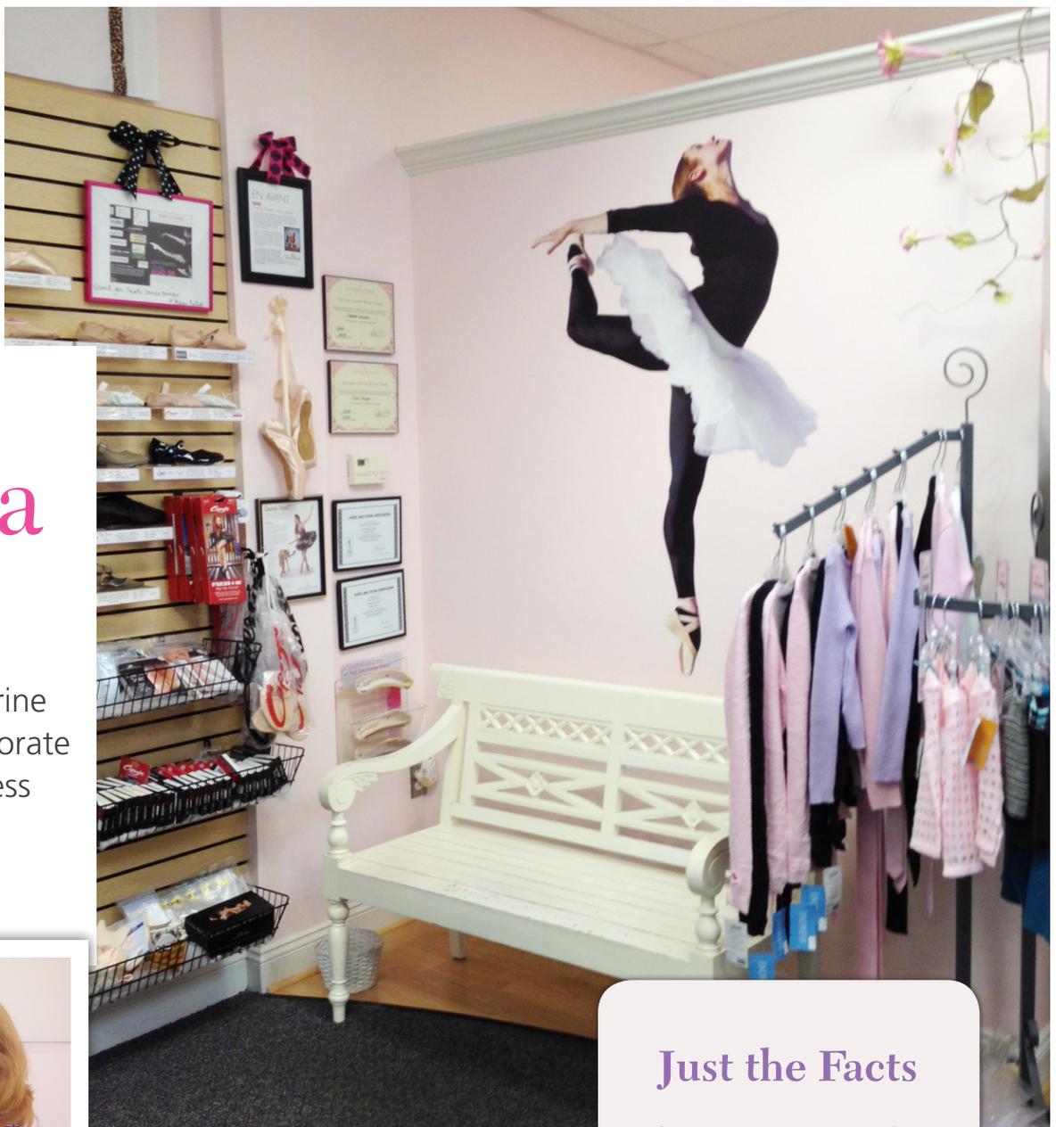


Whatever It Takes to Fit a Pointe Shoe

Pointe Dance Boutique owners Catherine Woodson and Marti Morgan left corporate jobs to turn their passion—and business savvy—to pointe shoe sales.

BY LISA TRAIGER



Pointe Dance Boutique's pointe shoe fitting area, where owners Marti Morgan (far left) and Catherine Woodson do five to seven fittings a week.

When Shannon Hunter McConville started her own ballet company in Chesterfield, VA, in 2010, Pointe Dance Boutique was among her earliest supporters, donating costumes for five dancers. Storeowners Catherine Woodson and Marti Morgan also supplied the fledgling troupe with Grishko pointe shoes. “Getting this recognition from Pointe Dance Boutique and support from a national sponsor has been a tremendous help for us in our first year,” says McConville.

Investing in their local dance community has been at the heart of Woodson and Morgan’s strategy for building a business around their store’s pointe shoe collections and fitting services. They regularly list dance concerts, recitals and workshops on their website and send out e-mail blasts about dance events in the region. The connections they forge with local dancers, teachers and companies such as McConville’s Stavna Ballet have paid big dividends in establishing their reputation and gaining customer loyalty. “People come in and say, ‘I’ve been referred to you because I can’t get a good pointe shoe fitting. Can you help me?’” Woodson says. “We have customers who drive two hours from Fredericksburg and one who drives four from Fayetteville, North Carolina.”

When Woodson and Morgan decided to launch Pointe Dance Boutique in 2007, the two former corporate execs could have put their marketing, accounting, e-business, project management and sales skills to work in any number of ways. But their shared passion was dance. Morgan has danced her entire life, and as a working mom, she still squeezes in adult tap and jazz, plus a mother-daughter class. Woodson finds her bliss in weekly

adult ballet classes. That background would influence all their choices as they developed a business together.

The pair met when they both worked at what was then Reynolds Metals. They held various positions in marketing and sales. “We both were anxious to leave corporate America,” Morgan explains. They put their heads together and realized that suburban Richmond needed a dance store that specialized in pointe shoe fittings. They knew pointe shoes would be a labor-intensive product, requiring 30- to 90-minute custom fittings. But carrying a range of styles, sizes and brands would also set their store apart from competitors and attract repeat customers—particularly dedicated ballet students looking for personalized attention.

With their corporate experience, Morgan and Woodson were able to write a business plan that landed them a \$90,000 bank loan, and they took space in a shopping center in Midlothian, a growing bedroom community on Richmond’s south side that attracts young families. “Within about a five-mile radius there are six dance studios,” Morgan says. “Once you get to a 15- to 20-mile radius, there are a lot more.”

THE FEEL OF A WELL-FIT SHOE

The storeowners’ introduction to selling pointe shoes was a full-day seminar at manufacturer Prima Soft in Pennsylvania, where they learned the ins and outs of fitting every type of dancer’s foot—including such common issues as how to fit one pair of shoes correctly on a dancer with two different types of feet. “We take great pride in being able to fit *any* feet we come across,” says

Just the Facts

Pointe Dance Boutique

6900 Woodlake Commons Loop
Midlothian, VA 23112
804-639-4215

www.pointedanceboutique.com

Hours: Monday–Friday: 10 am–7 pm; Saturday: 10 am–4 pm

Square footage: 1,350

Number of employees: 2 (entirely owner-operated)

Busiest time of day: after 3 pm

Busiest time of year: back-to-school

Typical customer: dancers and/or their mothers

Average purchase: \$40

Featured brands: pointe shoes: Grishko, Gaynor Minden, Capezio; other shoes: Leo’s, Só Dança, Sansha; dancewear: Bal Togs, Body Wrappers, Capezio, Eurotard, Mondor, Motionwear, Sansha; other: Dance Kicks, Dasha Designs, Heart and Soul, Horizon, Prima Diva, Sugar & Bruno, Trendy Trends

Best-selling brand: Capezio; and for pointe shoes, Gaynor Minden

Most unusual request: tutu for a gentleman who lost a bet

Woodson. Morgan's many years of childhood dance lessons included pointe work, so she already had a kinesthetic understanding of how a well-fitted shoe should feel. Most important, she can convey that to her young customers, especially first-time buyers, for instance, by gently squeezing the student's hand so the student knows how tight the shoe should feel. The co-owners still continually upgrade and refine their knowledge at trainings with manufacturers.

Today, pointe shoes bring in half of Pointe Dance Boutique's revenue. The store carries four brands: Prima Soft, Grishko, Capezio and Gaynor Minden.

Impeccable customer service helps drive these sales. With no employees, that means the two owners are on the front lines. But relationships with suppliers help. "Just recently we had a dancer who really loved a certain shoe but was having problems with it rubbing her pinky toes," says Morgan. "No matter what toe pad we added or removed, the interior lining of the shoe was just hitting her in the wrong place. We sent the manufacturer pictures of the dancer with bare feet and shoes on. They created a custom shoe for her, and it has worked perfectly."

MANAGING COMPETITION

Since the two owners do all of the 20 to 25 pointe shoe fittings a month themselves, they ask customers to make an appointment. Although they never turn anyone away, they hate to make their customers wait, and when an unscheduled fitting is squeezed in, things can back up. After a pointe shoe sale, they keep detailed records on purchasers the old-fashioned way: in manila folders. There, they list all shoe styles and sizes a customer has tried on, which work and which don't and any other relevant information.

While their biggest competition comes from independent dance stores nearby, Morgan and Woodson also run the risk of losing business to online merchants. To avoid becoming a free fitting service for internet vendors, the owners charge a fitting fee to customers who try on pointe shoes but don't purchase them. A sign in the store makes it clear up front: "A fee of \$25 will be charged on pointe shoes not purchased at time of fitting." They hope this heads off some sales losses to web-based vendors.

The store's dancewear inventory is in tune with the Richmond-area market it serves, which is to say, it's conservative: mostly black leotards and pink tights for studio uniforms, and not too many bare midriffs or other trendy revealing cuts. At

any one time, they'll have 280 pairs of pointe shoes in stock, displaying them individually on a slat wall with details of each style. The rest are stored in the back room, most of them hanging in their bags, some boxed. They order pointe shoes throughout the year as needed.

To manage their inventory, they tackle a single department once a month, scheduling smaller departments during the busiest back-to-school season. Every August, they do a manual count of their pointe shoe inventory and cross-check it with their POS.

The duo is celebrating the store's fifth anniversary

this year by continuing to focus on connections throughout the Richmond area dance community. Each year, they run their own road show, bringing dancewear and shoes to fit at studios throughout greater Richmond. "We have a good rapport with our studios," Morgan says. "We make it a point to go out every September and check in with them or talk to them in person to make sure we carry what they need. We thrive on those one-on-one relationships." 

Lisa Traiger writes on the performing arts from the Washington, DC, area.

