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Village of the Grand

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Thirty years ago, designer Sue Suster spent her days on her hands and knees, cutting out patterns for her custom carpet creations. One of the very first innovators to create original area rugs from a broadloom template, Suster and her husband, John, knew they were onto a good idea. Just how good it was became clear when they decided to turn Suster's one-woman enterprise into a specialized rug and carpet boutique.

They began to transform Village Carpets, an existing carpet store in the lakefront Chicago suburb of Winnetka, IL, the moment they signed the deed, and rug buyer Karen Lawrence has watched the business grow for the past 23 of its 25 years. "What started out as just a few area rugs has grown into an enormous part of the business," she says. "I think our reputation is more built on the rugs, even though we often sell carpeting for wall-to-wall installation."



And if Lawrence's upper-class consumer and interior design clientele can't find what they're looking for among Village's racks, she simply directs them to the store's [Sue Suster Custom Carpets division](#), which can realize from scratch any rug design their hearts desire. Here, she recounts the ground covered and the lessons learned during her tenure.

Alternating between rack displays, custom samples and area rugs piled on the floor, Village Carpets provides a calming, interactive and welcoming environment in which customers can find just the rug they're searching for.

How did you get into the area rug industry?

KL: When the current owners bought Village Carpets as an existing carpet store, they did a major facelift. They came to me and asked if I would get involved with buying the rugs for them. I told them I would be happy to help, but that I knew nothing about rugs. They said, "That's alright. Just buy things that you like because we trust your taste."

I've been buying rugs for 23 years now, and I think we've maintained a high standard in the industry. All the rugs we carry are handmade, and offering custom capabilities has always been a big part of our business. The fact that we can do that through a number of different mediums—[hand-tufted rugs, handmade Tibetans, Sue Suster's own creations and designer Liora Mann's Lamontage line are among the available options]—makes it interesting for the client.

Do you still "buy what you like" 23 years later?

KL: I do. You [occasionally] might have a client specifically looking for the classic, oriental, Persian-type rugs. I always felt there were enough of those rug stores in this area; we don't really get involved in that aspect [of design]. It's not necessarily that we have everything [in our store], but we probably have "everything but."

What portion of your business does the Sue Suster Custom Carpets division comprise?

KL: Maybe 40 percent of our business ends up as custom, whether [creating something from scratch] or ordering a Tibetan where we're [just] changing the color. That's still considered a custom rug.

How does the custom business work?

KL: We have two wonderfully talented artists that do color renderings by hand—pretty much of anything the client wants. Nothing is computer-



Almost half of Village Carpets' business centers around its custom capabilities and the work of the Sue Suster Custom Carpets division artists. (From left) New York designer Liora Manné's Klimt design.

generated; it's all hand-colored. The drawings they do are works of art in themselves.

Six months is pretty much the normal [turn-around] time for a custom rug. Our hand-tufted rug mill is in the Philippines, and the Tibetans are all hand-knotted in Nepal. Lamontage is based in New York, and our needlepoint rugs are done in China. There's another vendor we use in Thailand; we're pretty much all over the world.

Do private homeowners ever request a custom rug, or is it mostly a design trade business?

KL: With custom rugs, you most often work with a designer. Most [private sector] clients don't feel comfortable ordering a custom rug on their own.

About two-thirds of the people who come in already have half their fabric [for their home decorating project] and existing things they're working around, and then they go on a rug search. It's fairly easy to help those people; either you have something or you don't. Or, you can make something for them.

The other third of our customers think it's better to start with a rug. They'll come in and hope to fall in love with [something] and then purchase their furniture afterward. That's a more challenging client because the whole world is open to them. It's hard to find exactly what they're hoping for.

Are the custom and in-stock rugs kept separate or merchandised together?

KL: We do have samples of our custom work out on the floor in what I hope is a pretty well-organized system. Like things go together—not so much in terms of style or color, but more in regard to quality. So, all our hand-tufted rugs are in one area and the Tibetans in another.

Do you try to branch out beyond racking systems when setting up your displays?

KL: I don't think we do anything too strange [with our displays], but we do change our windows every week, which people have noticed and commented on. That's a wonderful advertising venue for us—our big windows.

The showroom has a nice look to it. It doesn't look like an ordinary carpet store. We're always trying to make it better, but when you have a lot of rugs, you do end up with pallets of them in a pile [on the floor]. Piles are organized by size. We are familiar with each one, even though the stack does change as rugs go out and new ones come in. If you're showing rugs to clients, you go through the entire pile one by one. We never have anything rolled up or shoved in a corner.

How important is a showroom's lighting to effective area rug display?

KL: In every instance where it is possible, we always have people take rugs home to see them in their own space [before they buy them]. It might look a certain way here in the light we have, but it will look entirely different in every different room under their home's lighting. I think that is so important.

Does the demand for area rugs fluctuate widely throughout the year? Do you plan around that?

KL: The fall is considered a busy time, as people are preparing their homes for the holidays. I really think the only obviously slow time is during the last couple weeks of December. Then in January it really starts up again.

I go to market twice a year to Atlanta's [Intl. Area Rug Market] and to Las Vegas' [Surfaces]. Up until now, [Vegas] has been more focused on wall-to-wall carpeting; you didn't see as many area rug vendors. But that's beginning to change. There is another market in New York in September. So many of the rug companies are centrally located [in their headquarter showrooms] there, and you get to see pretty much everything, not just what they bring with them to market.

Are area rugs overtaking wall-to-wall carpeting when it comes to consumer preference?

KL: People still like second floor bedrooms to be carpeted. Even if there are hardwood floors in those rooms, they want to cover them with something. But certainly on the first floor [in most

homes these days], there's some sort of hard surface, whether it's wood or stone. That's where area rugs are making a big impact.