

Dentist-Turned-Decorator



Gin Kremen, owner of Fort Bragg, CA-based Broken Leg Sports, was a practicing dentist for 20 years until 2000, when a careless driver rammed her at 45 miles per hour, severely jamming her wrist and putting her into instant retirement. Barely able to hold a pencil, she felt nervous controlling a dental handpiece that was humming along at 450,000 RPM. A former patient, who had just purchased a fabric store, invited Kremen to sell sewing machines and teach beginning sewing. "The embroidery features of the home sewing machines segued into my interest in commercial machines and digitizing in 2004," Kremen says. "That led me down the slippery slope of a thread junkie, a tragic ailment for which there seems to be no cure."

Then in 2007, Kremen was in a life-threatening motorcycle accident. That, combined with a month-long hospital stay, sent her in another direction: She moved out of the fabric store and back into her old dental office. Still selling machines, still teaching sewing, still doing commercial embroidery, she's also a Martha Pullen-licensed heirloom instructor and works "by appointment only" doing machine embroidery in a small town of 6,000. Contact: ginpaul@comcast.net.

October 29

It's day three of my weeklong Japanese Kumihimo braiding class, taught by a 79-year-old Englishman. I'm learning to create stunningly gorgeous braids used to tie obis. The first night after class I came home and embroidered awards banners for a middle-school volleyball team. The second night, I embroidered clothing labels on twill tape for a young woman who's starting a business making children's reversible jackets out of recycled men's clothing.

Tonight, both customers arrived to pick up their products. "If you want these banners, you have to look at my braids first," I told Connie, who had been one of my dental patients. Connie was used to being involved in my activities, so though she was freezing in her volleyball shorts, she admired my braids. Jill, the label gal, was a new customer, and she was actually surprised that I was charging her for her labels, which she liked (more on my pricing problems later). However, she was also

suitably impressed with my braids, so we spent some time seeing if we could incorporate the braids into her jackets.

October 31

I received another call for embroidery: "Hi, Gin. No rush on this order. I just need seven hats in various colors done by noon tomorrow." Right! No rush. Unfortunately, as a dentist (and a sucker) I never turned away an emergency, and I still seem to be in that mode. "No problem, Ron! I'm volunteering at the senior center today, but I'll do them tonight when I get home," I said, as I'm thinking, "Of course, it's a problem." You'd think I'd learn. It's not as though the world stops if the park service doesn't have hats tomorrow, but I'll get them done and hand-deliver them - for a total bill of \$50.

At a Martha Pullen heirloom sewing class, Martha was appalled at what people *didn't* charge for their work. Her advice was to raise prices until you charge twice what you do now; you might lose half your customers, but you'll work half as hard. Unfortunately, I'm still treating this career as a hobby, and there's a mindset that goes along with that: "Isn't this fun? I can make cool one-of-a-kind things for people!" Granted, custom embroidery is still an inexpensive way to class up a gift, but no one needs "Madison" embroidered in hot pink thread on a green camo diaper bag. (This isn't an abscessed tooth we're talking about.) I knew I should charge Ron a 24-hour rush surcharge, but I knew I wouldn't. And, I'm not sure how to get past that.

November 2

Since I'm open by appointment only (this works in a small town), I have a phone and answering machine at home. I called a man back this afternoon who merely wanted a referral for alterations. Apologizing for not calling back within the hour, I gave him the referral and we chatted about all kinds of stuff for 10 minutes. Finally, he said, "You know how you could make a million dollars? Open a business to teach people how to treat customers on the phone. Doesn't anyone have phone manners anymore?" I replied, "Well, Mr. Becker, my mother always told me to answer with a smile - it comes through the phone line."

This conversation made me think about calls I've made where the other person sounded bored or annoyed that I'd called. Who wants to shop there? When my shop was located in the fabric store, customers often thanked me for being friendly and helpful. It seems obvious from a financial standpoint: Being helpful with customers equals more time they're in the store, and that equals more time to buy your products.

I have several regular customers who started out as out-of-town visitors/browsers who now make a point of getting together with me for lunch or dinner when they come to town. Do they always buy? No. Am I always happy to share a meal? Of course. Do they refer friends or talk me up to other people they meet? They sure do.

November 5

I was at my shop today going over an order with a couple, who had a vague idea for a business logo. Using a catalog of stock designs and a good editing program, I was able to rip, tear and recombine designs to create something original that made them happy. I love this part of the job: taking vague ideas and creating a logo or design that customers are proud to wear or display. For example, I redesigned our city logo after their "professionally" done job resulted in a 5-inch-high, 33,000-stitch (bulletproof) patch depicting a redwood tree that looked like a flowering dogwood. After hours of work and several sewouts, I produced a redwood that looks like a redwood (it pays to live among them) in a 9,000-stitch patch.

November 13

I just finished embroidering names on seven Christmas quilts for a gal's grandchildren. She came to pick them up and I charged her \$63. She was aghast: "\$63? Are you kidding me?" I thought she'd be happy with the price, since I couldn't have done the job any cheaper. Then she said, "I thought it would be at least \$200." After mentally stomping around and silently yelling, "You undercharged again," I just smiled and said I was glad she was happy with the product and the price. I don't know how to price my time and my skill. I did so much pro bono dental work that I can't seem to judge "price/value" anymore.

What's the formula? Some jobs are so quick and easy I feel I overcharge; others are awful and I resent knowing I truly can't charge for my time. What does everyone else do? Figure an amount per hour they need to make? Set an amount per 1,000 stitches, per color changes? Difficulty of hooping? Size (since stabilizer always seems to be the main expense)? I've even tried being cagey: Those customizing/digitizing jobs where the customer is totally clueless as to the amount of work and only wants one item, for example - I'll ask the client what her budget is for the job and see if I can work with her budget.

November 16

Some days it doesn't pay to gnaw through the leather straps. I had no electricity for two hours (routine maintenance by the power company), so I had to cancel a design appointment; then my by-appointment-only customer was a no-show and I wasted another hour waiting for him to show up. My lunch date also canceled. So, I decided to make a list of things to do during this downtime. I swept up dog hair (I always bring my dog in to work), dusted, purged my paper files, rearranged my thread racks, refolded sweatshirts and T-shirts, and restocked caps and blankets. By the end of the day, the shop looked great and I realized downtime can be a great thing.

November 18

I took a small bag of embroidered items to Art Explorers, a local art workshop for developmen-