



EASTERN PROMISE

Mandy Lee at June Peony Bridal talks to us about why she decided to branch into bridal retail and launch her own collection

When did you open June Peony Bridal Couture and what prompted you to do so?

My best friend, who worked as a seamstress in another bridal shop, led me to this industry. After six months spent searching for a good retail location, I found the perfect place in early spring of 2016. It was an established boutique that had been in business for over 30 years, but was sadly having to close down.

One special reason triggered me to enter this challenging business – I believe there are lots of craftspeople in China who can create stunning and luxury garments with fine embroidery and beadwork. I am able to explore these great manufacturing resources in China and am willing to build up a bridge between the UK and Chinese bridal markets.

How has the business evolved and what have been the key milestones in its development?

Like most new businesses, at the beginning I suffered a great number of teething problems. During first three months, we had very tough time because I was not familiar with local brides' requirements, and got wrong sizes and styles in stock, therefore we missed lots of sales opportunities. However, we gradually met more brides and prom girls and every appointment helped us to learn about brides' demands. Sales slowly picked up when we adjusted our stock styles accordingly and started to order larger sample sizes.

Finally, we launched our first collection of wedding and prom dresses according to my plan in the summer of 2016. Then in 2017 we spent five months on our brass style shopping fitting and successfully opened our flagship bridal boutique in the city of Birmingham.

What have been the highlights of your time in business?

In spring 2016 I took over Crystal Bridal (previously Sallie Bee Bridal), a lovely boutique in Birmingham that had been established for more than 30 years. We launched our first bridal and prom collection in 2016 summer.

Another highlight was when we sponsored Miss Birmingham Evanjin Francia with a bespoke red pageant gown for Miss Junior Teen Great Britain and she won three awards in that competition in October 2016.

In 2017, we opened our flagship boutique in Birmingham city centre. Meanwhile, we made our second bridal and prom collection, and created a new label Miracle Prom for our prom dresses. We also launched our stunning holy communion and flower girl collection. We first exhibited at the Harrogate Bridal Show in September 2017, and successfully signed up several stockists in England, Ireland and Sweden.

In autumn 2017, we continued to sponsor Miss Midlands Evanjin Francia for Miss Teen Great Britain, and she successfully won the competition in our bespoke golden evening gown.

Which designers do you stock?

We stock Casablanca Bridal, as well as our own wedding dress brand, June Peony Bridal Couture. Casablanca has very intricate beading and the brand's styles are very different to our own. In addition, most of our Casablanca gowns are exclusive in UK, because we order Casablanca gowns from the Shanghai Bridal Exhibition, where they launched new designs, mainly for the Asian market. Moreover, by working directly with the Casablanca Beijing office, we can offer a quicker and more flexible service.



What criteria do you have when sourcing and selecting your designers?

We focus on efficient customer service and fine detail finishing of beading and lace appliqué. Customer service is the key in every industry: it's not just about placing a bride's orders, it's more about good communication between the retailer and the designer, to help the bride get exactly what they desire.

Flexible design service is also another important sourcing criteria. Indeed, how the design team can effectively understand and accurately address a bride's special design changes is crucial in the bridal business. This means we need an experienced customer service team and expert design team from any designer brand we want to stock.

How has running a retail business influenced your own bridal collections?

Running physical bridal boutiques provide us with more practical design and sales



knowledge. Through our daily retail business, we can quickly understand what modern brides need from their wedding dress design. It gives us a large database of marketing information that we can use to our advantage to profile different types of bride. Retailing experience helps us to master first-hand the customer's needs. The appointments are invaluable for gauging different body types and the styles that flatter all shapes and sizes. Comments from brides are vital for our design team; in this way, we can forecast which designs will be popular and we can pass this information onto our stockists. It also helps us manage our stock levels among different designs.

Do you go to any of the bridal or fashion trade events?

Yes, we started exhibiting at the Harrogate Bridal Show in 2017. We visited Barcelona Bridal Fashion Week, Shanghai Bridal Show and the Premiere Vision fabric show in France. These domestic and international shows help us to better understand all the latest trends in the global bridal market.

What do you enjoy most about your role and the bridal business in general?

I love gaining more and more design and sales experience – exploring what my bride wants in one-to-one private appointments and fulfilling mainstream demand in our new designs, helping brides to find their perfect wedding dress in our collections. I try my best to create



an original look for each bride with our special bespoke wedding dress and expert alteration service. Sometime a little alteration in detail changes the whole look of the gown.

How do you ensure that the service your boutique provides is second to none?

Listening to our brides is the best way to make sure we fully understand her need, concern or problem. From the moment she walks through our door to the final collection of her wedding dress, we always communicate effectively with our brides and ensure all the steps are finished properly and nicely.

We make sure every final detail is exactly as the bride imagined and we are always flexible on adding sleeves, extra beading and any other finishing touch to the design.

What do you believe is the key to running a successful bridal retail business?

First of all, great customer service is the key. It includes effective listening, good communication and after sales service, as well as plenty of opportunity for alteration. Understanding the real need of your bride means everything. Only when you understand your brides' demands, will you bring in the right collection.

Secondly, it's important that staff have an in-depth knowledge of each and every gown so that alterations that can be suggested to suit a wide range of brides. Indeed, good dressmaking knowledge will enable you create various design changes on one gown simply by using different alteration methods.

A good transaction conversion rate depends on how much you truly understand your customers' needs and how well you can address a bride's concern with a better solution in a 60-90 minute appointment.

How do you view the current state of the UK bridal market?

I think the UK bridal market is developing slowly in comparison to the international market. This market still retains lots of conservative and classic bridal styles, but I believe many brides are eager to embrace more fashion-forward designs. With the overwhelming influence of social media, brides can view more international bridal fashion elements, which in turn creates a high demand. As a result we hope we

Retailer profile

can implant more international elements to our collections and carefully balance traditional classic design with fashion-forward design.

What major changes have you noticed in the UK bridal industry over the past couple of years?


Modern and young brides rely on social media and internet searches more than ever before. Brides change their minds easily and they expect more personal elements to add to their gowns to make them look different, but still retain their personality on the big day. Plenty of brides will shop online, so they expect a more personal experience and service if they decide to buy from bricks-and-mortar bridal shops.

How important is your website and social media for driving brides in to the boutique?

Brides find our boutiques mainly via Google and our social media channels, while images on our website give brides inspiration and ideas before they attend an in-store appointment. Social media connects our brides to our business and allows us to engage with each other's lives and binds us together in a closer relationship. Customers on our social media channels usually have higher customer loyalty and are more willing to promote our business to their families and friends.

Most notably, good feedback provides our customers with more confidence and trust when they're considering whether to place an order.

How would you like to see the business grow?

We would like to walk steadily before we run. In the coming two-three years, we will still focus on the UK and Irish markets by creating the best fitted and structured wedding gowns and occasionwear. Meanwhile, we will design more fashionable holy communion and flower girl dresses for younger girls. We will continue to develop and select limited stockists to be our partners to grow together with us, and we will attend more overseas exhibitions so that more European customers can order our beautiful gowns. 

Contact

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