



# Millcreek instills Goodwill

by Linda Hungerford, freelance contributor

From the bubbly voice answering the telephone to the how-can-I-help-you attitude of eight full-time staff to the overdrive enthusiasm of the owner, if you phone or visit Millcreek Vac, Sewing & Fabric in Erie, PA, you'll notice this store is somehow more than average. While Millcreek stocks a nice selection of 2,500 to 3,000 fabric bolts and its 5,500 square footage seem just right, it's the bustling

activity and store events that set it apart.

"Let's face it, we have to be different," explains owner Judy Fenton. "As an independent retailer, we're probably not going to be competitive on price, and maybe not on selection either, so we have to do something that sets us apart. Even if customers have to spend an extra buck or two, they'll shop where someone cares about them and is involved in their community."

Millcreek's customer care is evident in several respects:

- First, when a sewing machine is sold. "We give free one-on-one lessons -- as many as you need -- forever and ever, amen!" says Judy.

"We don't offer a machine 101 class on this or that model. Instead, sewing machine owners get as much as an hour at a time to learn about whatever the owner wants to do."

- Second, when a customer walks into the store. During a VDTA marketing class Judy says she was "hit by a 2 x 4." Upon considering answers to the question, "What's the most important thing that brings customers back to a store?" she was surprised to learn customers believe it's "that they remember my name." Each Millcreek employee speaks aloud a customer's name whenever possible. Judy says, "Whoever knows the customer has to say the name loud enough so the rest of us can hear it! Speaking a customer's name makes them feel special."

- Third, with its standing invitation to "bring in whatever you're working on. Whether a customer is having an issue with a project related to a machine, or embroidery on fabric for a quilt, or want to know how to use batting as stabilizer...whatever it is," says Judy, "let us help."

- "We also expect everyone to come back and show us their finished project," she says. "We take a picture of the quilter with



Judy Fenton, owner

**Millcreek owner Judy Fenton has more marketing ideas than time -- "the bad four letter word that none of us has enough of," she states.**

- Call your customers by name.
- Make your business about the customer by helping with their projects. Show interest in whatever they're working on.
- Take pictures of customers and their projects. Post them in your store and on your Web site.
- Involve your business in your customers' community.
- Attend quilt markets; your machine brands' annual convention; take classes from the experts.
- Take advantage of your VDTA membership; enroll in classes.

**Watch for Judy Fenton and her business associate Katherine Artines on PBS TV's Sewing With Nancy on September 21 and 28. Episodes called "Jackets on the Cutting Edge" feature their "As You Wish" basic jacket pattern and 10 different edging treatments.**

her project, print two copies -- one for the customer and one for our poster-sized cork board 'Wall of Fame.' Customers enjoy returning later, usually with a friend, to look for their picture. It's a fun promotional tool and costs me only pennies."

A recent endeavor to bring in more customers turned into a bigger success than Judy anticipated. It began with a story related by pattern designer Mary Mulari. Mary made an appliquéd pillowcase, with a pocket prayer, for a long-hospitalized child. The child was delight with it. Judy, recognizing that pillowcases could bring enjoyment to other hospitalized children made arrangements with Shriner's Children's Hospital to accept and distribute pillowcases collected by Millcreek. With a pattern, a few guidelines, and an e-mail to 3,000 Millcreek customers, the pillowcase project was launched while staff busily made sample pillowcases to inspire customers' creativity.

Pillowcase-making guidelines were straightforward: 1) Shop at Millcreek for a \$2.50 pre-cut 1/3 yard tone-on-tone white print and pattern. 2) Use at least some of the fabric to make a pillowcase. 3) Return the pillowcase to the store within six weeks, 4) and receive \$5 in Millcreek "sew dough."

When more than 100 pillowcases were collected Judy was astonished.

She said, "I couldn't believe how many people joined up as the challenge went on. Every time another pillowcase was brought in - - and some people brought in an extra one or two -- everyone really got excited and it was contagious! As each pillowcase was brought we made a fuss over it. Other customers came to look too, and then asked how they could get involved."

Each pillowcase was assigned a number and hung from overhead rope clotheslines that zigzagged throughout the store. "Those clotheslines really got to sagging!" exclaims Judy.

For voting purposes each pillowcase was assigned a voting container -- a coffee cup with a lid donated by Tim Hortons, a chain restaurant. For a penny a vote customers picked their favorite pillowcases. To everyone's delight, \$658 was collected for Relay for Life® an American Cancer Society event. As well, the top four vote earners won Millcreek Sewing & Fabric gift certificates of \$200, \$100, \$75, and \$50.

This pillowcase project and similar community-related activities are a win-win-win for Millcreek, its customers, and project recipients. Judy explains, "I get my store decorated, the customers have every right to be proud of themselves, and an organization is supported. I am also blessed with a wonderful staff of women who truly care. Without a doubt, we'll be doing these things again."

To learn about other successful Millcreek promotions and challenges, visit [www.millcreeksew.com](http://www.millcreeksew.com). ☞



**Millcreek's current challenge is aprons. Beginning in mid-August, the aprons will be displayed at the store located at:**

*Millcreek Vac, Sewing & Fabric  
7200 Peach Street, Unit 460  
Summit Towne Centre  
Erie, PA 16509  
Phone: 1-814-836-8227  
[www.millcreeksew.com](http://www.millcreeksew.com)*