

# INVITATION

TO

Party

An expansive selection of imprintable invitations keeps customers coming to Where's the Party? in Costa Mesa, CA.

**OVER THE LAST TWO** decades, if there is one word to describe the success of Where's the Party? in Costa Mesa, CA, it is "expansion." Owner Candy Hirte developed a "bigger is better" philosophy over the years by using fortuitous increases in sales space to develop and expand her product mix. What began in 1990 as a 1,000-square-foot store selling balloons and party supplies has become a multi-million-dollar, 6,400-square-foot business that now includes an invitation department boasting albums ranging from Carlson Craft to William Arthur and has one of the largest selections of open-stock invitations in Southern California.

"When we first opened, balloons were a huge part of our business because balloon arches and columns were big, splashy elements for the celebrations sponsored by the local yacht clubs in the area," Hirte says. She actually opened Where's the Party? with a

partner she met while taking a balloon-designing workshop so she could do more extravagant balloon decorations for her son's classroom.

Within a couple of years, several events occurred that profoundly changed Hirte's business: first, she bought out her partner who lacked the same passion Hirte had for retail; second, the local demand for balloon decorations had fallen, either because of the expense or that her clients decided to do them in-house; and third, she was able to move her business to the 17th Street Promenade, a location central to the affluent beach communities around her that had better parking and three times as much space – enough to add a department for a party product she was getting more and more demand for ... invitations.

"The larger space allowed me to do what I really wanted to do when I got into this business: sell everything on the

party side ... and that included invitations," Hirte states. "We were finally able to have complete lines of products. For example, we expanded our birthday section from just paper plates and napkins to party hats, blowers, streamers, giftwrap and invitations that matched all the patterns we carried."

In the early 1990s, while her budding invitation department featured just a few imprintable companies – such as Odd Balls, Fitzgraphics and Four Seasons – and an InScribe system, Hirte put her large sales space to its best advantage by offering open invitation stock to her customers. "I thought that the bigger the selection, the bigger the audience and I was right! By carrying 100 pieces of complete lines, people knew they could come in for one invitation or 13 and not have to worry about buying boxes and ending up with excess stock. We built our reputation and success on bulk stock," she explains.

By the mid-to-late '90s, Hirte recognized that her customers "got" the fact that a beautiful invitation made a big impression and that they were willing

to spend a lot of money on a fabulous party invitation. "By 2000, I had every album I could get my hands on, from

Encore and Checkerboard to Oblation and Elum," she says, noting that she had to fight hard to bring in William Arthur

and Crane's but eventually succeeded in winning the territories. Yet even as new albums came in, more open stock was displayed. "When Envelopments arrived on the scene in 1999, we became the only dealer in the area to have their entire line on site. Today, we feature the whole color spectrum of Rossler Papier in 10 different sizes, along with bulk stock of other vendors like Inviting Company, Faux Designs, Anna Griffin, Cross My Heart, Meri Meri and Bella Ink," she states, adding that she believes her customers are now "spoiled." "I had more than 100 different Christmas invitations in open stock last season, and my customers continually asked, 'Is that all you have?' No one else around here had that much stock on hand," she says with amused amazement.

As her customers became more savvy

## WHERE'S THE PARTY? ... AT THE NATIONAL STATIONERY SHOW!

Twenty-year retail veteran Candy Hirte, owner of Where's the Party? in Costa Mesa, CA, travels across the country each year to attend the National Stationery Show. "I love going to New York for the whole show experience, the people, the excitement. It's one of my favorite things to do in this business!" she says.

"What really makes a difference for me is looking at all the fabulous booths and seeing all the lines together ... it's so much more impressive than seeing just one or two items. There's nothing better than making a big statement with merchandise.

"Since my customers are coming to me for 'new and exciting,' I'm doing the same at the show. There's always something wonderful, something unique and interesting, something that I can't find in any other place. I always find tiny little companies at the show that I would never have known about!

"I love seeing my fabulous reps at the show, too. When I see them there, it shows me they are dedicated to their product and servicing their customer ... me!"

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and sophisticated in their invitation needs over the years, Hirte brought in talented graphic artists to work with advancing computer-design programs, including Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. "There's so much more we can do to help 'theme' a party invitation for our customers using today's technology," Hirte says, commenting she was not too surprised when more of the open stock was being purchased for home use. "Our customers had access to the same computer programs we used, so it was only natural they eventually felt they could do things themselves. Not only was that fine for us, we encouraged it by providing tons of sample layouts, and we always warned customers about the compatibility of the stock they were buying with the type of printers it could be used with. Invariably, either they did-

n't pay attention and ruined the stock, they discovered just how hard it was to work with, or they discovered wording etiquette was a mystery, and they came back to Where's the Party? for more stock or to have us do the project ... which is the whole point of having our business - we're professionals!"

In the late 2000s, Hirte noticed online technology and applications were having an impact on her business. "I never thought anyone would buy an invitation they didn't see in person, but, guess what, they do! While people are still sending out real party and wedding invitations, some of the ancillary projects, such as save-the-date and response cards, are being relegated to e-mail delivery. That's been hurting our bottom line," she admits.

Adopting the "if you can't beat 'em,

join 'em" mind-set, Hirte has already taken steps towards her next big "expansion" by adding e-commerce capabilities to her website, but she's being realistic about the endeavor. "I can't compete against hundreds of thousands of websites selling invitations in the cyber universe, so I'm going to concentrate on promoting our website to my own customer base ... let them know they can shop our website 24/7 and then come into the store to see and touch the actual product," she says. To help facilitate this, she designated one person to manage the website in January. "We're going to blog and e-blast and maybe even tweet and let our customers know our product mix and expert staff are better than ever. Once our base is secure, we can expand into the rest of cyberspace. The sky's the limit." ■