

retail profile: zoë & co.

Q&A with Bruce Prescott, President



Ted Vayos, BODY: How did you get started in this business? What can you tell us about your retail stores?

Bruce Prescott, Zoë & Co.: Zoë & Co., Professional Bra Fitters had its beginnings as a seasonal store carrying dresses and other clothing items on Fishers Island, NY in the late 1990's. We were open about two months a year, which was a great way to explore our business model. Fishers Island is a summer resort enclave for the wealthy, only accessible by boat, ferry, or plane, with a few small shops and boutiques. At the time, when a woman forgot to bring her swimsuit to the island or needed a new one, there was nowhere to purchase one. We decided to look into bringing quality swimwear to our shop.

As we did our research, we learned that the best fitting swimwear was cup and band sized, and that the best cup and band sized swimwear is made by the best lingerie companies. We

expressed our interest in buying swimwear and were fortunate enough to have company reps take us aside and explain that swimwear sales were, in general, ancillary to bra sales. "If you can help a woman find a bra that fits well, you'll have a loyal customer forever," we were told. It made sense. We began to change our business focus to bras and lingerie as a result, and, of course, would also carry swimwear.

We gravitated toward brands which carried the largest size ranges in bands and cups. We wanted our shop to offer as much as possible to customers, reasoning that, if we were a shoe store, we wouldn't settle for offering only size 6, 6 ½, and 7 when we know people's feet come in a much wider

array of sizes. We wanted anyone to be able to come into our shop and find a good-fitting bra.

We began working with Eveden and Panache, and the advice and support they provided was invaluable. Women began taking the 45 minute ferry ride from the mainland specifically to shop with us for a bra that fit. At that point, we realized we were on to something! We decided to focus on bra-fitting, and we purchased a building in downtown Westerly, RI, so we could be open year-round. We made the move off Fishers Island and opened "on the mainland" in 2001. Women from Rhode Island, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and even upstate New York began making trips to Westerly specifically to be fitted at our shop. We developed a training system for our fitters which was strict and intensive, and we became known for our quality customer service. We maintained that training system when we opened our second store in Concord, NH in 2008,, and, another ten years later, we still utilize the same training approach.

Key Brands

Addiction
Ajour
Anita
B'Tempt'd
Cake Lingerie
Commando
Conturelle
Cleo
Daisy Corsets
Donna Karen
Elomi
Empriente
Fantasie
Fitfully Yours
Freya
Goddess
Gossard
Hanky Panky
Katherine Hamilton
Lady Emprezz
Linda Hartman
Lise Charmel
Little Bra Company
Miss Mandalay
Nubra
Panache
Parfait
Rago
Royce
Shadowline
Skarett Blue
Spanx
Velrose
Wacoal



We want customers at all three stores to have the same positive experience and to be fit consistently by all our fitters. A trip to Zoë & Co., Professional Bra Fitters should be a great one, whether customers shop in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, or New Hampshire!

All three of our shops are located in vibrant, historic downtowns. When searching for properties to purchase, we looked for towns with a strong sense of community, ones in which we could become active participants.

Our Concord, NH store is across the street from the New Hampshire State Capitol building, with its gleaming gold dome. Commerce, politics, and entertainment attract visitors from around the state, and many of our customers from northern New England and Quebec are

regulars at our shop at 92 North Main Street.

Westerly, RI has been a tourist destination for as long as people have loved great beaches, parks, and fabulous restaurants. It's now enjoying a re-

naissance as a destination downtown with the newly renovated United Theatre bringing world class visual, performing and creative arts performances and education to the region. Located off the I-95 corridor, about midway between New York City and Boston, our shop at 69 High Street is only a block from Amtrak's Westerly Station, and a short drive from Mystic, CT, or Newport, RI.

Our newest store is located at 448 Main Street in Hyannis, MA, which is often called the heart of Cape Cod. We are surrounded by restaurants, galleries and an eclectic mix of shops. Along with the downtown shops and restaurants, the JFK Museum and ferries to Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard attract great numbers of visitors, as do the wonderful beaches.

The building, built in 1820, has much of its original wooden interior, which creates a beautiful contrast for displaying our lingerie.

Like the other two locations, the front of the Hyannis store primarily showcases panties, hosiery, lingerie, bralettes, and sleepwear, while the majority of the shop's space is taken up by the stockroom, which holds our cup and band sized items. There are three fitting rooms on the main level of the Hyannis shop, with more fitting room space located downstairs.

Ted: What other retail businesses and services are near your new Hyannis location?

Bruce: Our Hyannis shop is located in the heart of a bustling and eclectic downtown. There are so many shops, restaurants, and services packed into the Main Street area of Hyannis! We are just down the block from the JFK museum, the public library, and the post office. Puritan Clothing store is a well-known establishment on our block, and there are many wonderful gift stores, specialty shops, and restaurants up and down the street. A carousel, a bowling alley and arcade attract families with

kids, as do ice cream and candy shops!

Ted: Do any other local retailers send customers to your store?

Bruce: In all three locations, we have customers who've been referred to us by clothing and bridal shops as well as lingerie stores whose customers are outside their size ranges. Surgeons, doctors, and physical therapists send us clients, as well.

Ted: Do you have any competition in the area?

Bruce: Because most lingerie and department stores tend to focus on a more limited range of sizes or brands, we aren't in competition with them. It's healthy to have other swim and lingerie stores in the area, because we offer different things.

Ted: Do you have an internet website?

Bruce: We can be found at zoeandcompany.com.

Ted: What makes your store special?

Bruce: What makes our store special? Our outstanding staff with our exemplary customer service and our wide range of sizes—we have over 230 sizes of bras in stock! We

take a great deal of time to train our bra fitters, because there is so much more to fitting than just learning the mechanics of finding a customer's size. Even in the same size, no two customers are alike. Their breasts may be set closer together or wider apart, be fuller at the top or at the bottom, soft or firm, among other variables. And there's more to fitting than the mechanics. Finding employees who are empathetic and genuinely want to help is crucial to our success. Our fitters work with girls getting their very first bra, expecting and nursing mothers, women in their nineties, and everyone in between! Our clients include those in the LG-BTQ+ community whose needs may include finding bras and breast forms, and those who are looking to be fitted for binders. We work with pre and post-mastectomy or lumpectomy patients, as well as those who have had reconstructive surgery, augmentation, or reduction. We carry longline bras, strapless bras, sport bras, and cup and band sized swimwear. Our trainees are closely supervised for about three months, as they learn how to find the best styles for each particular customer. We work with over 40 companies and carry over 230

sizes of bras. Our band sizes range from 24 to 56 inches, with cups ranging from AA to KK (UK sizing), and our fitters must be familiar with all of our stock before they are ready to work without supervision. We work closely with our customers to find the right styles in the sizes that work best for them.

Ted: What do you look for in a brand?

Bruce: We look for brands that carry a wide range of cup and band sizes, as well as brands which fill niches, like The Little Bra Company, which specializes in small cup and band sizes, or Lady Emprezz, which focuses on small cups in large band sizes. Royce specializes in wirefree bras in a wide range of sizes to meet a variety of needs, including mastectomy, nursing, and sport! Velrose and Shadowline fill a need for half and full slips at economical price points. We are always on the lookout for companies with products which may fill niches we'd like to address.

Ted: List some of the key brands that are important to your store.

Bruce: We carry over 40 brands in our stores. Each plays an important role, and they are all important to us. Some brands offer

fabulous basics, others are wonderfully luxurious—it's important that we have a variety of styles and price points available! There are brands which appeal to younger customers, some which appeal to professionals, some to older customers, etc. We will name a few: Eveden (Fantasie, Freya, Elomi, Goddess), Panache (and Cleo), Anita, Royce, Wacoal (and B.Tempt'd), Empreinte, Conturelle, Parfait, Fitfully Yours, The Little Bra Company, Katherine Hamilton, Gossard, Lady Emprezz, Miss Mandalay, Skarlett Blue, Ajour, and Cake Lingerie.

Ted: Do you private label any products under your own store name?

Bruce: No.

Ted: Do you sell sleepwear, swimwear, shapewear, hosiery, corsets, maternity intimates? How are they different?

Bruce: Just as the brands of bras we carry fill different needs for our customers, we select our sleepwear/swim/shapewear



etc. brands to fill different niches and to meet varying price points. Sleepwear: Linda Hartman, Addiction, Donna Karen, Hanky Panky and Wacoal. Shapewear: Rago, Spanx, Commando, Annette and Shibue. Hosiery: Wolford, Commando, Glamory Gerbe, Levante and Legg Ave. Corsets: Volders, Daisy Corsets, and Rago. Maternity: Cake, Parfait, Freya, Royce, and Goddess. Swim: We sell bikinis, tankinis, and one piece swimwear. All our swim is cup and band-sized, and our bikinis and tankinis are sold as separates. As with our bra selection, we seek out companies with a wide range of cup and band sizes, and we work with companies which appeal to different target groups, from luxurious to practical to fun! Fantasie, Freya, Panache, Elomi, and Miss Mandalay are top sellers, and Lise Charmel's Antigel line is



a beautiful line which is popular with many of our customers, as well.

Ted: Do you sell intimate apparel accessories like adhesive bras, nipple covers, breast forms? What are your top selling brands?

Bruce: Yes, we do. One brand that's been flying off the shelves recently is Booby Tape. People love its versatility! Nubra adhesive bras and Bring It Ups are perennial favorites for backless dresses. Braza, Shibue, and Nippies products are go-to's for so many fashion needs—honestly, all of the brands sell equally well for different occasions or needs!

Ted: Where do you like to shop for your merchandise?

Bruce: We shop at CURVE, Miami Swim Show, and with reps who

come to the shops. We've been to the Paris show once, and we occasionally go to the Las Vegas shows.

Ted: Have you brought any new products or brands into your store recently?

Bruce: Lady Emprezz, Katherine Hamilton, Skarlett Blue, Velrose/Shadowline and Booby Tape!

Ted: Describe the popular styles or trends in your store.

Bruce: Bralettes and body suits have been quite popular lately, as well as cup and band sized bralette styles for fuller breasted customers!

Ted: What are your most popular colors?

Bruce: Basic beige and black are always popular, but blues of all shades have been in high demand recently!

Ted: Describe your price points and size ranges.

Bruce: Bras range from \$24 to over \$200, with the average price being be-

tween \$65 and \$85.

Ted: What is your typical or average customer size?

Bruce: We see customers of all shapes and sizes, so it's not really possible to give a "typical" size.

Ted: What does your average customer spend per visit to your store?

Bruce: About \$200.

Ted: What has impacted your business the most over the past year?

Bruce: The greatest impact on our business has been acquiring and preparing our third shop for its January opening. Buying and renovating our property in Hyannis was a huge undertaking, as one would expect when working with a nearly three hundred year old building. We put on a new roof, replaced windows, and did everything we could to track down and seal up leaks while also meeting the historical society's requirements to preserve the building's integrity. The renovations included all mechanicals, from HVAC to plumbing and electrical systems. Once the building was ready, we focused on outfitting, stocking, and setting up the new shop. It's been well worth these efforts, we're happy

to say.

Ted: What have you done to draw attention to your new business?

Bruce: We've been lucky enough to have many local independent newspapers in our different locales writing about the opening of our new store. They've been very kind in showcasing the store's wide range of in-stock styles and sizes and our commitment to customer service, and we appreciate the positive articles and photographs. Of course, social media is important today and we are very active on FB and Instagram. We also do print, radio, and billboard advertising.

Ted: Who are your favorite sales representatives in the business?

Bruce: We love all our fabulous sales reps!!! But we'll give shout-outs to Heather at Eveden, Anna at Panache, Steve at Anita, Rosanna at Empreinte, Staci at Skarlett Blue, Maria at Royce, Andrea at Gossard and Conturelle and all things Eastern International, Rich and Charlanne Leavy for Rago and Parfait and other brands, Kelly at Wacoal, Jessica, Amanda, and Linda at Linda Hartmann, Tetyana at Aujour, and Jim at Cake!