

Brother International Dealer Uses Social Media & Strong Education to Court Younger Sewing Enthusiasts

Dealer Russell Conte of Sewing Arts Center in Santa Monica, California, has numbers that most sewing machine dealers would love to have. He draws 1,500 students a year (and 28 % of his shop revenue) with the extensive class line-up at the diverse Los Angeles-area shop where he sells fabric, notions, books, embroidery and quilting services and sewing machines—including the full line from Brother International Corporation. He just logged his 100,000th sale late last year. But here's the number most other dealers really lust after: the median age of Conte's customers is about 30.

How is he getting—and keeping—so many younger sewers coming into his store for sewing knowledge, and coming back for equipment purchases? Well, it doesn't hurt a bit that Conte himself is a young 46, and pretty plugged in to what's going on in contemporary sewing and quilting. And having a website for his store was a no-brainer, of course. But his customers told him they wanted more access to Sewing Arts Center via the social media that's become second nature to their generation: Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter.

And although Conte—who's owned Sewing Arts Center since 2000—says he's just old enough not to care too much about the social media revolution, he embraces it because his students tell him how important it is to them.

"My students keep me abreast of what's going on in the world," Conte says. "I've really geared my marketing

toward the younger demographic—and worked hard at preserving that."

He blogs regularly on his store's website, www.sewingartscenter.com, and sends notices of sales and special promotions to an e-mail list of 6,000 names. The shop has a small, but growing, Facebook presence. Conte also recently started using Twitter to promote the store, and within a month's time, has accumulated about 2,000 followers. Reaching customers like this may seem quick and easy, but it's actually very time-consuming, Conte says.

Still, it's an investment of effort that's really strengthened his store's relationship with its customer community, even if average machine sales tend to be mid-range.

"We sell a lot of \$300 and \$400 sewing machines, not \$3,000 or \$4,000 machines," Conte says. "At the end of the day it's a harder nut to chew, but from a personal standpoint, it's more fulfilling."

Conte says his customers also told him they wanted additional ways to keep learning about sewing—something beyond the 150 classes he offers every trimester on such topics as garment sewing, quilting, home décor, fabric dyeing, beading and photo printing on fabric. (His children's class program is also quite extensive, and attracts about 100 children annually.)

So, he responded by developing plans for a series of instructional sewing videos. He hired an outside expert production firm to make sure the videos would be top-quality, and he even purchased \$20,000 of broadcast equipment.



"We can set up a set anywhere and put out the quality we want," Conte says.

The first video—an 8-minute segment where Conte teaches how to sew a decorative Christmas stocking—was released last December on the Sewing Arts website and uploaded to YouTube. It was definitely an eye-opening experience! Right after filming that first video, Conte blogged to his customers: "Who knew taping a few minutes of instruction would take this man 67 takes and way too many hours?"

That first video segment got strong reviews, however, and he says customers were genuinely pleased with the level of instruction.

Since then, he's finished taping eight full-length DVDs on basic sewing, which will soon be released in his store and on its website under the label "The Tailor's Ham," a brand he has created specifically for the instructional DVDs. Next up is a series on quilting basics, as well as more 5- to 7-minute snippets that will be released free on the Sewing Arts website and YouTube. And he also plans to offer the DVD series to other sewing machine dealers who are interested in adding more education to their shops' services.

"We make that kind of commitment to our students all the time. Paramount to me is that they get a good education," Conte says. If they get good sewing instruction, they will continue to sew, take classes and add equipment. And all dealers will benefit from that kind of foundation. He's almost as committed to teaching more teachers as he is to teaching his customers.

"The more good people sewing and teaching others how to sew, the better off we all are," he says.



Owner of Sewing Arts Center, Russell Conte.
Photo Credit: Eric Christopher Photography.

For more information, visit www.brother.com