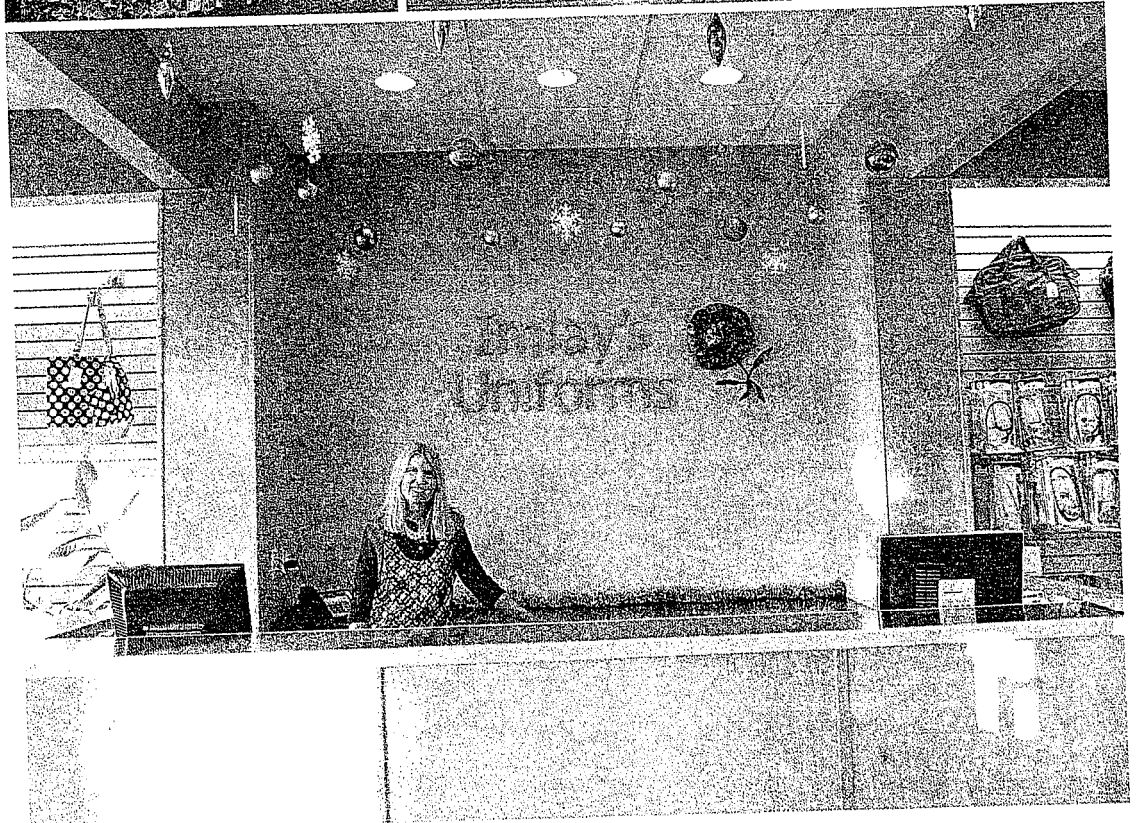
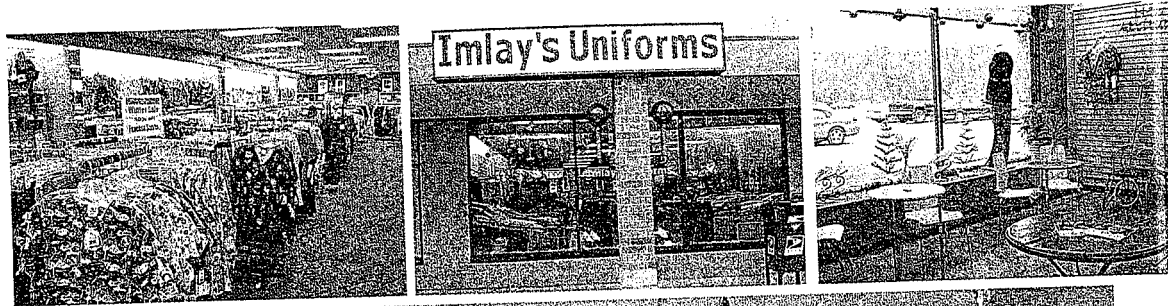
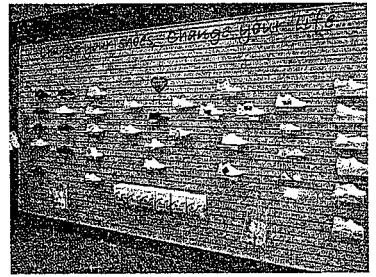
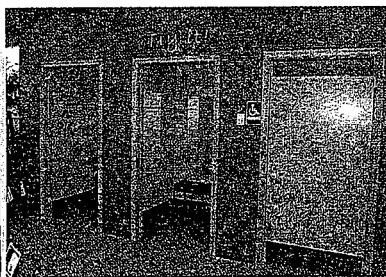
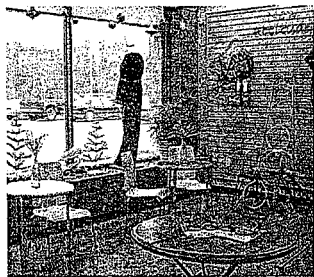


# (Re)Doing it Right at Imlay's Uniforms



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By Susan Derby

Melanie Imlay knows her scrubs inside and out. That's because she worked as a nurse before she opened her own medical uniforms business. She has the experience of someone who wears the uniforms every day, but she also has an understanding of the fabrics, manufacturing and style that goes into the creation of them.

That insider knowledge has helped Imlay grow her business quickly. In just under 30 years, she has turned her upstart business into three locations and 20 employees.

"I opened the first store here in Zanesville [Ohio] in 1982," she says. "I had worked as a nurse for 10 years. I had a young daughter, and I actually thought that having my own business would let me have more time to spend with her." Her laughter at that last statement underscores just how much time and work she has poured into her company. Though she had taken business courses and had a solid business plan, she didn't quite count on dedicating so much time to her young company.

Imlay's Uniforms began selling nursing uniforms – mostly white dresses – as well as maternity clothes, baby gifts and nursery furniture. It was a fairly common practice for retailers to carry various specialty apparel lines since most small towns

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couldn't support a store that sold only uniforms. After five years, Imlay's Uniforms dropped maternity wear in favor of more medical scrubs and a small collection of chef and hospitality apparel.

Her daughter, Lisa Lorraine, grew up in the business, spending afternoons after school in the store. In 1992, when her daughter went to college at Ohio State University in Columbus, Imlay opened a second store there. After graduation, Lorraine stayed on to manage the Columbus location.

Another ten years later, like clockwork, Imlay opened her third location in Lancaster, Ohio. The opportunity for the third store presented itself when the local hospital closed its employee uniform store. Imlay saw the void left behind and opened her retail store, even hiring the hospital's former retail manager to run the new location.

The three stores form a triangle roughly 50 miles from each other serving central and Southeastern Ohio. Yet despite their close proximity, they serve very different clientele.

"I could not just place and order and divide it up three equal ways. The customers are so

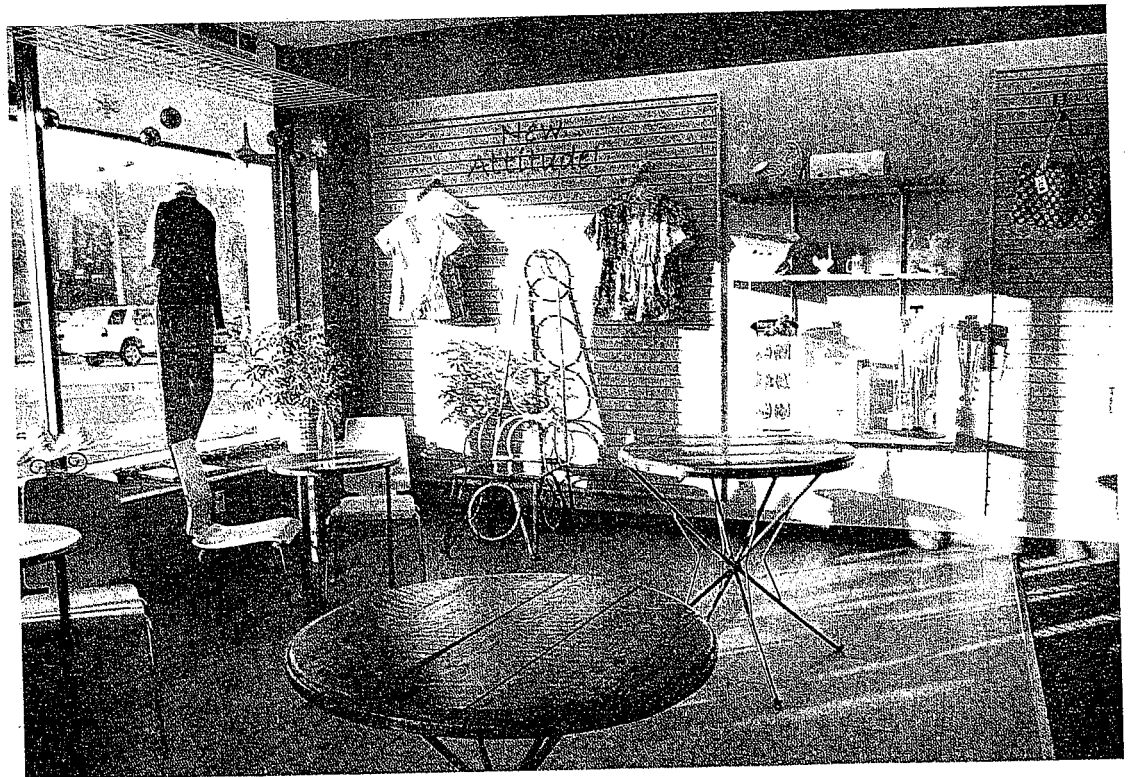
different in each area, so our stores don't look alike and their merchandise is different," Imlay says. "In Columbus, for example, they sell a ton of Dansk shoes, but we don't even carry them in the Zanesville store."

Imlay was quick to learn the balance of supply and demand for each location. Now, her easy-going attitude reflects just how much confidence she has in her store managers to do what is best for their particular store. She oversees all locations and manages the Zanesville location.

One of her key beliefs is a constant review of each store. About every five years, each store gets refreshed, with new paint, flooring, displays and any other needs. Imlay encourages her employees to take a critical look at everything from the dressing rooms to the checkout counter. Customer input is also considered.

The Lancaster store just enjoyed a redo in 2009. It not only got a new look but a whole new location. A larger space became available within walking distance from the hospital, and Imlay jumped at the opportunity to be closer to the target customers as well as grow in space.

"We were a mile and a half from the



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hospital, and now we are within walking distance, just through a parking lot and down some steps to get to our store. And we went from 1,500 square feet to 4,200 square feet," she says. "We were so crowded in the other location. The extra space is wonderful, but the location was absolutely most important to us."

Imlay took the opportunity to really shake up the store design. Because the space was long and narrow, it presented some challenges. It began with a complete interior demolition, meaning Imlay had a blank slate from which to start.

She called on an interior designer who specializes in retail stores to help with some design choices. They decided on a deep coral color on the back wall to help draw that forward and make it feel more like a square instead of a long rectangle. The side walls include tall mirrors, which not only serve the customers but also make the side walls feel wider apart.

"Before, we thought we didn't want our scrubs to compete with the colors on the walls. But we painted the walls parakeet green, a teal aqua color and a deep coral, so those colors are

strong and vibrant, and it actually makes the scrubs pop even more," she says. "Because of our colors at the Lancaster store, all the other employees are clamoring for the same bright colors for their stores too."

The entire design is contemporary with lots of wood accents. The front 30 feet is hardwood flooring with café tables. Imlay says customers love to linger at the front, have some coffee, meet friends, browse catalogs and leisurely compare merchandise. Displays up front tend to show the newest products to catch shoppers' eyes when they first enter.

Imlay had a custom maple counter built, and the rear wall is lined with birch Ikea bookshelves where folded solid scrubs are stocked. Ceiling fans "help with the feng shui," Imlay says, and also help reduce heating and cooling costs. And there's something else that sets the Lancaster store apart from almost every other uniform store in the country.

"I have a lot of friends who are artists, so I display their work," Imlay says. "There is metal working and different kinds of artwork, so it's kind of like a uniform store and art gallery in one. We change out the art about once a month



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to keep it fresh and fun.”

With almost triple the space in the new location as there was in the old, Imlay asked her customers what product lines they most wanted to see in all that extra room. She was also careful to leave plenty of room in back for inventory, storage and preparation of group orders. In just four months, the entire space went from lease signing to grand opening. The redesign cost a total of \$90,000 between Imlay's Uniforms and the building landlord. Imlay says the construction went quickly – just two months – and the recession offered great deals on materials and labor.

Imlay also began updating the Columbus store in January. She says the employees of that 3,300-square-foot store wanted the same vibrant colors as the new Lancaster store. Imlay's Uniforms owns the 5,000-square-foot Zanesville store, and they will likely use a variation of the same color palette to keep all three locations somewhat consistent in appearance while maintaining their individuality.

“It is always difficult to choose a retail location because it is so important,” Imlay says. “But uniform stores are destination stores. We

spent a little time in a mall, but that's not what our customers liked. They want to pull up to the front of the store, run in, get what they need and get back out the door. We like to have a visible presence, but we don't need to be in a mall.”

Fashion scrubs are the core of the business. Imlay says many of the men and women entering nursing today seek out the stylish scrub designs. They like the variety of patterns and cuts available. Many go out right after work and are looking for something that they are comfortable wearing outside the hospital and that shows their personal style.

“When we opened, we had all white goods. I had a rack maybe three feet wide with print tops, and that was it. Almost everywhere required white and most required white dresses. Look at how things have changed! Scrubs are fun now!” says Imlay. “Twenty years ago, when something new came out in ready-to-wear, it would be three or five years before the uniform manufacturers were on it, but anymore they are coming out the same season with whatever you see on the runway.”

Imlay's Uniforms will always carry basic



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scrubs, but Imlay says she likes to show her customers the newest fashions and give them the choice of what to buy. Imlay's Uniforms also handles custom orders, embroidery, alterations and large orders.

Advertising for the three stores is done mostly by direct mail. The 10,000 mailing list members receive quarterly promotions, and as an extra incentive, Imlay sends out \$10 gift certificates for their birthdays and for holiday shopping. She says she spent a much larger portion of her income on advertising when she first started the business. Print ads, radio spots and TV commercials were all in the arsenal to get the word out about Imlay's Uniforms. Now that the customer base is established, she relies more on direct mail and word of mouth.

A website, launched in 1996, also helps customers find the stores and browse merchandise. It currently accounts for less than 20 percent of all sales.

"We started that more as an informational thing, but it grew into online ordering. That's something in 2010 that we're really going to concentrate on. It needs an overhaul just like the stores do. So my next project is to increase the sales on the website because that is really important," says Imlay.

A website redesign will also include a transition to more email marketing. Imlay likes to have direct communication with her customers, and she sees email as the most cost-effective way to do that. She still plans to do direct mail though because "people like to hold that promotion card in their hands or post it at work," she says.

In addition to owning Imlay's Uniforms, Imlay also is the cofounder of the Uniform Retailers Association. When the Professional Apparel Association decided to disband in late 2006, she and Steve Land, owner of Land Uniforms in Nashville, Tenn., jumped into action. Imlay had been on an advisory board for the PAA, so she received many calls from retailers who didn't want to see the organization disappear. She also received a call from Land suggesting that they start a new organization. Just three months after the PAA disbanded, Imlay and Land filed the incorporation papers for the Uniform Retailers Association.

Imlay says, "We wanted to start something for the independent uniform retailers. The NAUMD focuses mostly on blue goods. We wanted something more for the medical community. Most of our members are small, with only one to five stores. There needed to be a way to network, share better ways of doing things and present education. We felt like the stronger our members could be the better we all would do in business."

Imlay says the three trade shows the URA has hosted have grown each year, with lots of manufacturer support. The next show in Orlando this November is shaping up to have even more sponsors and exhibitors.

It's clear that uniforms have quickly become Imlay's passion. With a constantly growing business and now a trade organization under her belt, she's looking forward to steadily improving both. And Imlay's Uniforms and the URA are each benefiting from her vast experience on both sides of the uniform. **M**

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