

# ELEVATE & EDUCATE

BY CHRISTINA NORSIG

## I'VE GROWN UP IN THIS INDUSTRY.

One of my first jobs was as a bridal consultant at Jersey's Brielle Galleries. I then moved to wholesale selling at Rosenthal. I now own and operate eTableTop.com, an Internet retail store for luxury tabletop and decorative accessories. I love this industry, the people, and our beautiful products, but we face real challenges, most notably the proliferation of off-price retailers and e-tailers, and the lack of consumer enthusiasm for luxury tabletop.

I often reminisce with colleagues about business practices learned from my mentor, Ira Jacobsen of Brielle. Ira sold top brands with a firm policy: no discounting. Ira educated and inspired his staff; there were weekly store trainings and there were always books and brochures left for us to learn from. Ira gave and got tremendous respect from vendors. They protected his business and he promoted and marketed their products relentlessly. These basic principles are noteworthy as we market to a new generation of customers.

I recently watched the women of *The View* discuss the relevancy of fine china as a wedding gift. One bride said she exchanged her wedding china for a dining room set. "I have no need for fine china but a dining set I can use," she said. This issue of industry relevancy is a huge challenge because the bride has a good point; there will never be a need for fine china just as there isn't a need to buy a Ferrari or Dom Perignon. These brands are desired because they've been elevated through sophisticated marketing and consistent pricing. Fine tabletop, like a luxury sports car, must be understood beyond its cost, and shown why it's worth more than an overseas knock-off.

We know the unique attributes of our products and at market are often inspired by vendors' innovative displays. We should consider having the same type of open house for consumers, inspiring and educating them. To truly appreciate a Royal Copenhagen *Blue Fluted* dinner plate, customers should know that each piece has 1,197 hand brushstrokes, a fact that makes the product unique.

Another significant challenge is the consumer's shift away from traditional brick and mortar stores to online shopping. They're computer savvy, surfing the web to research and compare prices, and the online environment is often their first impression of a product. Even if they aren't purchasing online, they're doing their research there. I've been saddened to see so many prestigious

shares celebrity and chef favorites that help animate the product. Our enhanced bridal registry offers couples a personal web page and a forum to write about their china selections.

Our latest educational tool is a *Tabletop, Food, and Style* blog to further excite and engage customers. Our visitors spend equal time on the pure content pages as they do on the shopping pages. There has also been an increase in downloading PDFs on the history of brands and product brochures. Investing in brand landing pages and creating content is time consuming and expensive; however, I recognize this is a long-term investment in boosting the image of the industry and our approach seems to be paying off; we have over 20,000 unique customers a month and a growing list of

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**If the luxury tabletop business is going to remain relevant, manufacturers must educate consumers about what makes our products unique and elevate retailers who market them.**

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tabletop brands deeply discounted online by a mix of strictly online stores and traditional retailers using the website as a marketing arm for their brick and mortar store. Fluctuating pricing hurts and makes it impossible for committed retail partners to maintain customers' loyalty. In many cases, online customers aren't exposed to the rich history of the brands but are buying on price alone.

This was the impetus to create eTableTop.com. My goal remains consistent: educate customers and elevate luxury tabletop to a new generation of shoppers. Our competitive advantage is the educational content we provide about the brands we carry. Each brand has its own page that offers information about the brand as well as the top sellers. We research and interview manufacturers to acquire educational content which can be found in our *Did You Know?* section. There are also pure content areas like *Celebrity Style* which

vendor partners.

Issues of off-pricing and customer loss of interest are not insurmountable. However, it's not enough to know the challenges; it's time to act on them. It's not about whether the Internet is important to the tabletop market; it's a reality in today's marketplace and we should consider ways to do it better. The basic principle I learned from Ira Jacobson many years ago still applies today: elevate and educate. I'm doing my part to uphold that tradition. Are you? □

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