

FLOOR TO CEILING INTERIORS: CURTAIN RETAILER PROFILE.

DAWN ADAMS REPORTS A window furnishings retailer north of Adelaide is targeting country regions after noticing a gap in the market several years ago.



DUANA KEITEL

When Duana Keitel established Floor to Ceiling Interiors almost three years ago, she was often asked why she started during difficult economic times. "I took an opportunity while it was there," she says.

The opportunity Keitel had identified was to service country areas from the business' base in Gawler one hour north of Adelaide. While working in the window furnishings sector over the previous 12 years, Keitel had observed that country residents were 'frustrated' at not being able to access adequate services. It was that gap in the market that she decided her new business would fill.

Situated on the outskirts of Adelaide, the business is capable of completing work in city and country regions. Country residents often travel to Gawler to complete their shopping and the business' location on the main road works in its favour.

During her first six months in business, the operation was home-based but Keitel became convinced a shopfront was required. "People need to feel confident that there is a shopfront where they can see samples or displays," she says.

"I think that's important. And we get a greater success rate that way."

But she also recognises the need for home visits to gain a better understanding of a customer's needs. "I encourage us to go out to all their homes because the end result is so much better," she says. "We see their type of furniture, the style of home and the paint colours. The lighting can make a huge difference."

To understand what customers in the country were looking for, Keitel asked for feedback when the store first opened. She learned that some people thought its focus on interior design meant it was expensive.

"They thought we would be above their budget," she says. In response, Keitel took measures to ensure that she could service any budget such as adding pre-packaged curtains to the store's offering. "People on a tight budget might want custom-made products in guest related areas like the family room, the lounge room and the main bedroom, but they might choose pre-packaged for bedrooms two, three and four," she says.

She also chose not to stress the full design consultancy service offered in case it was intimidating to clients. "We try not to over emphasise certain aspects so people feel more relaxed and comfortable here," she says.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

An involvement in the community helps to develop the showroom's profile. Local students are welcomed for work experience stints; Keitel takes an interest in training young people, claiming it's crucial for the sector's future. "If I don't train the young ones, we'll miss out as an industry," she says. "We need to think long term and not short term." The staff include two interior designers and two installers with production work completed elsewhere.

The showroom comprises two adjacent premises, a cottage with several rooms as well as a modern open space. In the cottage are rooms set aside for particular products with, for example, blinds in one room and upholstery fabric in another. "People can be left to browse without becoming confused about which fabric is for which purpose," she says.

The more modern space is dedicated to drapery fabric, however, the cottage also has curtain materials in designer ranges on show. "If we have an influx of customers, we can guide them to the areas that interest them," she says.

Discussing options with clients can also lead to fresh ideas about the possibilities for window coverings. "We've had quite a few younger customers with their hearts set on roller blinds," she says. "But when we show them the different possibilities in modern looks, they sometimes switch to half-and-half, with blinds in one area and curtains elsewhere." It can be about breaking down pre-conceived ideas. "Sometimes, they think the only option is floral curtains, like their grandmother had, until they see the modern displays," she says.

VALUING CUSTOMERS

Keitel insists her business is not all about the dollar value spent. "When someone comes through my door and they want lace on one window, I will treat them as important as someone who wants a whole house consultation," she says. "We value them as much as a customer who might spend \$10,000 with us."

She describes the business today as at a critical point in its development. "I am a lot busier now than I had anticipated in such a short amount of time," she says. And she is determined to maintain that personal contact with clients as the venture continues to grow.

Asked about particular trends in her territory, in country regions, she notes there is a diverse mix of homes and that no one style dominates. But she also offers a challenge to fabric suppliers, asking if they can solve a problem she often faces.

"At the moment, it's very difficult to find heritage green or a maroon in a traditional print," she says. Without a lot to choose from, Keitel will guide customers into a different direction to find something else they might like. "But I still need the customer to be happy with the end result," she says. "They'd prefer a heritage green or maroon, perhaps, in a basic jacquard or a regency stripe."