When it comes to customer service, Abigail's gets the picture

Chesapeake frame shop takes on the holiday crunch with spirit

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BY PAT HIGGINS

Dear Abby, can you matt and frame these 35 awards in time for our annual membership drive on Wednesday? Dear Abby, no one else in town can frame our 10-foot painting—can you help us? Dear Abby, we could use some leftover materials for our art class at school—do you have any? Dear Abby, I want to frame my husband's baseball card collection in time for Christmas … Did I wait too long?

The staff at Abigail's framing center in Gainsborough Square really doesn't answer to "Dear Abby," but maybe they should. This team of community-oriented women takes pride in being able to solve the unique framing needs of individuals, businesses and organizations throughout Chesapeake—especially during the holiday season.

"If you can picture it, we can frame it," owners Sheri White and Susan Cawrse have been saying for years. They should add to that statement, "We can frame it fast." Frequently, Abigail's is one of the only shops in town able to complete those specialty (and often last-minute) framing jobs in a timely matter without sacrificing quality or creativity.

Just ask Lori Schick, Director of Marketing for the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce. "With Abigail's," Lori says, "I can just tell them, 'here's what I have,' and I trust them to get it right. I love everything they've done for the Chamber as well as for me personally." When she recently asked them to complete a large order on short notice, Lori was met with nothing but positive attitudes. "Abigail's took my work with a smile and did it in just a few days. They're amazing," Lori remembers.

Abigail's has been open and growing for almost five years. During this time Sheri and Susan have grown their staff to include Denise Tukiendorf and Kim Ledoux. The combined experience of all four women gives Abigail's a total of 60 years in the framing business. "Adding Denise and Kim to the shop was the boost we needed to tackle tighter deadlines and never say 'no'," Sheri says.

Along with a great staff, Abigail's has the advantage of technological advances that most frame shops don't have. A database of over 160,000 prints is available at the touch of a mouse. Customers can create a list of images, search by subject, size and color to find prints for their home or office. They also have added a framing program that makes a client's framing history readily accessible, guarantees consistent pricing and speeds up the sales process.

An example of the can-do outlook of the Abigail's team hangs in the foyer of one of the largest churches in Chesapeake. Less than a year after Abigail's opened, the Great Bridge Baptist Church brought in a very large (5 feet by 10 feet) oil painting of *The Last Supper*. "We were the only frame shop in town who took on the job," Sheri recalls. "It needed to be complete in time for the opening of the church's new sanctuary. It was a major project, but we did it, and it empowered us to take on even more challenging work."

Photo by Larry Whitesel

When the staff of the Great Bridge Baptist Church brought this enormous painting of the last supper to owners Sheri and Susan, they didn't bat an eyelash. "It was a major project, but we did it, and it empowered us to take on even more challenging work," Sheri remembers.

Throughout their years of growth, Sheri and Susan have also been contributing generously to the community. "When someone in our area has a special need, we feel so honored to be able to help," Susan says. One of their "pet" projects is for the Chesapeake Care Free Clinic, where they donate framing for the sports memorabilia that is auctioned at the annual celebrity auction.

As Partners in Education for Chesapeake Public Schools, Abigail's provides scrap matting materials for class projects, donates certificates for teacher appreciation gifts and offers educators' discounts on a daily basis. Currently, the shop is hosting an art show for area teachers. From Nov. 13 to Dec. 27, Chesapeake art teachers will be honored with a showing of their own artwork in Abigail's gallery. "This is an opportunity for the community to see the wonderful work of our students' talented teachers," Sheri explains of the exhibit, which will showcase both paintings and sculpture.

What the public doesn't see while browsing inside Abigail's is the highly equipped workshop jam-packed with professional framing tools and equipment. I first realized that Abigail's was an actual working shop, and not just a retail store, when I was standing at their counter one day and smelled wood burning. Peering around the back, I saw Susan wearing goggles and cutting a very long piece of molding on a table saw. It was then I knew that Abigail's represents more than framing specialists—they are true craftswomen.

"We may look like a small store from the outside, but we can do a lot of things other frame shops can't do," Sheri says simply, without bragging. "We have several local frame shops that come to us because they don't have the equipment we have."

Take, for example, their computerized mat cutter. "The Wizard allows us to cut custom mats with multiple openings," Sheri explains. "With this technology, the sky is the limit on matting design." Abigail's can cut your mat to reflect the work behind it, the shape of the object or the number of objects to be displayed. Using the Wizard, Abigail's was able to create specialty mats cut with the letters and logos of all the area high schools; perfect for team and school photos.

Given Abigail's ability to turn almost any object into a work of art, customers can take their personal treasures and turn them into a one-of-a-kind holiday gifts.

"Framing personal mementos will provide distinct gifts unlike anything found on the shelf of a store," Sheri says.

"We're not just talking about a photo or a paper document," Susan continues. "We can frame any item, regardless of size, and turn it into a unique gift that will bring joy when opened because it holds sentimental value."

The list of objects that can be framed is almost endless: needlework, children's art, photos, sports memorabilia, antique photos, invitations, souvenirs, collectibles, concert tickets, album covers, uniforms, flags and much, much more. Large or bulky items are ensconced in frames made into creative shadow boxes.

An integral part of Abigail's mission is to do no harm to the work brought to the store. "The most important aspect of framing your treasures is to be sure they'll be in the same condition once they are framed as they were when you brought them in," Susan explains.

"Everything we do can be reversed and will not harm or affect the items," Sheri adds.

Paul O'Leary of Good Sports in Greenbrier Mall trusts Abigail's to mount and frame many of the collectibles he sells in his store. "Abigail's is the frame shop to go to for framing sports memorabilia," Paul says.

Sometimes, Abigail's hard-earned reputation leads customers to believe they can't afford to frame their items with Abigail's. "It is a misconception that custom framing is always expensive," Sheri says. "We're more affordable than you may think, even without the discount coupons."

Value at Abigail's comes in many forms besides fair pricing. From the original ideas of the staff at Abigail's, to the special care of your items, to the personal attention to detail, Abigail's customers find many reasons to shop at this local small business.

"Abigail's always provides me with quality work at a reasonable cost," Paul is quick to attest. "Those women work as hard as anyone I know and always meet my time requirements."

Need a unique gift idea for this holiday season? Look around your home, find those sentimental items that will bring a tear to the eye of a loved one, and take them to Abigail's. "We have never missed a Christmas deadline on any gift," Sheri claims, "but the earlier you bring us your items, the better." Your item is sure to be a treasured gift, and, with Abigail's quality conservation framing, it will be cherished for years to come.

Right: Preservation framing involves acid-free materials and ultraviolet-filtering glass that reduces fading.

Abigail's

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