her store for the past two years.

"It has been a really positive experience," Glenn says. "Mickey is really mellow, not at all aggressive or interested in what's going on. He's barked at maybe three people in the two years he has

been here. We're really lucky."

In addition to delighting customers and employees alike, Mickey generates conversation and creates bonds — even with difficult brides.

"Everyone has a dog, everyone has a story about a dog so they feel like they can relate," she says. "Especially with us doing alterations, things can get pretty tense. I think Mickey helps the atmosphere in our store to be relaxed."

One of the biggest benefits of Mickey's presence, however, comes at the end of Glenn's workday. In July 2015, feeling stressed out from working so many hours, Glenn decided she was in need of some dog therapy. So she began sitting with Mickey on a bench in the fitting area during the last six to eight minutes of every day. It's a ritual both dog and storeowner have grown to enjoy.

"Mickey will come running in the back to make sure I'm here, then he'll sit right next to me and stick his head under my arm," Glenn says. "It's very calming, and it definitely helps me relax."



Shop dog **Mickey** is allowed free reign of **Victoria's Bridal Couture** in Seattle, although it's a privilege the 10-year-old Xolo mix never abuses.

"He's constantly coming in the back area to look for crackers but he doesn't go near any merchandise," Glenn says. "Making a shop pet work definitely takes the right animal. I'd never have a cat because I wouldn't trust it wouldn't sleep on anything."