



Paper Plus in Berkeley, Calif. reinvented itself as a one-stop party shop that offers everything from cards and balloon deliveries to concessions. Photos: Paper Plus

Paper Plus

Proving independent stores can not only survive, but thrive

By Abby Heugel | Managing Editor

In a world increasingly being taken over not only by big box stores, but also the electronic word, Paper Plus in Berkeley, Calif., has managed not only to survive, but thrive and remains the only party store left in Berkeley.

What started as "Papyrus 1st Class Seconds," a 300-square-foot outlet store selling discounted Papyrus inventory in 1985, quickly expanded and took over the entire building. As the store grew, owner Michele Schurman and her husband, Philip,

were unable to get their merchandise, so they changed the name to "Paper Plus" in 1994.

"We started receiving lots of closeouts from many sources and for awhile we were mostly discount stationery, wrapping paper and cards," Schurman said. "We were known for our large selection of half-priced cards, which is something we still offer."

But with the advent of computers, email and e-vites, the stationery business changed drastically. In order to stay viable, they bridged the gap by offering

Shop Talk



Although they are no longer “Papyrus 1st Class Seconds,” greeting cards still make up about 10 percent of the retail offerings at Paper Plus.

a large variety of specialty papers and envelopes for people to make their own cards on their computer.

Eight years ago they sold the building that they had been in for 22 years and relocated right next door. Moving became seamless and profitable because the 3,000-square-foot space was more open, better lit and more accessible.

“Once again we had the opportunity to reinvent ourselves,” Schurman said. “With an addition of our ‘Balloon Mobile’ for deliveries and party concessions for rent, we became a full-fledged party store.”

Getting Personal

Now the proportion of stationery and cards to the general party goods section is about one-tenth of the entire store. Concessions are stored in the back, except for one of each as display, and the majority of the store is solid and licensed party goods, bags, wrapping paper, boxes, crafts, office supplies, candles (birthday and tapers), baking goods, costumes, makeup, hats, themed occasions and holiday merchandise, as well as close out items.

Schurman’s background is in business with an emphasis in Hotel and Restaurant Administration, but she said it was an easy transition from restaurants to party goods. General business principles apply, regardless of what you’re selling — inventory control, cash flow, decent management skills, organizational skills and efficiency optimization are universal principals.

Although they only have six employees, everyone has been at Paper Plus on average 12 years. Each employee has an area of expertise that they are in control of, but they all work together and any person is interchangeable. Schurman said sometimes the work is so seamless that no direction is necessary, only a look will do.

“By being in the store all the time, I’ve put a face and a personality associated with our name and people really connect on a personal level,” she said. “We have second and third generations of customers and a lot of the items in our store are direct results of listening to the needs of our customers.

“My philosophy is to treat your customers as your friends and your employees as family,” Schurman continued. “The dynamics created by this philosophy is a very powerful opposition to the big impersonal stores.”

Another powerful opposition is the vast and varied assortment of merchandise they carry. In the last few years they’ve started carrying theme-oriented and seasonal items year round, and the ability to offer makeup, wigs, accessories, costumes, hats and a whole section with crafts and baking items gives them an additional advantage over the seasonally-based box stores.

Concession rentals — such as industrial strength snow cone, cotton candy, popcorn, nacho, hot dog and slushy machines — also have been a great addition because they complete the party experience, and once the machinery is paid off, all other rentals are profit.

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"We try to make the renting convenient and easy and we have all the accoutrements available as well," Schurman said. "Unlike other stores that rent for a day, our rentals are for three days for the price of one day, which gives them time to pick it up the day before and bring it back the day after. Cleaning of the machines really is the only down side."

Special Delivery

While concessions are a valuable area of their business, balloons have become their most notable and profitable item, in part because they are the only brick and mortar that creates and delivers balloon arrangements in the East Bay.

"We have our very own Certified balloon Artist (CBA) and we boast the largest balloon inventory in the Bay area," Schurman said.

They price all their balloons separately and have a pricing for various increments of balloon creations, such as columns and spirals priced by the foot, for example. For events big or small, they take time to sit with the customer and ask a lot of questions — taking into account budget, location, color scheme and specific themes — so they can steer them into designing their balloons to their exact specifications to reflect what they want to accomplish.

If they're delivering, they do all work in-house so setup is immediate and professional. If the customer is taking an arrangement home, they make it easy by implementing the use of balloon bags, rubber bands, weights and a helping hand, if they choose.

"The challenges created by the helium shortage have both helped us and hindered us," Schurman said. "We have been fortunate to keep the flow of helium in our store going without any interruptions, but the prices have tripled and supply is always uncertain. We have gotten more creative with air and will continue to venture into other options as well."



Concession rentals — such as industrial strength snow cone, cotton candy, popcorn, nacho, hot dog and slushy machines — help complete the party experience.

Along with the helium shortage, one of the biggest challenges they face is conveying all that they have and all that they are to potential customers. They use the fact that they're on a major street to their advantage by placing large balloon creations on the island in front of the store. These unique pieces act as advertising and make a statement about current holidays or local events.

Schurman said people love to see what they come up with and it also draws them into the store. Once they come in, they know. She said it's all about trial and error and changing as business demands.

"In business things are never constant," Schurman said. "I believe that as long as you don't become myopic, you will have the ability to change directions and to stay in that upward growth curve."

One thing that is constant is that they take pride in helping customers create fun and memorable parties by supplying innovative balloon designs and reliable balloon delivery, and that's a "plus" for the shoppers they meet. **P**