

*Steel Window Change*

March 26 By Jennifer Bell p. C 6  
2003 THE INTELLIGENCER

Finding a niche and filling it well has made Jane Nicol a business success.

The owner of The Village Shoppe and Bridal Salon in downtown Belleville makes herself indispensable to her customers — a service she says is lacking in many clothing stores today.

"I get to know my clientele so well that I know what styles they like, what designers fit them well and what colours they look best in," said Nicol, who bought the former Stirling-based shop from her mother Marg McMullen 17 years ago. "Then, when it's time for them to shop, I can put together half a dozen outfits for them. Ninety-five per cent of the time, they like what I've chosen."

Making clothes shopping — an activity many women dread — more attractive to the consumer reaps rewards not only at the till, but for Nicol's reputation.

"Clients tell me there's no other store like ours around. I think it's that one-on-one experience that makes customers feel special and valued," said Nicol. "Many have become friends over the years."

Nicol got her first taste of sales helping her mother with the business as a teen in Stirling. But, the Belleville-born Nicol pursued a career as an elementary teacher in Grafton for four years before heading to Toronto to work in sales.

She continued to keep her hand in the family business, however, accompanying her mother on buying trips several times a year and working part-time when possible.

She'd planned on taking over the store when her son Nathan reached school age, but when her mother became ill, "things happened sooner."

Nicol headed back to Stirling when Nathan was two and plunged full-time into the world of fashion.

"My part-time work at the store helped a great deal, but I still remember that first buying trip I took alone," she recalled. "It was difficult, but a learning experience."

Nicol's love of people and a desire to "help women look their best" drove her

success, as did an eye for colour that often helps convince her customers to try a shade they've never worn before.

"I love to see their faces when they real-

ize how great they look in blue, or pink. It really gives them a boost."

Nicol's years of experience also come into play for regular clients who, because

they're elderly or ill, can't frequent the shop.

"I will choose items for those customers and get the clothes to them, either myself or through the mail."

The Village Shoppe — celebrating its 30th year in business — caters to many of Belleville's professional women, but also draws clients from as far away as Toronto and Ottawa, many during the wedding season.

The bridal salon is at its peak in early January (gowns must be ordered three to four months ahead of time for a summer wedding), although Nicol said the fall is becoming a popular alternative for wedding dates.

Nicol moved the store from Stirling's Main Street to downtown Belleville in 1996, after outgrowing the 1,600 square-foot shop.

She and her eight full- and part-time staff now work in 5,400 square feet of light-filled, open space that was once the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce.

"The vault is still here, but now it's filled with wedding dresses," she laughed.

She carries a "lot" of inventory, as her experience over the last 17 years has taught her that "customers want choice."

Her extensive clothing lineup includes popular Canadian designers such as Linda Lundstrom, Jack's, Lucien Daunois, Francesca Mammoliti, Simon Chang and Peter Nygard. Her European line sports fashion-forward looks by Sara Pacini and Zaffiri, for younger clients.

"Clients want quality clothes that are going to last as well as look good," she stated.

But Nicol said the line between younger and older customers "is definitely blurring."

"People are getting younger in their outlook on fashion," she explained. "I've noticed a real change in buying habits in the last year or two. I now see women in their eighties and even nineties who come in and don't want to dress like old ladies," she smiled. "They look wonderful and have kept their figure, and want to dress young."