

25 Lessons to Live and Work By

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This will be the last installment of my "A Day in the Workroom Life" articles, so I thought I'd share 25 recommendations from 25 years of workroom wisdom and experience. Some of these I learned the hard way, and some just seeped into my brain over the years.

1. Be nice. Period. People won't work indefinitely with people who aren't nice. I like to think I'm a naturally nice person. I am, I'm sure, a positive person with a somewhat Pollyannaish mindset. I expect the best from others and I try to do the best that I can to please others. I genuinely like people. It helps. You have to understand customer service, and I learned good customer service when I worked for the telephone company in my teens and 20s. It was drilled into my head and has served me well.
2. Dress nicely ... not necessarily when you're sewing, but when you're out in public (like going to the bank or, yes, even to the grocery store), as well as when seeing clients. Like it or not, people make judgments about us according to the way we look. I remember someone saying to me, "If you can't decorate yourself, how can you be expected to decorate someone's home?" I think it makes a difference in how you're perceived, and you want to be perceived as a businessperson.
3. Do what you say you're going to do. When you tell someone that you'll be there, *be there*. On time. Deliver what you promised, when you promised it.
4. Keep up with stuff. Don't lose things. How embarrassing would it be to call a client to make a second appointment because you lost the measurements, or to ask for another check because you "misplaced" the original? Keep extra measuring tapes and extra tools for quick fixes in your vehicle, as well as an extra pair of shoes in case yours are dirty. I keep a pair of Crocs in my tool kit for such occasions.
5. Remember that every customer is an advertisement for your next five jobs. At least.
6. Stand behind your products. If something isn't right, make it right. And do so as quickly as possible.
7. Return calls as soon as you can — even to irritating, aggravating clients who drive you crazy. Here's the thing: They're spending a lot of money. They need reassurance. They need to know that you care.

8. Cover your posterior. This means: Find out what you need to do legally to protect yourself, and do it. Keep the proper paperwork, and if you do find yourself in trouble, keep a timeline of all contacts and contact attempts with the opposite party. This will take you far in court if this becomes necessary. I know this because I sleep with the judge.

9. Learn how to give great customer service. It's hard sometimes to meet the expectations of your clients, but I've found that if you tell the truth about what they'll be getting and when they'll receive their products and services, you can better manage your relationship with them. See No. 1.

10. Join a professional organization. For me, this was the Window Coverings Association of America. I have been a loyal member from the beginning of my career. I've gotten many jobs from the website, and have made friends all over the country by attending meetings and gatherings.

11. Get certified. When I started my business years ago, I knew nothing — nothing — about window treatments. I borrowed every book in the library. No one who was already making window treatments was particularly forthcoming with information. I took WCAA's certification program and I not only learned many things that have helped along the way, I also became an expert. I had a title to prove it. It not only gave me confidence, it helped others to have confidence in me. In other words, it gave me credibility.

12. Attend conferences and shows. Do I even have to elaborate? As a wholesale workroom I've met many people who later became clients at these shows. I've gleaned a wealth of information at shows, conferences and local meetings. I've learned sewing techniques and business management styles, as well as new treatment ideas. This information has been invaluable to my business.

13. Take classes at the Custom Home Furnishings Academy. Even if you think there's nothing more that you could learn about window treatments, color, decorating — whatever — you're wrong. Take a class. You must continue your education. Styles change and you have to keep up.

14. Join local civic organizations. Yes, I know it costs money. Do it anyway. Chambers of commerce, downtown advancement groups, Rotary Club (yes, ladies are welcome), Kiwanis, whatever. Who goes to these meetings? Businesspeople. Just like you. They buy draperies. They will also teach by example.

15. Learn to be a businessperson just like all of those you meet at the meetings in No. 14. (See also Nos. 1 and 2). Compare prices for better deals and to keep your prices in line. For instance, you should know exactly how much 68 inches of head rail for a Roman shade costs you. You need to know how long it takes you to make any particular item, and how much each

product put into that item will cost you. This is how you start making a price list that works. And a working price list is an absolute must.

16. Make a profit. This is mandatory. If you don't, you can't stay in business very long. No one you do business with expects you to not make a profit. Yes, I know many of us love to sew. If your business is real, you have to make some money — otherwise you're a hobbyist. I absolutely hate this label. It makes me crazy. I'm a businessperson. My business is sewing. And I do it to make a living, not to play.

17. Make your own business policies to suit you, and then stick to them.

18. Change your business policies to suit you when they start to not work for you. They are your policies and you owe no one an explanation of why you changed them. If need be, they can be made up on the spot.

19. Trust your gut. If it doesn't feel right to you, it probably isn't. (See No. 16.)

20. Spend money on good equipment. Good equipment can save you money in the long run. That expensive iron? Worth every penny. That automatic machine that cuts threads automatically may save you hours per week. That cutting machine ... please! Think of the time it will save, not the money it will cost. Time equals money. More time means opportunity for growth.

21. Put together a championship team and treasure it. In my business, I'm blessed with "The Ladies," as well as two installers. My suppliers are also on my team. Those with good reps are my favorites. Just as I'm interested in the success of the designers I do work for, they're interested in my success. That's the secret that makes it work. I also expect a lot from my suppliers. I want them to be as nice to me as I am to my clients. If not, there are always others who will be more interested in my business.

22. And this one from the judge, my husband: Project confidence to the public, even if you don't feel it. Make the butterflies fly in formation.

23. Learn to step out on a limb every once and awhile. If you are short of work, cold-call a designer in a nearby town. Ask for a discount from a supplier you use all the time and buy a lot of supplies from. Approach that seminar producer and ask how you can become a presenter. Stop at the new business going up in your town (or your new neighbor), explain what you do and ask whether you can be of service. Be brave.

24. Enter a contest. Be brave.

25. Be brave. <