

“How much is that spinner in the window?”



*by Kristin Nicholas*

One day last October, I picked up my usual stack of mail which included numerous retail mail-order catalogs. During the pre-holiday season my box is flooded with these booklets. Catalogs, we are told, are modern shopping conveniences for we busy Americans. I enjoy glancing through them to find the newest fashion or gadget. That day, one particular catalog caught my eye. I had seen the name before: Landau's of Princeton, New Jersey. Their holiday catalog was filled with woolen clothing made in Iceland. I am a textile specialist with a special interest in wool as I raise my own Romney sheep and spin, knit and weave with a passion. I was immediately attracted to this artistically produced catalog which used a creative approach to mail-order retailing. The colorful pages featured Icelandic woolens with photos of long-haired sheep, hand-knitters, fishermen, and landscapes interspersed between the copy to successfully supplement the products.

I was impressed. Between the covers, the reader could learn about wool fabrics, care of wool clothing, the country of Iceland, and sheep. Most mail-order establishments begin their catalogs with an introduction to their company, their philosophies, and products. I found the name of Robert Landau on that opening page and proceeded to write him a professional and friendly letter about my own sheep and wool business and to compliment him on his attractive catalog. I included a copy of my catalog and a resume. Very little time lost on my part and I felt satisfied.

The letter slipped from my mind until I found a scrap of paper with a scribbled message and phone number on it. (My 13 year old sister would not make a good answering service.) I called the number and to my surprise Robert Landau had called me regarding my letter. I drove to Princeton to meet with him. I was dressed in a handsome, handwoven blazer, skirt, and pumps

and carried a briefcase full of pertinent information. Robert's first words to me were "Kristin, you certainly don't look like a sheep person to me." He was impressed with my enthusiasm and business-like attitude about my work. Together we worked up an idea for a holiday window display which would feature me performing different aspects of wool processing. In past years, Landau's holiday window had featured kittens playing among their products to catch the attention of passing shoppers. The kittens were from a local animal shelter and were there for adoption. I was to replace the very popular holiday kitten display.

I designed my window with the premise that I would educate customers on the processing of sheep's wool into finished products along with offering my many items for sale. The 24'x6' window contained a spinning wheel, raw wool in both natural and dyed colors, a table loom, woolen yarns, my own handcrafted products and sheep-centered gift items. The Landau's furnished me with a regal full-size stuffed ram complete with a nice set of curly horns, a small brown stuffed lamb, a Christmas tree, and numerous sheepskins from Iceland which suitably complemented my products. I kept the window simple so viewers would focus on my demonstrations of carding, spinning, and weaving. I placed pictures and descriptions of myself with my sheep around the window. Evenings and Sundays, when most stores are closed, are popular times for window shopping in Princeton. The display was effective in arousing browsers' curiosity and bringing customers back to see me working with the wool.

Every day during the holiday season between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I could be seen spinning or weaving wool in Landau's window. At first it was a strange feeling working while being watched by strangers, especially since I am used to working in solitude. There were all kinds of jokes from my friends about Kristin being a goldfish. Quickly I adapted and made the most of the situation.

I found most people to be very interested in what process of wool working I was demonstrating at the particular moment they walked by. Some townspeople stopped by daily to check on my progress. I encouraged people to come and talk with me inside the store. I used flash cards to explain the techniques.

A window can be a great source of communication; it was fun to listen to a viewer explain to a friend exactly what I was doing. Many people commented that they could remember their grandmothers working with wool in the old country. One gentleman had actually learned to spin in Europe during World War II while in the French countryside. I was mistaken for a native Icelander on several occasions. The children were the most fascinated. They could stand for half an hour just watching me spin, card, and weave. It was a nice opportunity for their parents to shop inside the store without worrying about them.

One of the biggest hits was my little mixed breed dog, Haida, who looks like a sheepdog. Occasionally I brought her with me into the window.

Haida has a wonderful personality normally, but being on stage made her feel all the more important. She would sit or lay perfectly still alongside one of the sheep. Most people commented, "and look at the little fake dog." Haida would pick up the cue and confuse them ever so slightly by subtly blinking or turning her head. She was a consolation for all the folks who had come to see the kittens playing in the window.

I met many fascinating people during the course of the window display. Anthropologists, newspaper reporters, bankers, pastors, students, sheep producers, and pre-schoolers all stopped by to relate some sheep- or wool-related experience of their own to me. I found there is an enormous group of people who are already engaged in some kind of wool processing whether it be spinning, knitting, weaving, felting, crocheting, or sheep producing. So many potential customers for wool processors are waiting for high quality products, whether custom done or production oriented.

I encourage you to try a different approach to marketing your handcrafts. Make plenty of contacts within your community. Many attempts may be futile but there could be that one time when someone will be interested enough to give you a chance. Stretch your imagination. Be creative in your marketing. Be prepared to sell a large amount of work. If your concept and display are excellent, half the battle with your customer is won. Marketing begins with a quality product. You must go many steps further and make a good appearance, be friendly, explain your techniques, and be proud of yourself and your work.

Be responsible to the people you are working with and to your customers. The Landau's commented to me at the end of my stay that they were surprised at how reliable I was. Evidently they had worked with other craftspeople who were not and had developed a negative attitude because of those past experiences. If you are professional, business-like, and responsible in your dealings with other business people, you will be making it a little easier for the next craftsperson.

Try to get some attention from the press by having photos run in local newspapers. The local Princeton paper happened to be sponsoring a contest on holiday window displays. My window at Landau's received the prize for the "most unusual". A photo of me spinning was run in an article on the holiday windows which included a description of my sheep and wool business. The Landau's also ran advertisements thanking me for my time and talents.

Present a total image. Have business cards ready to hand out to clients. Keep a customer list for future mailings. Treat your business as if it were Bloomingdale's. Consumers are interested in the person who made the product they are purchasing. Give complete care instructions and fiber content. Explain the technique used in producing the item on the hang tag attached to the article. Many handcrafted products become very special gifts for your clients. They want to understand the technique so they will be able to tell their special friend about the item and the person who made it. □