

by Katie Roberts

A Cut Above *the Rest*



Inside the reception area of Bridal Reflections' Manhattan salon.

Integrity is the name of the game at New York-based Bridal Reflections, which celebrates its international debut this year.

The store aims to give superior customer service to each and every bride.

Integrity. Unfortunately, it's a word that can't be associated with every business today because it requires real work, time and devotion. It also requires great leadership and a commitment to seeing that value ingrained in a company's essence.

However, at Bridal Reflections, a trio of upscale salons located throughout the New York City area, there's no doubt that integrity is the big driver behind its success.

And it has been from the very

beginning of Bridal Reflections, which took off even before the opening of the first store, located in Massapequa on Long Island's South Shore. Scheduled to debut on a Saturday back in 1973, the business was holding its staff training on the Thursday prior when a young bride walked in and asked to look at dresses. The salon's owners, Maria and Anthony (Tony) Micari, informed her that the store wasn't open yet but graciously invited her to stay and look around.

"By the end of that day, three days before Bridal Reflections was scheduled to open, we had made our first sale — and that was a good sign," Anthony says.

It also set the standard for Bridal Reflections' "customer service that's a cut above" policy, says Anthony, recounting a long list of examples, such as when a bride forgot to pick up a purchase from the salon and he personally drove it to her wedding in The Hamptons.

Or when Cristina DeMarco,

the current vice president and one of the company's three managers, learned that a customer who was to marry in a high-profile wedding had forgotten her shoes in the dressing room.

The ceremony was taking place hours away on the Vermont and New Hampshire border, but that didn't stop DeMarco from boarding a plane to deliver the shoes to the wedding planner, who met her at the airport.

"A bride can purchase her gown anywhere, and everyone has fashion — some more than others," Anthony says. "But the thing that will keep you in business and set you apart from the competition is when you give that extra bit of service."

It's a message that Anthony has hammered home and routinely addressed in staff sales trainings over the years.

"I would always start out with something that would relate to customer service and tell (employees) you must always put

WHERE IS IT?

Three stores currently comprise the 36-year-old Bridal Reflections legacy. The business originated in Massapequa, N.Y., and then expanded with a second salon into the upscale hamlet of Carle Place/Westbury, N.Y. Its newest salon overlooks New York's famous Fifth Avenue and plans are underway for a fourth establishment in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.



Inside *Bridal Reflections'* Manhattan salon where brides have aisles of dresses to choose from in a comfortable, relaxed environment.

yourself on the other side of the counter," he says. "Imagine you are her and not the one listening to what she has to say."

Taking that extra time necessary to understand and even empathize with customers has translated to a company that's adept in creating authentic, memorable experiences. And when the very rare but difficult situations have surfaced, this skill has led to solutions and fostered an atmosphere of respect – not only for the customers but also the staff.

"If there is a panic of some sort, even if you created it, we will help you. But the one thing we demand is that you respect us equally," Anthony says. "It's like this: I always say a customer isn't always right, but we do our best to make the situation right."

Eighty percent of Bridal Reflections' business is referral-based.

Bridal Reflections offers brides many accessory options, including necklaces, jewelry, headpieces, gloves and more.





Along with hundreds of gowns and designers to choose from, *Bridal Reflections' Carle Place* salon offers a variety of accessories to pair with a bride's dream dress.

Product & Business Integrity Builds Company Reputation

In fulfilling its mission to provide premium customer service, Bridal

Reflections quickly gained a reputation for being one of the best salons in the New York area. But it also earned the endorsement of many upscale brides because of its fashion-forward product.

And over the years, the Micaris and their management team learned the value of choosing bridal fashion with integrity. This meant not being swayed by every sales pitch or picking the most popular products in the marketplace. As Anthony says, putting integrity of the product first has been another winning business tactic.

"We're not always looking for the most advertised situation," Anthony says. "We're looking for the quality our client will appreciate, and have found

"I couldn't be prouder of the manner in which our staff treats the clientele."



Bridal Reflections' Massapequa salon reception area.



From Left: Wedding cake designer Sylvia Weinstock and Bridal Reflections founder and president Anthony Micari with bride and renowned wedding planner Marcy Blum.

that many times the fashion leaders are not the advertising leaders. Our emphasis is on the fashion leaders."

Consequently, Bridal Reflections has evolved into a destination resource for stylish brides and has found itself in the fortunate position to expand not just once, but twice.

In 1976, the company launched its second location in the affluent Carle Place/Westbury area of Long Island's North Shore. Bridal Reflections opened a third salon in January 2006 on Manhattan's legendary Fifth Avenue and has plans for a fourth location to open this year in the world's largest luxury market: Dubai.

Of the three current salons, one carries some moderate price points. But all provide more of a bridge and couture collection, starting around \$2,500, with the occasional gown costing \$20,000+.

Many new hires are trained from the ground up and must work their way up the ladder.



Bridal Reflections' Carle Place salon displays the latest trends and looks for brides.



Anthony Micari, founder and president of Bridal Reflections.

In tough economic times, these price points might appear difficult for customers to bear, but according to Anthony, Bridal Reflections hasn't "felt the impact." Again, it's a direct result of the company's reliability and business integrity.

"Given the economic conditions, 2008 was one of the most successful years," he says. "But being a reputable salon has worked in our favor. When you're buying in troubled times, you don't have to worry about whether or not the salon will be there in six months – if you're buying from a reputable one."

And by "reputable," Anthony is

adamantly excluding the deep discounters whose price-cutting practices put a toll on the industry's reputation. Having seen numerous such businesses go bankrupt overnight, desert customers without warning, and threaten the entire industry's image, Anthony has taken to addressing the risks of buying from discounters whenever the opportunity arises.

"Anyone who is cutting prices so drastically – that's a dangerous thing," he says. "Either they're going to discount the services or the tailoring, and if they're not making a decent profit, they can't stay in business."

He continues, "Sooner or later the cards will fall, so we spend a lot of time educating our brides on that. And we get a very positive reaction. When customers feel comfortable with us and the fact that everything is going so well at our salon, they realize it's not worth taking a chance for a few dollars."

Staff, Leadership Set Tone For Remarkable Work Ethic

Just as Bridal Reflections brides opt to minimize buying risk by choosing the reputable business, so, too, does the salon reduce the potential for service headaches by employing professional, passionate staffers.

Although some employees join the business as experienced salespeople, many new hires are trained from the ground up. They begin by handling stockroom duties then, if appropriate, work their way up the ladder to train as part of the sales staff.

In fact, that's exactly how DeMarco learned the ins and outs of Bridal Reflections. At the age of 16, she signed on with the company as a stock girl and climbed her way up through the ranks to eventually earn a junior partnership and serve as a general manager.

Alongside DeMarco and also sharing the title of general manager are the Micaris' two children, Rose Lynn Fiumara and Anthony E. Micari. Raised

"If there is any gift that I gave [my children] it was an adherence to work ethic."

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in the family business but bringing to it their own distinct talents and education, Rose Lynn and Anthony are the company's next generation. As such, they're working with DeMarco and doing their part to help shape and lead the business in fresh directions.

"My children tell me I was quite the disciplinarian and looking back, I probably was," says Anthony, who also credits his wife, Maria, for setting the standards high when it came to running a business and delivering quality customer service.

"But the approach must have worked well because both of them were on the dean's list in college, and they're two wonderful children," he says. "If there is any gift that I gave them

In The Spotlight: Bridal Reflections

Business Established: 1973.

Size of Store: 25,000+ square feet among the three locations.

Total Staff: 100+.

Compensation: Both hourly and salaried plus commission, depending on the position.

Alterations: In-house, as well as on-site storage facilities.

Advertising: All promotions and product placements are handled by a professional advertising/marketing firm and a public relations firm. High-profile radio, television and print media recognition and advertising include, but aren't limited to, New York Magazine, Grace Ormond Wedding STYLE, WOR NewsTalk Radio 710, "Platinum Weddings, Tough Jobs," "A Wedding Story, Entertainment Tonight," "The Today Show," and Broadway's hit musical, "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change."

Recent Good Business Read: "The Tao of Warren Buffet" (Scribner, 2006).

Local "Must See": A two-block walk from Bridal Reflections, the Empire State Building provides a realistic sense of New York's magnitude. You absolutely should not visit New York City and not go see this iconic building, says Anthony Micari, president of Bridal Reflections.

it was an adherence to work ethic that's a cut above."

He continues, "Cristina, who is like a third child, has that same incredible work ethic. Put yourself in the place of an employee who comes in to see that the general manager is willing to stay late to satisfy a situation. The attitude of that leadership trickles down. It sets the tone for the way everyone works and treats the customers. I couldn't be prouder of the manner in which our staff treats the clientele."

One testimony to this dedicated work ethic has been the salons' galleries of more than 5,000 thank-you cards and photos sent by former brides throughout the years. What's more, 80 percent of Bridal Reflections' business is referral-based, something Anthony says those from the public relations and advertising/marketing firms he hires can hardly believe.

Furthermore, numerous media accolades, everything from print to radio and television, have regularly highlighted Bridal Reflections, helping sustain the word-of-mouth momentum behind its success.

But despite all the press, ongoing referrals, achievements and expansions, Bridal Reflections hasn't lost its sense of self. It's a company that believes in giving back to the community because it can — and should.

One shining example is its prom donation program that stemmed from Fiumara's high-school years, when she noticed other girls not being able to afford prom gowns of their own. As a result, Bridal Reflections launched a program that, with the help of the Junior League of New York, has provided more than 7,000 dresses to less-fortunate teens throughout the years.

More recently, the company has donated wedding gowns to many brides and the fiancées of military serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. While this giving back provides a sense of satisfaction for the Bridal Reflections staff, the strategy has become ingrained in the company's DNA and is now just a part of its makeup.

Recalling a television interview of the late Paul Newman, Anthony talks about the actor's passion for giving everything away, setting up foundations

and charities, and helping others instead of "living high on the hog."

In the interview, Newman cited a Greek saying that translated to the unspoken law of giving back to the community from which one profits. The message resonated deeply with Anthony who says he, too, believes that "to those who are given, they should give."

In tough times, it's even more important to do so, and Bridal Reflections' commitment to selfless acts exemplifies its integrity once again. This value has

been the business' guidepost during times of struggle as well as success.

Given this, and a new generation of management that's been raised with integrity as a core business value, Bridal Reflections is poised to excel for at least another 30+ years.

It's a company that believes in giving back to the community because it can — and should

Most Memorable Moment

For years, Bridal Reflections has run a prom gown donation program, a massive charitable effort that has helped thousands of teens in the New York area attend their proms in top-notch style.

When Bridal Reflections first launched this program, the business sought out schools located in underprivileged neighborhoods. After student eligibility had been determined, the company received a special letter of thanks from a recent widow who, up until that point, had been working up the courage to tell her daughter that she couldn't buy her a prom gown.

"She wrote to us, 'You have no idea what it has meant to me to not have to say to my daughter that your prom is one more thing you won't be able to attend,'" recalls Anthony Micari, president of Bridal Reflections. "To this day, I can't read that letter without tears coming to my eyes. It's a moment in my business that truly stands out as meaningful in my mind."



Bridal Reflections' "next generation": RoseLynn Micari-Fiumara (left), Anthony E. Micari and Cristina DeMarco make up Bridal Reflections' new team, running and managing the salons.