

ENTICING consumers

WITH INNOVATION

A PERTH-BASED RETAILER HAS DEVELOPED ITS OFFERINGS TO ENTICE POTENTIAL CONSUMERS INTO ITS SHOWROOMS. **DAWN ADAMS REPORTS.**

'INNOVATION' IS EVOLVING into a full decorator destination by stocking a variety of items that encourage greater traffic through its two stores. The selection includes items like vases, artworks, mirrors and greeting cards. The idea, according to Karen Thomas who established the business in 1978, is to make customers aware of the showrooms to encourage them to revisit these centres when they are looking for window treatments. "We started as a curtain shop and had our own workroom and never subcontracted work out," Thomas says. "We've always done our own manufacture and started producing only curtains and selling fabric off the floor." The business grew from its original single store in the Perth suburb of Willetton expanding into new premises a few hundred metres down the road, and later, opening a second store in Subiaco, closer to the central business district. Around 15 years ago, Thomas realised the importance of providing blinds as well as curtains, and she became convinced that she would miss out on valuable business if she failed to take on an expanded offering. "If people want a mixture of blinds and curtains, you have to have that covered or you don't get the job," she says. "We provide the two together. We have to promote what's suitable for the client."

Today, around four staff members produce the curtains and roman blinds ordered by customers from a nearby workroom five minutes from Willetton. Demand for other blinds is most often met by providing Verosol products. However, Thomas also notes the significant difference in margins for the two product offerings. "The margin on blinds is nowhere near as good as on curtains, where more knowledge is required," she says. She credits her staff with significant experience and knowledge, and she takes a strong stance against a common industry practice of offering a free measure and quote. "We don't do that," she says. "The industry is selling itself short. It's

hard for people to put a value on something they get for nothing and this work takes a lot of skill." She started charging a fee for consultations around seven years ago, receiving a mixed response from customers – some accepted the idea and others objected to being asked for payment. Thomas responds to any negative comments by asking customers if they've already had someone into their home who didn't charge. "They often say they have, and then I ask why they called us as well," she says. "Their response, usually, is that they were not happy with that service because they didn't give them many ideas. A lot of businesses that don't charge have to turn over those tasks quickly and don't have the time to spend with people."

Thomas takes this initiative one step further by going against another common practice in this sector of deducting those types of fees from the final quote if clients agree to place an order. "We also don't refund that fee if they go ahead with an order," she says. "A lot of the time, people don't know the full range of products available. If they haven't changed their window treatments for maybe five years, there is a lot of product out there that they're not aware of." And she highlights the scale of work being requested for quotes, pointing to situations in which people seek window treatments to meet the total needs of a new home. "That's a huge amount of work with all the calculations and the staff experience required," she says. It is particularly important to find out what clients want and for what purpose, so clients are asked a series of question to determine which options would best suit their windows. "We say we design window treatments for people – we don't just make curtains," she says. "There is a difference."

The two stores cater to a slightly different demographic. Willetton is known for older style houses on big blocks, an area in transition as new home owners reshape the neighbourhood

by purchasing traditional properties and rebuilding them into larger developments. This store also caters to a more mature clientele that has started the process of downsizing as their children leave home. Offering a wide variety of options, the firm is also capable of providing less expensive solutions for property investors. "Some clients have rental properties and want to complete those window treatments economically," Thomas says. Twice as large as its Willetton counterpart, the Subiaco store offers a larger selection to clients who are attracted to the store from a wider area. Just five kilometres from the CBD, the offices in the area ensure that people who don't live locally visit the store. "Lots of people come into this store during the day who work in the area and live in suburbs a distance away," Thomas says. "In contrast, the majority of clients at the Willetton store come from within a five-to-ten-kilometre radius." She also notes that the demographic mix of apartment owners contributes to a variety of trends, with units accommodating both younger people and more mature clients who are often downsizing into apartments.

Thomas says she stresses to staff that they are privileged to be invited into a client's home. "I tell the girls they should never underestimate how privileged they are to be invited into their homes," she says. "It's a very private, personal space." Around 60 per cent of the firm's business comes from word-of-mouth recommendations, and the company's strategy to create events that foster community and growth opportunities appears to be effective. Examples include a newsletter distributed to a mailing list of around 2700 people and a decorator club made up of members who have used its services. Club members are invited to special promotions and get 'first pick' of certain items and discounts. "We also have a Christmas shopping night when we get extra product in store and enjoy a glass of champagne and Christmas cake," she says.

SOLUTIONS FOR WINDOWS that are three-metres tall and six-metres wide are often provided by Perth-based Innovation, as Australians seek out water views. The firm's Karen Thomas offers a few insights into the most appropriate use of curtains and blinds.

Blockout lined curtains or blinds that keeps the heat out are suitable for windows that face west to limit heat entry into a home. While clear view blinds enable a stunning outlook, she claims that they often do not provide as effective heat control as blockout lined curtains. "People often say that's okay, that they'll just put the air-conditioning on," she says. "But we need to point out that putting on the air-conditioning is not good from an environmental point of view."

Thomas suggests that curtains are particularly appropriate in home theatre settings because they mimic the design of cinema settings, where chairs, walls and floors are covered in fabric to achieve the best acoustics. "Covering the walls with curtains will darken the room properly and will provide much better acoustic quality than blinds in that situation," she says.

In contrast, she suggests that curtains are often not suitable in areas with wall-to-wall windows, because there is no space to stack fabric on the edges. "Classic areas for blinds are wet areas like bathrooms, ensuites, laundries and toilets, or for huge banks of windows with a view," she says. "The blinds for larger windows need to be motorised because you don't want chords or strings hanging down. But we would still make them more decorative, with a mixture of the practical and the aesthetic. A big room with large windows can look Spartan, especially at night when the view of the water is like a black hole, unlike a city view." She points to certain decorative elements to achieve different effects, whether French Provincial, classic English, Australian, nursery or teenager. **WFA**

