



Seven ways to boost employee morale during the slow times.

To keep employees busy during the slow season, **Sposabella** in Feasterville, Pa. hosted a fashion show. Attended by 275 women, the event not only gave staff something fun to do, but it was an excellent way to boost exposure for the 10-year-old store.

In November 2016, 275 women attended a fashion show hosted by Sposabella in Feasterville, Pa. The event netted money, but more importantly, it was great exposure for the 10-year-old store.

But there was another positive takeaway: It kept the employees of Sposabella busy for weeks, which is why owner Roberta Rushing held it during the salon's quiet time. She wanted to boost her staff's morale during the annual downswing in business, which she knew would rebound during the beginning of the year.

Rushing, clearly, is a glass-half-full type of person but she's not alone. Most bridal retailers have a cyclical business that's busy during the first half of the year, then tapers off in November and December.

One of the difficulties of these quiet times is keeping employees'

Focus on all the positive things to be gained from a slow period.

morale up. Boredom will take the edge off anyone's appetite for their job, and a dejected face isn't going to sell many gowns.

But instead of fearing the slowdown, retailers are embracing it: exciting their employees, injecting new energy into their stores and getting to know each other better.

"We feel a sense of accomplishment during the quiet times because we get so much done," Rushing says. "It is often impossible to tackle big projects during high season."

Below are seven ideas on how to keep employee morale strong when business slows down.

1. Host a fashion show

Like Rushing, you can use slower times to generate some excitement in your store.

Almost double the expected number of women showed up for last year's fashion show, and with tickets costing \$15 apiece, Sposabella made money, too. Along with the fashion show, there were hors d'oeuvres and drinks, music and experts offering advice such as dermatologists who talked about skincare.

"Our employees loved this," Rushing says. "If we could do one a week they would, but it takes so much time and planning. Doing something fun can be exciting."

2. Educate

Shannelle Armstrong-Fowler, owner of Haute & Co. Bridal Boutique and Revolution Bridal stores in Chicago, is a proponent



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of employee education. Quiet times, she explains, are the perfect time to get ahead on this.

Armstrong-Fowler reviews the basics on getting to know brides, then asks what employees need to help close sales faster or engage brides before they walk through the door. She also asks staff to assess themselves.

"We walk through their strengths and what they would love to highlight," she says. "Employees have an opportunity for real dialog with me about frustrations or positive things they are seeing with their appointments."

Last fall Carrie Huyett, owner of Carrie's Bridal Collection in Chamblee, Ga., engaged Lindy Rivera, a bridal shop expert and coach who teaches a "Do You Speak Bride?" training series.

"I wanted to give my staff a different perspective in everything," Huyett says.

"It changed the attitude of my consultants. Lindy works to empower women and make us feel good, so we can help others feel good. It changed our perspective on what our brides are going through when shopping for a dress, and how to see things from the bride's perspective."

Last year Bridget Moore tried something different. In December, the owner of K&B Bridals in Bel Air, Md., partnered with her mentor, Lori Dubasik, owner of Evaline's Bridal in Warren, Ohio, to bring both of their teams together for a day and a half. The idea was to do training and prep for the New Year, to build up the teams and learn from each other.

"It got them pumped up for

Slow times are an ideal opportunity to focus on employee training.

January, which is our busiest time," Moore says.

At the event, which around 15 employees attended, staff members gave presentations on how they do things such as create great displays or close a sale, and the two storeowners gave tips and held contests. Employees received a certificate for attending.

"This event lets my staff meet other people who do the same thing and allows them to talk to people who understand their experiences working in this industry," Moore says.

Dubasik adds, "This is the kind of thing that refreshes employees and energizes them for the next season. It gives them a great feeling that they're experienced and knowledgeable enough to pass that on to another store and to their colleagues."

During the quiet time, Moore also tries to bring in reps.

"They have great product knowledge, which they pass on to my employees, which helps them be confident in their sales," she says. "The reps also talk about trends and what their company can offer to help my girls close the sale. It always helps them feel a lot more confident if they know the options from different designers."

This add-on service is not something the reps volunteer, Moore says, but is something she's starting to ask for.

"It's important to invest in your employees by giving them that training," she says. "It makes them feel a lot more empow-



Shannelle Armstrong-Fowler, owner of *Haute & Co. Bridal Boutique* and *Revolution Bridal* stores in Chicago, uses downtime to educate her employees.



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Rushing also educates — in a very hands-on way.

"I teach my staff about steaming dresses, taking inventory, writing thank you cards, sending a certificate to the bride," she says. "There's always something to be done and this is a great time of year to do it."

Educating your employees is an ideal thing to do during quiet times, says Darcy Eikenberg, founder/executive coach of Red Cape Revolution, a leadership development and executive coaching firm in Bonita Springs, Fla.

"We forget employees want us

Slow times are an excellent chance for reflection and planning ahead.

to lead them, to give them a purpose and a direction," Eikenberg says. "They know we're not super-human, but people truly want to be led and engaged in the business. Investing in your employees always pays off."

3. Change up your store

In an ideal world, your bridal store's layout regularly changes to keep things fresh, but really, who has the time? It may be just once a year, but many bridal stores use quiet periods as an opportunity to change.

"We move things around and change things, which keeps it fresh for the employees but also for the public," Huyett says. "We are always looking for ways to make the store more functional for customers and showcase things in a different way. Anything we can move helps invigorate the employees and gives the store a different look."

Last year Rushing moved all mothers' dresses and bridesmaids' dresses, as well as repainted the store and brought in new furniture, draperies and rugs.

"The girls are very excited because there's something going on," she says. "These times really allow me to get creative and busy, which I don't have time for when there's a lot going on, and this inspires my team."

4. Offer gift cards or other treats

Huyett also inspires healthy competition during her staff in the quiet weeks. She picks up a variety of gift cards (for gas, coffee, books, etc.) and presents one each time an employee sells a dress during the slow time.

"Sales are less guaranteed at these times so we try to do this then," she says. "My employees are straight salary so they love any reward they can get."

Rushing offers gift cards to local retailers during her slow season and runs contests such as a gift card for the employee with the highest sales in that month, or a gift card for the employee who sells a hard-to-move designer's gown.

Michael Levin, associate professor of marketing and chair at Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, says another way of upping morale can be as simple as offering employees a surprise: Show up with a box of doughnuts one morning, or offer an impromptu order from the local coffee shop.

5. Looking forward, looking back

You've likely heard it's necessary to work *on* your business as well as *in* it. Well, quiet time presents the perfect opportunity.

"It's also a good time to evaluate your goal and business plan," Levin says. "If your business is cyclical, it's also a good idea to do the things you usually neglect."

Slow periods are a chance to reflect back and project forward. Huyett plans social media and marketing several months out; Dubasik uses this time to examine reasons brides don't buy.

"It's a time to look at the past year – what did we do well, what did we not do well," she says. "And, we talk about the coming year – what can we do to grow,

what's our marketing plan. Every year how you reach brides changes."

6. Get to know your staff

Amid the hustle and bustle of daily business, it's easy to forget employees are people with lives, talents and worries. Slow periods are an ideal time to change that.

"They're a good time to reconnect with employees and also for them to reconnect with each other," says Red Cape's Eikenberg.

She teaches the art of bragging and says bridal retailers should do the same thing: Invite each staff member to make a brag.

"This is a good time to find out more about your employees so you can connect; it's a way to invite conversation without forcing it," she says.

And you might get some good ideas at what your employees are good at along the way.

Bridget Moore treats her employees to some time out during her quiet time, which has the added advantage of working as a thank you to them. In November she held a Friendsgiving at her manager's home for her team and their spouses or boyfriends. In December she took her team out for a holiday party. She also takes the staff from one of her stores out for a mani-pedi day.

Rushing also took her employees out for dinner, which turned into a partly business, partly personal event.

"We need to do this more – it could be breakfast or lunch but I think it brought us closer together," she says. "It allows the girls to

ask questions they normally couldn't. At the dinner we were all very happy and excited about things they were going to do."

During her quiet month of December, Dubasik tries to spend time one-on-one with each of her staff members.

"Our staff never gets enough of the owner; you're always too busy doing things with the customers so this is the time of year to share yourself with your team," she says. "I want to share my confidence in our lines; my closing experience; share my knowledge, etc...this is the time of the year I want to show them I respect and value each of them and want to empower them with my knowledge and empower them to feel accomplished in their positions. I also feel I learn as much from them

*Get to know your employees
and learn about their pas-
sions and skills.*

as they learn from me."

7. Encourage time off

During the slow season, Haute & Co.'s Armstrong allows staff members to take time off if they choose to work on their passions. However, if a bride they are working with comes in while they're not there, their commission is split with the employee who covered the appointment.

"I want my employees to focus on things that are important to them," she says.

A bonus is sometimes her employees can translate these extra skills for the benefit of the stores. One stylist is an artist, for example, and creates beautiful designs on a chalk door that wel-

comes brides. Another knows how to use Adobe; others are talented with social media.

"Everybody feels good about this," Armstrong says.

Moore advises her employees to take some time off if they want to because come January that won't be an option. For this, her hourly workers are not paid but she gives them a bonus so they don't lose a full day's pay.

At the end of the day, slow periods are going to happen, whether you want them or not, but your attitude can make all the difference. The best thing you can do, says Red Cape Revolution's Eikenberg, "is to go into a slow period focusing on what you can gain from it, instead of what you may be losing from it."



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