

Exchange Magazine  
January 1991  
Vol. 8, No. 4  
pp.54-59, 61-63, 67

## **CREATING A LOOK**

Kathy Boyce's and tailoring company caters to businesswomen for whom the joy of shopping is a thing of the past

by Marie Lefaive

In high school, Kathy Boyce was known as the girl who wore a different pair of earrings every day. She was not ambitious then. If anything, she was content. Content to work through a four-year high school program, content to move from school to a secretarial position, content to lead an undemanding life. Content as long as she had enough money to pay the bills and buy the fashions.

Yet now, contentment has given over to a driving ambition, and Boyce has parlayed that early interest in clothes into an enterprising, offbeat and practical fashion business.

Boyce is the owner and creative force behind "Dressings", a fashion consulting and tailoring company. She started the business in 1987, mostly, she says, for the challenge and the satisfaction.

Boyce was entering her fifteenth year in the secretarial field then, having moved up the ranks from junior to administrative secretary in various departments at the University of Guelph. And she had had enough. "Time passes too quickly to be a secretary all your life," she says. "I wanted to run my own business."

The entrepreneurial path was a logical one for Boyce, who comes from a family of small-business people. Her grandfather owned and operated a Guelph cigar store, and her late father ran a construction firm in the city. And of her three siblings, two are in business for themselves a sister owns a landscaping business in Hillsburgh, and a brother heads an excavating company in Aberfoyle.

Not that pressure from the home front to succeed in business was ever a factor in her decision, Boyce says. In fact, apart from the general directive to go out and work at something, parental persuasion was kept to a minimum. "But after a while I started thinking that if my brother and sister could do it, then so could I."

She began by going to school. While still a secretary Boyce attended over a dozen non-credit courses at the University of Guelph. She listened to lectures on how to start a business, how to be a woman in business, and how to plan, run, and market a business.

But what business? "I did a lot of soul-searching at first," Boyce recalls, noting that the courses she took "all stressed the importance of working at what you know and like." Boyce liked fashions, and she knew how to sew. It was something her mother had taught her as a teenager and that she had perfected over the years. It was, in fact, an obsession. "It was nothing for me to spend a weekend sewing," she says. "I'd start at seven Saturday morning and go right through until two the following morning." As addicts talk about their bondage to drugs, Boyce speaks of her sewing marathons. "I resented the phone ringing or anyone coming to the door. I just wanted to sew."

So she started a sewing service. "I told a friend that I wanted to start a business, and she said she wanted to be my first customer. She gave me the pattern and I sewed the outfit."

"It's not good enough to tell someone that they should wear this style of clothes or these types of accessories and then send them on their way," says Kathy Boyce, owner of "Dressings", a fashion consulting and tailoring business in Guelph. "You should follow through and provide them with the look they want"

That was in April 1987. By September of that year, Boyce had hired her first dressmaker. The business was growing. In fact, says Boyce, "it wasn't hard to get orders for custom clothes; it was hard to get good seamstresses."

Yet when the time came to take up the family tradition and launch her business as a full-time venture, Boyce moved cautiously. "I needed to know that everything was in place before I'd quit my job." She did this by operating her business in the evenings for the first two years and keeping her day job. When tailoring and administrative duties began to pile up, she had someone run "Dressings" out of her home during the day while she went off to work at the university. It was only once she was convinced that she had an established client base that she moved to a larger house on Paisley Road, converted the front half of her new home into a store, and left her secretarial days behind her.

Virginia Gray, who chairs U of G's continuing education division, was once Boyce's boss and is now a client to her. Boyce's creation of "Dressings" came as no surprise to her. "Kathy always had an interest in fashion," she says. "She was always entrepreneurial in whatever she did. She knew what she wanted and she knew how to get there."

What Boyce wanted was to develop a fashion-consulting business alongside the tailoring enterprise. She set this up almost immediately, either suggesting the proper accessories or buying them for each outfit she sewed.

"I'd always been a people watcher," she explains, "and I'd always had an eye for fashion. I'd often want to go up to strangers and tell them if their outfit looked horrible." She resisted the temptation; now she comments on people's clothes only when paid to do so.

As to her skills as a purveyor of fashions, Boyce draws on years of experience. From the time she started earning money, she was a dedicated shopper, hitting the stores at least once a week. "I used to spend all my money on clothes," she says. "Anything I had left after paying the bills, I put on my back." Now, when she goes shopping, she usually goes with someone else's needs in mind.

Seventy-five percent of Boyce's clients either run their own businesses or hold management positions. For many of them, she takes away one major headache: the need to find quality business clothing. "Women," she says, "especially those over 30, are tired of shopping, of always looking. The joy of shopping – as is the case with younger women when they first start work and have a paycheque – is gone." Many are "confused and dissatisfied" with what's available in the stores, and they're "tired of paying a lot of money for something and then running into a friend who's wearing the same thing."

This is why Boyce offers a singular mixture of services: she wants to make shopping – and dressing – an enjoyable experience once again.

There's the "wardrobe shape-up" service, where Boyce will travel to your home, cast a critical eye over your clothes, and advise you as to which outfits are giving you the proper look, which can easily be altered and which are lost causes.

There's the shopping service, which comes in two styles. Boyce can take you shopping and help you select suitable clothes. Or she can bring the shops to you (and she will choose everything, from hose to handbags), letting you pick from selections she has taken on spec from stores.

There are the corporate presentations where Boyce meets with a company's staff individually or in a group, advising them on anything from proper clothes to grooming techniques to the importance of posture and body language.

And then there's the tailoring service, where Boyce and her staff will alter an existing outfit, sew clothes to your patterns and with your cloth, or choose the fabric and design the outfit themselves.

It's a colourful medley, and one that reflects Boyce's business philosophy: provide options to fit every customer's bill, and never sell your customer short. "It's not good enough to tell someone that they should wear this style of clothes or these types of accessories and then send them on their way. You should follow through with that and provide them with the look they want."

Boyce also believes in doing things differently, in giving herself that "edge." A recent "Dressings" fashion show, for example, used clients as models and featured a jazz pianist

instead of the traditional piped music for the walk down the runway. Even the name – "Dressings" – is a bit different, says Boyce. "I put the quotation marks around the name because nobody else was doing it."

In fact, she says no other business in this area offers quite the same scope of services that her firm does.

For Mary Anthes, owner of Wellmark Diagnostics Ltd., a Guelph company that sells medical diagnostic products to hospitals and laboratories across the country, "Dressings" has become almost a necessity. "Kathy does all my shopping for me," Anthes says, "shoes, suits, nylons, jewellery, everything." Anthes, who "hates shopping," gladly admits that she has found the perfect match with Boyce. "I just wanted someone to do all of it" -- to put together the look, to find the right accessories, to take care of that part of her life. Now, when Anthes travels on business, she brings only one suit jacket with her, yet she can put together six or seven different outfits with that. "I don't have to worry about ironing my clothes; I don't even bring a suit bag with me anymore."

Dressing appropriately for the business world, it is generally agreed, is essential for any man with ambition. This is doubly true for women. Though most resent this fact, seeing it as yet one more stone on the path to corporate success, Boyce sees it as an advantage. Women, she says, are allowed more freedom of expression in their clothes.

"It used to be," says Anthes, "that the more you looked like men, the better. That's changing. Now, you can bring more personality to your wardrobe. Kathy helped me through this." As Boyce points out: "When you look around any boardroom, the sharp-looking ones are the women."

To Boyce, the importance of looking good cannot be understated. "I'm not going to take the credit for someone's climbing the corporate ladder, but I can give people confidence in the way they look, and I can help them put together a professional look that commands respect." And that, she says, can give them the edge.

Boyce also maintains that for those whose goal is to succeed in the business world, "good style must carry over to casual wear, because you never know when you're going to meet people that you work with." This does not mean that you must be dressed to the nines every time you walk out the door. "I can show you how to look great just going out to the corner store to buy diapers, although you may have nothing on underneath the coat," she says with a laugh.

Rosemary Smith, owner of Mediaworks Design and Communications in Guelph, first came to "Dressings" two years ago when she launched her business. She recalls that she needed a boost to her wardrobe, and she needed a look that would reflect her new business persona. "But because I was just starting a business, my financial situation wasn't great," she says. "I needed a couple of very versatile items." Boyce came through with flying colours. "She has developed a great wardrobe for me," Smith says, "and I don't waste money on clothes any more. She's taken

a lot of the pressure off. I don't have to go into stores anymore; all my big purchases are through Kathy."

With each client, Boyce puts together a look that she thinks creates a fitting image and that the client feels suits her personality. As a customer becomes a valued client, Boyce invariably becomes a friend, a sort of personal arbiter of taste. This is not, however, how the relationship begins.

"When I do a wardrobe shape-up," she explains, "I need to know the person's job and her hobbies, so that I can get some idea of her lifestyle, but I do not want to know too much, nor to become her friend, because I need to keep my objectivity."

Boyce brings to the job a combination of honesty, tact, and humour, three qualities that are necessary when dealing with a very personal and, at times very sensitive, area: a person's appearance.

Linda Lennon, an alderman for the city of Guelph and co-owner of Lennon Construction Ltd., had Boyce do her first wardrobe shape-up for her last winter. "Kathy is very tactful," she says, "but she tells you what does and doesn't suit you. She has a good sense of what looks good on a person and what you should wear."

Lennon turned to Boyce again when she decided to stand as the Progressive Conservative candidate in the recent provincial election (the seat was won by the NDP). "Everything happened so quickly that I didn't have time to put together the necessary wardrobe." Within two days, Boyce had organized a shopping trip. "She did it all for me," Lennon says. "She put together a decent variety of clothes so that I wasn't wearing the same suit to every public meeting."

On the night of the election, Lennon waited for the returns at her riding office, dressed in a suit that Boyce had put together. "A woman came up to me and said, "That looks great; have you been going to Kathy?"

It's not by accident that Boyce's name or work should be so recognizable by professional women in Guelph. She has worked hard to propel both herself and her company into the business spotlight. Take, for example, her involvement with Guelph Women In Networking (GWIN). GWIN is an organization whose purpose is to bring businesswomen together, offering both a common meeting ground and periodic business or personal-development seminars. Boyce became its president in 1988 and, during her year's tenure, she worked to increase GWIN's membership and to turn the organization into a "place where the membership could feel welcome and could use the organization according to their needs." Boyce also highlighted the expertise available within GWIN's ranks when organizing information nights. Only one outside speaker was brought in during her presidency.

The GWIN presidency was a chance for Boyce to work with women who held similar interests and goals, but she also saw the usefulness of heading an organization whose members were largely from her business' target market: professional women ranging in age from 30 to 55. "It makes sense to get involved, to get yourself out rather than wonder why the clients aren't coming to you," she notes.

Clients come mostly from Guelph and surrounding communities, but Boyce also works with women in Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge, Hamilton, and Toronto. She has a client list of 350, of which 75% are repeat customers. Less than 5% of her clientele is male. In each of the past two years, she says, sales have more than doubled at "Dressings."

Boyce credits her success to the fact that "I never went beyond my means. I was very patient." She has never borrowed money for her business. The sewing machines and other tools of the tailoring trade, the distinctive green-and-white van that she uses when making home or business calls, the selection of accessories, and "Dressings" originals on display in her store have all been acquired with business profits.

Boyce also says she designed her company with an eye to the future. "I always included my shopping and consultation time when pricing an outfit. That way, when I began to contract out the sewing, my prices didn't have to jump.

"A lot of people forget that," she believes. When they first start their business, they simply charge for the time it takes to physically create the product. Before long, they realize that they must factor in all the accessory services that come with running any business; when they do that, their prices skyrocket, and they lose customers.

"Dressings", which has one full-time employee aside from Boyce, has a stable of 10 freelance seamstresses, as well as the part-time services of an accountant, a marketing co-ordinator, and a special-events presenter. June Dashner, the firm's full-time design and production manager, co-ordinates the dressmaking teams and oversees the design work, leaving Boyce free to concentrate on the consulting services.

As with most new entrepreneurs, Boyce devotes far more than the standard 40-hour workweek to her business. She says she works six days a week, an average 12 hours a day.

This leaves little time for anything else. Exercise, once a major commitment in Boyce's life, has definitely taken a back seat. Where once she used to work out religiously attending fitness classes four times a week, now she takes a brisk walk around the block when time permits. On Sundays, her day of rest, she does just that charging up the batteries, as she says, for the coming week.

Boyce has no children, nor are they in her plans. "I like my own time," she says, "and I know how much of it kids would consume." As it is, there is barely enough time to take care of business. Any one day can find her holding consultation meetings with several clients in her

shop, accompanying a third on a shopping trip, and rounding out the day with a trip to someone's home to do a wardrobe shape-up.

"It's not money that motivates me," she says. "It's the sense of accomplishments," of helping someone create a look, develop a style.

Boyce is not worried that people may see her business as yet one more trendy flash in the pan. "People have realized that this isn't a gimmick; we offer too much. Fashion has been bombarded by all these rules. I show people how to break those rules." Nor does she believe that the demand for her services will fade as the recession grows. In fact, says Boyce, it could very well do just the opposite. A woman can easily spend \$250 a month on clothes, and that translates into \$3,000 a year. It takes only one or two unwise purchases to turn that \$3,000 investment into a losing proposition. "A lot of women are compulsive buyers," she continues. "They need to go shopping in their own closets."

Boyce wants to be there when they do. And if she's too busy, she hopes to be able to send someone else before too long. Expanding her consultation services by bringing in new fashion advisors is one charted area of growth for "Dressings". Opening a second shop, most likely in Hamilton, is a second objective.

With each new expansion, Boyce's goal will always be to make the clothes fit the woman -- not the other way around. Too many women, she says, despair of ever finding fashionable, suitable business wear. Their bodies are too fat, too short, too wrong for the clothes out there today. Boyce can sympathize. "I could never buy off the rack," she says. "I could never find anything to fit me. One day, I tried on 35 dresses. I know what it's like not to be able to find the right clothes; I know what my clients are going through."

Boyce's trouble lies in the fact that she only just tops the five-foot mark. Yet she dresses with such style that you don't see a short woman; you see a smart, attractive, elegant woman.

She often highlights this fact by working alongside Colleen Mino, her special-events presenter. Mino is a mature model, and, at five-feet-nine, stands in marked contrast to Boyce. Women often come to a "Dressings" presentation convinced that the company won't be able to help them, says Boyce. "But when they see the two of us together, they stop complaining." When that happens, "Dressings" has gained one more client, Boyce one more convert, and the girl who wore a different pair of earrings every day has one more reason to go shopping.