

AS SEEN IN
EARNSHAW'S

QUEEN BEE

With an eye for buzz-worthy brands and dedicated service, Honey Smith, president of A Bit of Honey showroom, has made a career out of channeling her inner tween.

By Angela Velasquez



DON'T BE FOOLED by the laughter coming from Honey Smith's New York City showroom, A Bit of Honey. The veteran rep makes running a 14-brand, tween dream of a showroom in the heart of the Garment District seem like second nature, but when it comes to her clients—both retailers and manufacturers—Smith, who grew up in the industry selling her family's embroideries to all pockets of the apparel industry, knows exactly when it is time to get serious.

"We laugh a lot, my staff and our clients, but I like to stick to basics: come in, make a plan and set goals," she says of her no nonsense, focused approach to work, which she honed as an education major in college. Or as Smith's husband puts it, she's steady.

For 30 years, Smith has welcomed a host of retailers who loyally return season after season. The draw? The warm atmosphere Smith has created with easy-to-browse collections and a friendly staff ("I like to keep it familiar," she explains.); her lack of ego ("I have a lot of experience, but if I relied on that fact alone I'd be out of business," she quips.); and her readiness (Smith's preshow ritual entails studying each brand, style number, color, price, delivery and pre-pack.). Not to mention treating each customer fairly. "We give buyers the attention that they need," she explains. "We are always trying to help with their business and go the extra mile, whether they are writing a \$100 order or a million."

When Smith turned 28, she went into the rep business with a friend. Two years later, rooted on by family and friends, Smith struck out alone. She recalls, "I had a headache everyday, but I was up for the challenge and was going to make it work because I was supporting myself. There was no turning back." Connections in California helped Smith land fashion-forward lines, including her longest partnership, CW Designs, which she continues to rep. The fancy dress label was one of the first hints that Smith had an eye for trendy togs in a market that was not yet coined "tween." As Smith puts it, tweens had yet to hit the scene but there was an increasing interest in girls' 7 to 14 fashion and in particular, items like fashion T-shirts and party dresses. "That was one of my strengths. I focused on outrageous dresses, and then the market exploded with them," she says.

Smith has lent her Midas touch to a number of tween trends spanning



leather bomber jackets to embellished denim. Looking back on these success stories, Smith says it's a shock to realize that she was part of it. "When you're doing it, you don't see it. You don't see the impact on the industry," she notes. Her attention has turned to au courant children's collections from well-known adult labels like Vintage Havana and fashionable licensed apparel by the likes of Junk Food, as well as niche categories like camp and communion. Manufacturers that are strong in design and production, and execute on customer service, are high on Smith's checklist, too, but she adds, "I look for opportunities that aren't typical and markets that aren't oversaturated."

That's easier said than done. Smith's day-to-day duties keep her busy. "I used to call myself a workaholic, but I think that term has a whole different meaning these days," she says. She admits she is almost neurotic about following up with retailers on details and has to remind herself to get out and discover new brands and styles. Her Vice President of Sales, Liz Farkas, has been a tremendous help, Smith notes, keeping an eye on magazines and what she sees in stores. "It's easy to get comfy with what you are doing, but you have to push yourself forward," she offers.

In an industry that has been transformed before Smith's eyes not only by fashion trends but by technology, the rep is edging her way into the 21st century with a revamped website and a robust Instagram account. "Never mind computers. We didn't even have a fax machine in the early days," she laughs, admitting that she's catching up. Still, a good reputation never goes out of style and Smith believes positive reviews via word-of-mouth have kept her in business. "If I was starting out now, there's no way I could get around not having all the bells and whistles, but you always have to keep changing," Smith adds. "Every year is a new year, and you're only as good as the lines you carry." •