



Brother International Corporation

Brother Dealer Pairs with Schools to Raise Next Generation of Embroiderers (and Sales)

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Reinvention may be scary for some, but not for Ronald Croucher of Continental Sewing Center in Lexington, Kentucky. About 10 years ago, when this Authorized Brother Innov-is Dealer learned of changes taking place in his local school system, he not only saw a chance to help reinvent outdated curriculum into meaningful vocational education, but he also saw long-term sales opportunity for his family-owned dealership.

It all started with what is now called the Family and Consumer Science curriculum (formerly known as Home Economics). Two high schools in his area were retooling the sewing aspect of this program to be less about learning to sew clothes for family, and more about skills that could be used in industry. These schools had domestic sewing/embroidery machines that had probably been used for little more than construction and the occasional monogram or design. That's what got Croucher thinking.

Croucher, son of Continental Sewing's owner, Jack Croucher, and a 10-year veteran of sewing machine sales, helped these two schools revise their "learn to sew/embroider" classes into "how to run a small business" programs using Brother embroidery machines. The students learned technical and business skills, and the in-classroom embroidery "shops" produced and sold goods to other school organizations help defray costs of the program. In most cases, the in-classroom "shops" upgraded or expanded their machinery to include commercial equipment or models more suited to small-business use. Win-win-win, right?

That was the beginning of Continental's Schoolsew program (www.schoolsew.com), and at last count, the dealership has helped 250 schools in seven states in the Southeast develop successful embroidery lab "shops." Hundreds of students have gone on to jobs in the textile industry, drawing on the skills they have developed. Continental's up-front effort has had considerable long-term pay-off in machine sales to the schools, as well as to former students and local businesses determined to take advantage of this skilled labor pool.

Now, schoolsew.com is just one aspect of Continental's operation. The dealership sells both household and commercial sewing and embroidery machines and is one of a select number of Brother dealers authorized to sell its newest small-business model, the Entrepreneur™ PR-650.



The company also has a thriving online business, selling more than 160 items online, including project materials and goods for their small business customers.

The Schoolsew program, however, is Croucher's favorite, but not because it's easy. It requires a willingness to advocate on behalf of teachers who may grasp the potential of such a program, but are unable to navigate educational bureaucracy to get backing, funding or support.

He often finds himself working with bureaucrats at state, county and municipal levels. And because school districts vary, his sales strategy often varies, as well. "I attack it from the top down and the ground up and sideways," he says, with a laugh.

Tribal Threads, the in-school embroidery operation at Madison Central High School in nearby Richmond, Kentucky, is one of Croucher's Schoolsew clients. Veteran teacher Karen Feldhaus has spent many years helping students learn to embroider, digitize, process orders, keep inventory, and handle all the aspects of customer service you'd encounter in a regular business.

Tribal Threads produces spirit gear, apparel and accessories for school groups, organizations and special events, but it also has several out-of-house accounts, including golf courses, hair salons and a local horse stable. The in-school shop has about \$65,000 of machines, including the new Entrepreneur™ PR-650 machine, which Feldhaus says the students love.

"It is easier to use, and it's just a cleaner stitch," she says. The students really enjoy using the easy on-screen editing functions. In fact, a simple logo that was recently created recently using the on-screen editing feature turned into a 150-piece order for a middle school. That's just a side benefit, though.

"We're not out to make a fortune. It's primarily to teach the students," says Feldhaus. "We're getting so good at it that we can train kids and put them out into the workplace."

For example, 17-year-old senior Danielle Hale was recently hired part-time by a dry cleaner to help expand its alternations department to include embroidery. She says her Tribal Threads classroom experience was key in helping her get the job, and her knowledge of the Brother Entrepreneur™ PR-650 made it easy to learn to use her employer's PR-620.

Continental sells two different brands of machinery to the schools, but Croucher says Brother machinery has recently taken the lead because of the company's PR-600 series – including the PR-620 and the Entrepreneur™ PR-650. Its cap frame accessory, large jacket hoop, ease of use and affordable price match the criteria of these in-school "shops."

Brother's corporate support has been just as valuable as its technology. Croucher says that when working with schools, he often finds himself in remote areas. Telephone support is critical.

"(Brother) resolves any issue that I may have very quickly...because I might be out in a school in Egypt someplace and I might need a question answered real fast and they'll get right back to me," Croucher says. Steady corporate support and an understanding of Schoolsew's long-term nature is a key factor that makes it possible for Continental to keep growing its school-based sales.

"You can't have instant gratification on this. You keep going after it and eventually it's going to pay off," he says.

