

The Best of Both Worlds



Courtesy of Step 'N Stretch

Step 'N Stretch storeowner Valerie Vermeire melds business expertise with a love of dance.

BY LEE ERICA ELDER

For Valerie Vermeire, owner/president of not one but two branches of Step 'N Stretch, the three little words that are key to her success are "I'll be back." According to the storeowner, hearing this from satisfied customers is crucial to longevity. "Without them, you have no business. You have to nurture relationships—from the smallest to the largest sale—and provide the best service," she says.

Twelve years ago, Vermeire was heavily ensconced in the corporate world, as a national account manager for Proctor and Gamble. Her career path quickly changed, however, when the company required her to relocate. "I had a young daughter, and my husband and I made the decision to stay in Minnesota," she recalls.

This experience, along with her business training, made opening a one-stop shop for dance and exercise gear a natural next step. After running a brand for a major retailer at P&G, Vermeire was well-equipped for the transition. "When you're dealing with—I think at that time it was about 43 million dollars in responsibility—you have to manage those increases. You have very high demands on you to drive the volume and grow the business," Vermeire says. "It was very easy for me to start my own business because I was managing a very large account as it was." She also had another advantage: a diverse performing arts and athletic background as a dancer, teacher, choreographer, former acrobat, skater and aerobics instructor.

That's not to say that Step 'N Stretch's beginnings were without challenges. Despite having researched the Burnsville location, which was projected to have long-term residential growth, business took off slower than Vermeire anticipated. "When I first opened I came close to filing for bankruptcy," she recalls. One saving grace was gymnastics. Coming off of the success of the Magnificent 7 (otherwise known as the gold-medal winning U.S. Women's Gymnastics team) at the 1996 Olympics, local interest in the sport kept the shop afloat. In addition, Vermeire had confidence in her business

plan: "All the pieces fit together to create the right time, the right location, the right mix of goods and dollar amounts invested in the business," she explains. "I was able to wait it out and know that there was a market to come and support the store." Step 'N Stretch soon developed a strong following, particularly among area high school dance-line teams.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

In 2005, as Vermeire was looking to expand the business, a unique opportunity presented itself. A local storeowner, who was battling a serious illness, approached Vermeire to take

over her declining shop. Since settling in, Step 'N Stretch's Minnetonka location has seen a dramatic surge in business, reporting a 25 percent increase in growth since the establishment reopened under new management. Vermeire credits her assistant manager and daughter, Michelle, with spearheading the positive change: "She has done a phenomenal job of increasing volume and improving relationships, taking all of our product knowledge and trying to reclaim customers' trust."

The former owner, who keeps in touch regularly, has an enormous amount of pride knowing that what she once started is coming back to what it was, notes Vermeire.

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Just the Facts

Step 'N Stretch

E-mail: stepnstretch@aol.com
Website: www.stepnstretch.com
(under construction)

Burnsville Location:
13903 Aldrich Ave S
Burnsville, MN 55337
952-882-8300

Minnetonka Location:
12957 Ridgedale Dr
Minnetonka, MN 55305
952-591-1040

Buying Office:
PO Box 3046
Burnsville, MN 55337
952-892-0083
Fax: 952-892-0023

Hours: Monday–Friday: 10 am–8 pm; Saturday: 10 am–6 pm; Sunday: 12 pm–5 pm (both stores)

Number of employees: between 16 and 18 (more at Burnsville)

Square footage: Burnsville: 1,700; Minnetonka: 2,000

Average number of customers per day: Burnsville: 38; Minnetonka: 30

Merchandise: Dancewear for ballet, tap, jazz, lyrical, ballroom and hip hop, and shoes, gymnastics wear, skatewear, cheer wear, gifts, jewelry and accessories

Featured brands: Bloch, Leo's Dancewear, Sansha; Dancewear: Bloch, Body Wrappers, Bunheads, Capezio, Dance Paws, Danskin, GK-Elite, Grishko, Leo's Dancewear,

Mirella, Mondor, Tia's Dancewear

Décor: Each store features wood floors and simple, neutral décor. The Burnsville store is smaller and more densely packed with merchandise, while the Minnetonka branch has more room for displays. Burnsville's top feature is the shoe room, equipped with full mirrors and a barre.

Best-selling item: Step 'N Stretch has a very large booty-short business, which owner Valerie Vermeire says has essentially replaced the jazz pant. **Busiest times of day:** Lunchtime and after school

Busiest season: Back-to-school

Q & A

With two busy stores to run, Step 'N Stretch owner Valerie Vermeire looks to her staff to help keep things running smoothly. *DRN* talked to Vermeire, and two senior employees, General Manager Tiffany Boozier and Kristin Grohs, senior sales associate and former assistant manager, about what sets the employees apart.

DRN: What does your employee training entail?

Valerie Vermeire: We have a main training book, and new staff members have to learn product and style numbers, why a customer is shopping for those given items, take employee tests to evaluate where they stand on ability to do pointe-shoe fittings, etc. We hire dancers, primarily those with a pointe background. It's also important for them to understand the differences between the studios, because some are very classical,

and others offer different training. Our training covers all of this.

DRN: How do you ensure growth of employees' product knowledge?

VV: It's an ever-evolving process. You can never train a staff member and then just let her go. You have to provide coaching. Then you succeed because she succeeds and can grow as a staff member who provides the best service for the customers, her peers and vendors.

Kristin Grohs: I like learning about different shoes, clothing and products, and sitting in on vendor meetings to see upcoming products. I enjoy getting out of the store and talking to people who may not know about us. I also like hearing customer requests and passing them along to Valerie.

DRN: How does management foster good employee relations and a positive working environment?

KG: I always try to present new policies or changes in a positive way and take the time to demonstrate them so everyone feels comfortable. If there is a problem with an employee or a situation that needs to be dealt with, I try to listen to the other side. I also try hard to admit my own mistakes so everyone knows we all make them! We also plan outings every few months and recognize everyone's birthday. During our busy season, we give gift cards to staff members who pick up extra shifts, stay late or go above and beyond. We also try to encourage them to have fun while they are working!

Tiffany Boozier: Getting to know the staff on a personal level creates a strong trust between employee and employer. We have "to do" sheets, which are detailed lists of expectations for each staff member. They are also used for staff to record additional accomplishments completed at each shift. The sheets are a great tool to verify that tasks are being completed, identify who is getting things done, and assess what needs to be finished. They encourage the staff to be self-motivated and take on more projects.

SERVING THE COMMUNITY

Step 'N Stretch has a strong foundation in the entire Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, not to mention many of its outlying regions. "People come from way north, from Iowa, Nebraska and Wisconsin," Vermeire says. Since the stores are situated 25 miles apart, near major highways, many customers shop at both locations.

While Vermeire's day-to-day efforts are mostly rooted in the buying office, she visits the stores regularly to provide hands-on management. "If you just sit behind a computer looking at numbers, you lose that personal touch. You lose that overall appearance or presentation that products show and tell you when you're at store level," she says. "Store checks and keeping your hands on the pulse of customers are equally as important as all of the data analysis."

Though face time is crucial for all retailers, perhaps it is even more so for Vermeire, who has the added challenge of competing with a local wholesale supplier. "You'll find studios selling shoes and tights," Vermeire explains. (When the business first opened, there was roughly one studio for every 12 blocks.)

At the 2007 DRN Expo, Vermeire recalls her fellow retailers being shocked by her unique situation. When she stood up during a session and asked if anyone else was in a similar position, "they all gasped," she says, laughing. "They said they would go bankrupt!"

Vermeire handles the situation by carrying the same assortment of products as local studio owners as well as the private label brand of the wholesaler. "You have to have it to capture that customer who comes in to shop for other things," she says, "they notice [and say], 'Oh, they have the same shoe that my studio carries.'"

The storeowner insists she harbors no ill will: "Our goal is not to be offensive to studio owners in any way, but to complement what they carry. It might be tough for them not to carry shoes and tights, and you just have to know that they are trying to survive as well."

GIVING BACK

Vermeire's humble and quiet grace was learned partly from one of her favorite tap teachers, Mary Lou Dennhardt, whom she describes as "an absolutely phenomenal hooper." It wasn't until

Dennhardt's wake that Vermeire realized who the "Gene" she kept referring to was—Dennhardt's old teacher, the one and only Gene Kelly. "She was such a modest woman, she never even mentioned his last name."

As a long-time, vital member of her local performing arts community, Vermeire strives to give back. She plans to launch a local arts calendar as a feature of the new

Step 'N Stretch website, which is projected to launch at the end of this month. "It will allow some of the smaller groups who can't afford advertising the ability to get their name out there," says Vermeire, who regularly uses radio, print and television ads to promote Step 'N Stretch.

In addition to community outreach and direct marketing, Vermeire swears by four

characteristics, which she refers to as CATS: Convenient location, wide Assortment, Trend responses and quality customer Service. "We have everything the customer needs, and if we don't have it, we'll find it and bring it in," she says. "Our advertising tagline is, 'Why go anywhere else?'" 

Lee Erica Elder is a freelance writer in NYC.

