

# The World According to Roz

*From a basement business to a national, award-winning retail store, V. George Rustigian Rugs has a pulse on marketing and making customers happy.*



*After winning one of the two 2001 ROY Awards given for Oriental Rug Specialist, Roz Rustigian, owner, V. George Rustigian Rug, said she was overcome and regrettably overlooked mentioning the following: "Women in this industry share peculiar challenges. I share—with a knowing smile—this award with [the late] Jackie Vance."*

When you walk up to the door at V. George Rustigian Rugs, the austere, Greek façade and 11-foot, floor-to-ceiling, arched windows may give the impression of a pretentious interior. That couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, on any given day, you might be greeted by owner Roz Rustigian's Doberman, or the caged African Gray Parrot who calls the store home.

The Rhode Island rug store began in 1930 as a makeshift rug business out of Mr. Rustigian's Rhode Island basement and garage. Roz, his daughter, never planned to go into the rug industry. In fact, she was an operations analyst, successfully walking the corporate talk and dressing the dress. When

business. Tibetan business is "steady, but not jarringly successful," Rustigian said. "On the other hand, we've had amazing luck with the new product from Pakistan, like the old Caucasian designs, Mahals and Sultanabads—moderately scaled designs with modern colors."

Also moving off of the sales floor are traditional Persian designs with looser weaves and antiqued, beat-up surfaces "that have serendipity about them," she said. "And we're still selling the hell out of sisal." Broadloom also has become an important part of the store's sales.

In terms of merchandising, just about every rug in the store is racked so that people can wait on themselves. The

***"We're really good teachers ... I see that as one of the reasons we're open."***

her father died in 1980, she kept his business going almost by accident. In 1981, she decided to buy a building; it was an old historical bank building from the 1920s. The rest is history too.

The store's inventory is high end, so you won't find 90-line Chinese rugs or any low-end product at all. Machine-made goods are sourced from Karastan, (primarily the 700 series and Samovar lines) with choice pieces from other vendors. "I'm a cherry picker. No question," said Roz Rustigian. "I don't buy collections. I buy rugs."

With a 1,700-square-foot store, space is a pivotal decision-making factor in what she buys. "It's not compelling for me to get heavily into machine-mades. I'm not in a volume business where I can make up profit margins."

In handmade categories, the store does little flatweave

exception is 9x12s; spacing limitations don't accommodate for a 9x12 rack. There are festive, khaki-colored canvas signs with black wording that identify rack sizes. Laser-printed rug tags that bear a picture of the building neatly grace the 700 rugs on display at any given time.

Marketing to the consumer—the right consumer—is a top priority at Rustigian Rugs. After hiring a research firm to analyze her customer demographic, she learned that her customers are 55 years old or more, have owned their homes for nine years or more, have a pet or two and a combined income of \$129,000 a year. Her customers' activities include sailing and tennis. They don't bowl, drive RUVs and they're not especially computer literate. They read dining and food magazines like *Gourmet*.

"That basic bit of knowledge changed the way I market,

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and direct mail is my thing,” said Rustigian. “Now I intensely market to sailors at regattas and other boating events. I send rugs for silent auctions at waterfront events. It works.”

The store mails weekly specifically to new homeowners in the area, who have spent at least \$160,000 on their homes. Follow-up mailings will come six times over the course of a year, in addition to general mailers, which go out several times a year.

“You can saturate the market to the point where they don’t listen anymore,” Rustigian said from experience. Years ago, at low business point, a friend said, “You’ve got to make people see you again. Paint the outside of your building.” She did and was astonished at the difference it made.

As you would expect, customer relationships are paramount at Rustigian Rugs. “We’re really good teachers,” she said. “I see that as one of the reasons we’re open.”

According to Rustigian, one of the most frequently incorrectly asked questions is: ‘Where do the best rugs come from?’ “It’s a question that begs a lot of chit-chat,” she said, “because you have to explain that rugs have to be looked at on their own merits. That’s really not the answer people want because it requires them to think and not just have a pat explanation. Then you need to throw them back out into the tempestuous waters without getting them scared. It’s a skill that demands finesse.”

Rustigian said it’s imperative to make customers legitimately comfortable with the level of information you give

them, while making them confident that the information is true. She never hesitates telling customers that they’ve asked a question in the wrong way; then she tells them how they should ask it and why. Perpetuating misinformation is a pet peeve.

“And we carefully take people through that whole knots-per-square-inch thing,” she said, telling customers that simple designs don’t need a lot of knots and that wool quality and design drawings have to be good. “That’s another area that you throw people off a cliff, but you have to do it carefully,” she said. “We tell them the truth and jokingly say, ‘Now don’t shoot the messenger.’”

As far as being a woman in the male-dominated rug industry, Rustigian says it hasn’t been too bad and that some sides of the industry are worse than others. “Sexism is like a good karate teacher. You see the opponent is going to strike and use his own force against him to your own benefit.”

Rustigian’s basic motto is that there’s no point in doing business unless you have fun. “When people see me coming, they know they’re about to laugh and joke and probably get paid on time.”

Most importantly, Rustigian wants customers to know that while the outside of her building may be formal, inside they’ll find real people, real jokes and maybe even a real dog barking.

“I don’t like pretension. You want a rug? Here. We have good ones.”