

Brother International Corporation

Business Is Personal with Susan Baskin, Brother Innov-ís Dealer

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For Gulf Coast sewing machine dealer Susan Baskin, business is strictly personal. In a little over seven years, this top-selling Brother Innov-ís dealer has built a multiple-location business by giving personal attention to each customer, including one-on-one training for all and special encouragement for her small-business customers.

It’s undeniably been hard work, she says, but the motivation and support that come from Brother, plus the company’s strong line-up of machinery and technology, have made all the difference.

“One of the reasons for our success is, first of all, the product, and then the backing we get,” Baskin says. “Because Brother has supported me, I can support the customer. It just grows.”

Baskin owns four sewing machine locations in the tri-state Gulf Coast area, including Susan’s Heirloom & Quilter’s Fabric, her original store in Theodore, AL; Magnolia Sewing in Hattiesburg, MS and Gautier, MS; and the newest location, Susan’s Sew & Vac in Pensacola, FL. The Pensacola store opened in late November 2007.

She actually started her business in 1998 selling handmade heirloom dresses and teaching sewing classes, but soon added sewing machines and fabric to her wares. With the help of her husband, W.C., the dealership quickly expanded.

In addition to selling sewing and embroidery machines to her tri-state following of home sewers, quilters and embroiderers, Baskin is also a top seller of Brother’s PR-600 and PR-620 machines, which are perfect for in-home or small embroidery businesses. Baskin’s success with aspiring business owners has also led her to become one of just a few Brother Innov-ís dealers authorized to sell Brother’s single-head 12-needle industrial model, the BE-1201B AC-PC. Their first demonstration machine arrived in late March, and Baskin says she already had a couple of customers eager to try it. This all comes from devoting time to a customer, she says.

“You just have to take your customers personally, and listen to what their needs are.” Sometimes it isn’t easy to figure out what they need, but if you spend enough time with them, you can come up with a solution. If you don’t, you won’t get the second, and then the third, machine sale.

Her strategies include making appointments with customers and always offering one-on-one training—something she thinks is critical in a business that marries creative sewing enthusiasts with Brother’s cutting-edge technology. The Brother machines are by far the easiest to learn, she says, but a private training session can be customized to a customer’s interests, further supporting the customer’s buying decision. “Even though the machines are the same,” she says, “the customers aren’t.”

The Baskins take special care of their small-business customers by providing sourcing information on blank apparel and accessories that lend themselves to embroidery and monogramming, and by keeping an eye out for new and innovative products that can be personalized. Baskin says she also makes it a point to introduce in-home embroiderers to each other when they come in for classes and training, just to help them informally build their networks.

That connection with one’s network and environment keeps small businesses growing, she says. It’s especially important in markets like commercial embroidery and personalization, where people worry about saturation.

“Every year, someone asks me, ‘Is the market saturated? Can I still make money?’ And I say it’s all in how you take it on, and how you look at your surroundings,” Baskin says.

Adding the BE1201 does call for some minor changes in how Baskin’s dealership handles service and maintenance – they’ll be making house calls, literally—but she doesn’t plan to alter her practice of keeping close tabs on customers. If anything, that one-on-one touch is even more important with embroiderers who step up to the 12-needle machine.

Even though she’s often on the road, traveling between their four locations to work with customers in each locale, Baskin still finds time to indulge in the craft that helped her find her career as a dealer. She says she still teaches classes, and yes, still sews. At press time, she was preparing to join 35 of her customers on a three-day mystery-quilt retreat at a vacation facility fashioned from a former Air Force base on the water near Mobile, AL. Continuing to work with fabric helps feed her love for the craft, she says, and that’s a big part of what keeps her successful as a dealer.

“There are issues, of course,” says Baskin. “The customers are human. You’re human. The machines are machines...but at the end of the day, people are doing what they enjoy.”



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