

The-Sew-Op
Suzanne Mancini
February 15, 2023

Summary by Aileen Valerio

Suzanne Mancini, the owner of The-Sew-Op, exemplifies the importance of the local community when starting a business. After graduating from RISD, Suzanne spent 10 years designing apparel in New York City and earning a Master's in Education from NYU. Returning to Rhode Island to teach at RISD, her design experience and education prepared her for her next venture. She opened The-Sew-Op in 2016 after recognizing a void in the market. Her students at RISD were coming in with little to no sewing experience. Located in North Kingston, Rhode Island, The-Sew-Op's goal was to provide a place where children and adults can learn to sew.

Developing a business plan is crucial to starting a business. Successful apparel-based businesses require a design mind and a business mind. Suzanne Mancini was filling both these roles. However, her business plan had a clear focus that set her up for success. Location and promotion were important. Her goal was to teach children sewing skills, therefore a storefront close to a school was important. The-Sew-Op's first location was down the road from Wickford Middle School. At this location, she relied on her window displays to draw customers in. Filling the visual merchandiser position herself, she learned what grabbed customers' attention. She promoted through friends, Rhode Island Commerce, and social media. When the tailoring and quilting stores closed in Wickford, the community looked for their services elsewhere. Recognizing when you need help is important as a business owner. Suzanne reiterated that she was not a retailer as she struggled to buy the correct product and was easily convinced by sales representatives. If she wanted to expand her business, she needed more help with teaching or more help with administrative duties. Suzanne hired staff to tailor clothes and teach classes. She also outsourced marketing and technological expertise.

After four years in business, the pandemic struck. Luckily, Suzanne recognized The-Sew-Op had what people needed: masks, materials for masks, and sewing knowledge. Small businesses still struggled to reach customers and Suzanne recognized she needed help with her website. Rhode Island Commerce helped Suzanne design a website with a larger interface, saving her business. Establishing a presence online meant Suzanne no longer relied on window displays to draw customers in. When she outgrew her shop she remembered her focus, prioritizing location. Remaining close to the Wickford Middle School, her new location is bigger, brighter and ample parking. Suzanne recognized she needed to set herself apart from Joann's. She offers consumers quality fabrics and the ease of popping in for materials, without the commute.

Suzanne rolled with the punches, using them to her advantage. It is important to remember the original mission of a business, even as it expands. She recognized The-Sew-Op's role and significance in the community, designing her business around it.