

At This Shop, The Accent Is On The Customer

By Tracy Pulley, Contributing Editor

Deborah Keeling was bored. Answering phones for her father's automotive upholstery business in Lynchburg, Virginia was not her idea of a dream career. All day long she sat at a desk staring at huge bolts of fabric. One day in 1989, she had a brainstorm. Why not unleash her repressed creativity and make something?

Keeling created a flag decorated with a dove and yellow ribbon centered in a large heart. She hung it in the window of her dad's shop and it sold almost immediately. She took the proceeds, bought material to make more flags, and Accents was born.

Today Accents has replaced the upholstery shop, adding on another 2,800 square feet of selling space, and flags share walls and shelves with every gift category under the sun. It turns out that Keeling wasn't just a good flag designer; she's a pretty savvy store owner as well.

"We've doubled our sales every year," she says, "and this year we're up 30% from last year. And this year we're going to expand again."

Keeling attributes her success to several things: listening to customers, reinvesting profits into the store and always—always—being there.

"I haven't had a day off in eleven years," she says. "I am here seven days a week. I would love to get a pedometer to see how many miles I run here in the store every day."

The store keeps Keeling hopping not just because it's so popular but because she chooses to run Accents with daughter Ashleigh Taylor as her sole

employee. "We do it all," Keeling says. "I choose to be more 'home grown,' I guess, because of what my daddy instilled in me."

So every day Keeling and Taylor maintain their 4,800-square-foot store, listen to customers and create product displays that bring in folks from miles around. Those customers don't see Keeling's custom flags anymore, though; she finally stopped making those four years ago. "When it got to the point that I was booked up two years in advance, I said, 'I can't do it



◆ This seasonal display is the first thing customers see when they walk into Accents, a store in Lynchburg, Virginia.

anymore.' I miss the creativity part some but I use that in our store displays."

Her creativity extends beyond simply arranging product on the

shelf. "I don't buy display units," says Keeling. "I design them myself and have my husband build them for me."

One recent creation is a seven-foot-tall lighted octagonal gazebo used to display seasonal goods. Keeling also designed a locked, lighted cabinet for her Willow Tree angels so that customers can see every detail without being able to walk off with a figurine. "I came up with that one after several angels disappeared," she says.

For years Keeling didn't carry collectibles, but as customers began telling her they couldn't find lines such as Willow Tree and Department 56 anymore, she decided to jump in—and it turned out to be a smart move. "We're selling them like crazy."

Customer comments led Keeling to add greeting cards, too. "Women kept saying, 'It would be so complete if we could not only buy the gift and get it wrapped but get a card here,'" she says. "We love Leanin' Tree cards; their envelopes are as pretty as their cards, and they have great prices."

Keeling notices that lower price points are selling better for her these days, so she searches hard for products that still have the quality her clientele wants. "I'm not afraid to sacrifice a dollar if it means I'll sell more," she says. "We hear 'Your prices are good' a lot."

Keeling is also not afraid to feature a beach section when Lynchburg is nowhere near the coast. "It's one of our best-selling categories," she says. "Flamingos, palm trees, lighthouses...It goes all year long."

The 800-square-foot Christmas room earns its keep, too; Keeling says she sells something out of the room every day of the year. "And our flags, Christmas and otherwise, still sell just about every day."

As Keeling plans her expansion—an addition that will feature statuary and other garden gear—she doesn't have much time to pause and look back over her 20 years in business. "I'll just knock on wood," she says, "and get my flu shot."

Store Stats At A Glance

- **Name:** Accents
- **City:** Lynchburg, Virginia
- **Opened:** 1989
- **Size:** 4,800 square feet
- **Location:** downtown, freestanding store
- **Website:** www.accentflagsandgifts.com
- **Top vendors:** Magnet Works, Grasslands Road/Amscan, Raz Imports, Transpac, Blossom Bucket

Partnership Boosts Bottom Line

Deborah Keeling, owner of Lynchburg, Virginia gift store Accents, credits a portion of her 20 years of success to a local group called Lynch's Landing, a "Main Street" program organized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to help revitalize the economic vitality of downtown commercial districts. How does the group make a difference in Accents' bottom line?

◆ **They plan special events.** "We have lots of events, and Lynch's Landing coordinates them all," says Keeling. "Gretchen Wilson performed in the monthly Winter Cheers concert in January, and in the summer the concerts are held every Friday. At last year's Girls Night Out we had so many people in the first half hour, I was afraid we'd exceed the occupancy limit for the store."

◆ **They handle advertising.** "Lynch's Landing has a page for me on their website, and they have at least 800 Facebook friends," says Keeling. "Last year we had a sidewalk sale that they advertised on Facebook and within the first two hours we'd sold nearly everything and made \$6,000."

◆ **They have regional standing.** "Lynch's Landing goes in with a local TV station to promote its businesses," says Keeling. "They got us featured on a local show called Living In The Heart Of Virginia...I cannot tell you what it did for our business."

◆ **Best of all, they're inexpensive.** "Membership only costs \$100 a year," says Keeling.



◆ Deborah Keeling (right) and her daughter Ashleigh Taylor "do it all" at their 4,800-square-foot shop, focusing on customers' needs and unique displays.