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Spotlight on: Texas

By Sarah Mandel
Editor

Parties and Profits, Lone Star Style

A creative bent and a flair for promotion is the secret of one party retailer's success

June Schiada is a California girl whose love of a good celebration started right in the family. The daughter of a Hollywood make-up artist and hair stylist, June literally grew up on the sets of "The Sonny & Cher Show" and the "The Carol Burnett Show," not to mention those of countless films.

"By 16, I had met George Harrison, William Shatner, Vincent Price, Mickey Rooney and many others," June explained. "I loved the sets and the glitz of the productions. I suppose my affection for a party started back then!"

She officially entered the party industry in the 1980s, working alongside her late father, John Triana, in his San Francisco party rental business. At that time, "the opportunity to service big events

was there for the taking," she said.

Memorable jobs included Apple Computer's company picnics and Intel's sales meetings, with The San Francisco 49ers and the Bank of America among other plum accounts. Her favorite client, however, was Danielle Steele, then married to John Traina of Traina Vineyards in Napa Valley.

"Every summer, for their Fourth of July shindig, bunting, balloons and banners adorned every inch of the party area," June remembered. "I'm so grateful that my father introduced me to an industry that gives me such personal satisfaction."

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PJ's is a family affair for the whole clan — Patrick, June and Shauna.



The front of the store says it all, and from a distance too!



Essential to Texas but also popular everywhere else, the Western section is orderly while touching on a wide range of product categories.

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The millennium, however, found June, husband Patrick and daughter Shauna in Denton County, Texas, in search of better schools, open spaces, proximity to family and an overall better quality of life. June wanted to start a business but was having trouble deciding just what kind.

The answer came while planning Shauna's birthday party, when June discovered there were no party supply stores in the phone book. "A HUGE light bulb went off in my head! I ran to my husband and declared, 'I can do this!'"

PJ's Is Born

And "do this" she did. In October 2001, PJ's Party Supply opened in a 2,000-square-foot space in downtown Sanger. Soon, they'd outgrown the space — and Sanger's population of 5,000 — so PJ's moved to the more centrally located and populous Denton.

The new PJ's, at 3,400 square feet, opened in January 2004. "The growth of business at our new location was unbelievable," June said. "After six months, I realized the space was not big enough for what I envisioned."

So another lease was signed, this one to accommodate a 2,500-square-foot expansion. Construction was completed in October 2004. The new space allowed more floor space for popular themes, not to mention 700 square feet of storage. "Before that, my small office was all we had," June remarked.

The move and increased business volume enabled PJ's to join Party Club of America, "the best thing I ever did," June noted. "My purchasing power is in the big leagues now. I can offer customers better discounts, and my profits have increased. I was thrilled to receive rebate checks, not knowing they even existed. I have a bounty of suppliers to choose from, and access to items I'd never find on my own."

Today, PJ's product mix includes tableware ensembles in 190+ themes, solid tableware in 50+ colors, 250+ Mylar balloons, plus decorations, banners, streamers, piñatas, favors, noisemakers,



The vibrant solids wall livens up the store as it moves through the color spectrum, giving customers the inspiration to mix and match.

seasonal décor, cards and giftwrap, as well as bridal merchandise. With offerings that extensive, PJ's can truly live up to its motto, "You invite the guests, we'll supply the rest!"

The Fine Print

A stable of informative brochures are available both in the store and on its website, www.pjspartysupply.com. "I wanted to give customers the whole picture of what a party is about," she explained. "Some brochures merely list our services and prices, but others show how to put a party together, use balloons to decorate or provide inspiration for centerpieces. Customers can take them home, plan and then return to buy everything."

The benefits of this free service are many. Putting everything in writing improves her employees' knowledge, enabling them to steer customers in the right direction.

While party books can be purchased nearly anywhere, the brochures position PJ's as an expert, she emphasized. "Being an expert brands your business and keeps customers returning and sending their friends," she said. "These brochures are also handy and fast to read. People are so busy that anything that makes their lives easier is a Godsend!"

▷ *PROFITS continued on page 16*



The referral center offers a great way for customers to take it all in and consider what applies to their event.

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Better still, they're inexpensive to produce. June uses Microsoft Publisher to create the tri-fold leaflets and runs them off on her copy machine. "As I come up with new ideas I make new ones," she commented. "I always include product we have in-house or that we can special order. You would be amazed at how this service has boosted many sales."

Customer Amenities

PJ's also offers a slew of discount and savings programs. "Looking at other party stores prompted me to create my own plan," she remarked. "Another reason was to be competitive with the nearby Wal-Mart, Party City and Hobby Lobby. Although I am not always able to meet their prices, I offer my customers fun ways of cutting costs."

While discount programs apply to teachers, senior citizens, members of the military and non-profit, government or tax-exempt organizations, anyone can participate in the savings programs. June admits that many were lifted from previous "Shop Talk" columns. They include:

- A birthday club, where customers receive offers and coupons throughout their birthday month.
- A bridal club, where brides who purchase their invitations at PJ's get five percent off through their wedding day.
- A bouquet club, where the sixth balloon bouquet is free.



The balloon work area has detailed, easy-to-read signage to inform customers of what's available.

- A frequent buyer program, in which participants receive one punch on their member card for every \$25 purchase. Eight punches earn a 20 percent discount.
- Bounce back coupons, placed in shopping bags and changed regularly.
- Phone promo savings, through which callers can press "3#" to learn about weekly specials.
- A Web site coupon program, featuring printable coupons.

As well, no tot leaves the store without popcorn and a balloon imprinted with the store's name and address. "This is aimed at children, but ultimately leads back to the household buyer," June remarked. "The kids are always delighted, and you can bet they want to return!"

Organizational Details

Just as June worked alongside her dad, PJ's is a family affair. In addition to two part-timers, Shauna works there, and while Patrick has another job, "he's the main labor that put this store together," June noted. "If it wasn't for him, I couldn't have installed all the fixtures; he is an awesome stocker too!"

Speaking of stock, good organization is tantamount. "I ask employees to 'straighten, straighten, straighten' while not with customers," June explained. "I get compliments all the time about what a pleasure it is to shop here — no overstock above customer's heads or messy counters with half-opened packages. Customers ask for a certain product, and everything to do with that theme or type of item is in one spot."

June also sets up themed display tables around the store. "These have become a profitable sales tool," she said. "My customers will buy the items and duplicate either some or all of it at their events."

Finally, PJ's wouldn't be PJ's without its window mascot, a large frog outfitted to accent the current theme. "Right now he is sipping a cool one in our tiki lounge in a hula skirt and lei," June laughed. ■