

Brother International Corporation

When Quaint Turns Quirky: Metro D.C. Brother Dealer Embraces New Location To Keep Shop Thriving

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When Authorized Brother Innov-Is dealer Terri Johnson saw the neighborhood of Woodbridge, VA changing, she did more than just take note of the cultural shift and how it would affect her business. She began musing about what those changes would actually mean for her busy sewing machine dealership in the long run. For almost eight years, Johnson's Sew Special Studio has been the only authorized Brother dealer in Northern Virginia, drawing customers from Richmond, VA all the way up to Maryland. She carries the full line of sewing, embroidery and quilting products from Brother International Corporation, maintains an active calendar of classes and club meetings, and hosts several special product workshop events each year. For six years, Sew Special Studio has been located in an old house in an area that used to be mostly residential with light business and retail mixed in, much of it complementary to Johnson's sewing machine dealership.

Then, in late 2006, the "industrial creep" started. Her compatible business neighbors moved out and different types of businesses moved in, giving a more industrial flavor to the area surrounding Sew Special. The changes did not sit well with Johnson, and she began to glimpse the possible slow erosion of her shop's ability to catch the attention of new prospects.



"The complexion of the area has changed," Johnson says. "We don't get any drive-by (traffic). We've become an end destination."

Then, there is the whole issue of space. Sew Special's quaint, old-house setting is crammed to the rafters. "It's been a



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challenge as we've added more and more inventory, because this is an old house," Johnson says. Signs and displays are tough to position because the floor plan is not as open as a well-functioning retail space should be. And with all the fabric, designs and machines competing for wall space and customer attention, new items literally have to be hung from the ceiling, she says.

Then Sew Special's lease was up for renewal. The changing area, the tight space and the lease issue became a kind of "perfect storm" for the business. Johnson made the decision to find a new home for Sew Special and began working with her realtor to find a promising new location. They found it in a new shopping center being built in an area of Woodbridge that is bursting with new development. It's also on a busy road, which renews the drive-by appeal that Johnson counts on for catching new prospects.

"It was important to be very accessible," she says. "And it's very exciting to get to design the build-out."

Sew Special's existing space is 1,200 square feet, including display, service and classroom areas. The new space will be 2,000 square feet, not a huge jump, but it will be better designed to fit the shop's needs, and it includes a state-of-the-art classroom that is 25% larger than what Sew Special has now.

Classes are a huge part of Sew Special's business model, says Johnson, and it is important to have both the space and the technology to teach well. The new classroom will include a large-screen, flat panel projection system and individual sewing cabinets housing computers and/or machines.

One segment of education that will benefit from this enhanced teaching area will be Johnson's classes on Brother digitizing and editing software. She says she's already teaching more software classes than the average dealer, and she plans to increase this in the new building.

When customers understand and can use the digitizing/editing software, they have unleashed the full potential of their embroidery machines, Johnson says. It's tough, though, for dealers to hit the mark here.

"It takes a lot of time, because you have to have educators who know what they're doing," she explains. There can also be a steep learning curve because when you have a wide range of customers, you have

to accommodate an equally wide range of computer skill levels. Johnson's software classes include basic computer skills, such as file management and back-up. Customers actually love learning about this, she says, when they understand how it meshes with their cherished hobby. Once they connect the computer skills with sewing and embroidery, it captures their interest and commitment.

In addition to increased classroom space, the new location will also have some built-in retail synergy to potentially help enlarge Sew Special's customer base, says Johnson. The new shopping

center will include a spa and nail salon (read: women customers) and tentatively has a dance studio coming in (read: young moms). Johnson says she's excited about the possibility of drawing from these two businesses' clientele, and possibly strengthening her shop's appeal to younger women.

Johnson signed the lease on her new space May 1, and although no official move-in date has been chosen, she says she's hoping to

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be settled by September 1, giving her plenty of time for major grand-opening hoopla and a kick-off for holiday sales.

While some business owners might balk at the expense and risk involved in a location move—especially during a time when the economy is challenging in many regions—Johnson has no qualms about it. "I really haven't had any second thoughts about the move. It just feels right, and I get confirmation of that from

my staff, my accountant (most important!) and my customers. I think it's the right thing to do." She also feels confident that the ongoing appeal of the Brother product line and the staying power of the company she represents will contribute to the success of the move.

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