

# She Said: Courting the Crochet Customer

By Linda Permann

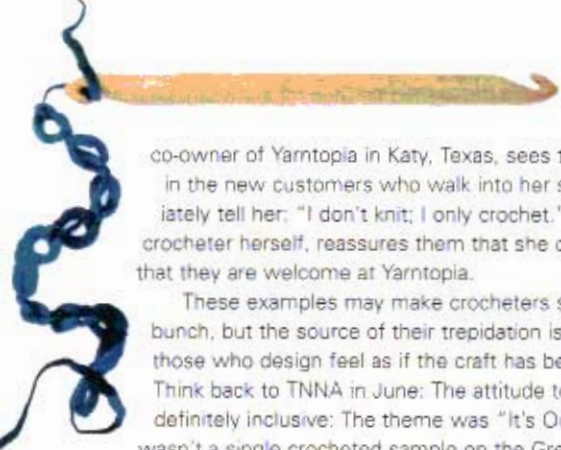
You've heard it before, but it bears repeating: Crochet counts.

There are more books, magazines and blogs devoted to the craft now than ever before; 42,000-plus crochet patterns were available on Ravelry alone at press time. The Crochet Guild of America (CGOA) and the Crochet Liberation Front have improved knowledge of and attitudes toward the craft in recent years. Crochet designers who got their start at the dawn of the knitting resurgence a decade ago now have a highly developed, intricate skill set and a dedicated fan base hungry for more. One look at the current collections of Chanel, Dolce & Gabbana and Missoni tells us that crochet is clearly reaching a tipping point.

Yet, as Charles Voth writes so eloquently, there's long been a barrier between the LYS and the crocheter. Even if you didn't integrate the hook into your original business plan, as more and more big-box stores step back from the yarn game, the time is now ripe for you to position your yarn shop as *the* destination for crochet expertise, tools and yarn. Many wise LYS owners and employees have made that leap; find inspiration in their stories of outreach below.

## Be Inclusive

It's the elephant in the LYS. For many years, crocheters who've ventured into yarn shops have felt like "unwanted stepsisters," in the words of Karen Rattoo-Whooley, a crochet and knitwear designer who works at Great Yarns! in Everett, Washington. Because of this, crocheters tend to enter an LYS already on the defensive, and any hint of crochet derision while they're there—whether intentional or not—may send them scurrying,



never to return.

Sheryl Means, co-owner of Yarnopia in Katy, Texas, sees that fear of rejection in the new customers who walk into her store and immediately tell her: "I don't knit; I only crochet." Means, an avid crocheter herself, reassures them that she crochets as well and that they are welcome at Yarnopia.

These examples may make crocheters sound like a sensitive bunch, but the source of their trepidation is not imaginary. Even those who design feel as if the craft has been largely ignored. Think back to TNNA in June: The attitude toward crochet was definitely inclusive: The theme was "It's Our TNNA," yet there wasn't a single crocheted sample on the Great Wall of Yarn. If that's happening at the industry level, imagine what trickles down to individual stores.

It's not necessarily your duty as a shop owner to include crocheters, but doing so is good business. All numbers point to the fact that there are more crocheters than knitters worldwide—more crocheters who typically use more yarn than knitters do. They also complete projects faster, so if they've had a positive experience shopping with you, they'll likely be back to buy more yarn before you know it.

To the hook-minded, there's a marked difference between yarn shops that tolerate crocheters and those that cultivate them. To be truly inclusive, never assume a customer is a knitter. Ask everyone who comes in, "Are you planning to knit or crochet with this yarn?" You may be surprised by the answer. And if you mention the "C" word right off the bat, you're instantly letting customers know that you can help them with either needlecraft. An easy way to get into the good graces of those who wield the hook is to make sure that all of your advertising and events incorporate the word "crochet." It sounds simple, yet many yarn shop owners insist that it's easier and more concise to just say "Knit," "Knit Night," "Knit Shop."

Gwen Blakely-Kinsler, founder of the Crochet Guild of America, puts it bluntly: "Owners need to adjust their attitudes if they don't already include the words 'knit and crochet' in everything they do, including the store's name. It is quite obvious that if a shop owner sells both Italian bread and French bread, sales will double if the store is named 'Bread Store' instead of 'French Bread Store.'" To test this theory, try dubbing your next stitching circle the less knit-centric "Stitch Night."

## Educate Yourself

Before you reach out to crocheters, you must educate yourself and your staff about the craft. It's hard to be excited about something you don't know much about, and taking a class will introduce you to the basics.

"Make sure you are not propagating myths about crochet," advises Deborah Burger, a teacher at Charlotte's Fibers in Brevard, North Carolina. Yarn shop staff must be able to "recommend a realistic hook size for your yarns, suggest appropriate yarn weights and explain the attributes of different fibers. Remember, most crocheters are just discovering that there are wonderful yarns available to them."

Because most high-end yarns do not put crochet-gauge information on the label, it's important for you to be able to give a customer that type of information. Karen Rattoo-Whooley relies heavily on the Web for more information [see "Click on Crochet," opposite]. As a general rule, she suggests a hook one to two sizes larger than the recommended needle size on the ball band. "Many yarn manufacturers think that crochet and knitting gauges are the same, with the same sizing," she says. "If I followed the hook information on many of the yarns, I'd be making Kevlar!"

It's also important to keep your attitude in check. There are three other yarn shops in the general vicinity, but Deborah Burger's crocheters have made it clear that they'd rather drive 40 minutes to Charlotte's Fibers than visit those that are closer but are less welcoming to hook wielders. Passionate knitters can take a cue from Burger, who has made a point to learn all she can about knitting, needlepoint and wet felting,

even though she doesn't spend her free time pursuing those crafts. "The fact that I myself have gotten the cold shoulder in stores has motivated me to learn enough to at least talk intelligently about any of the yarn crafts, so none of our customers will feel that same lack of interest I've experienced," she explains.

## Hire a Crocheter

The absolute best way to attract crocheters to your shop, especially if you're inexperienced with a hook, is to hire one. Says Sheryl Means: "You have to have someone there who loves it, makes a case for it, is knowledgeable and can help your customers."

As you've probably learned by teaching knitting, deciphering patterns is half the battle. Hire someone who can provide technical crochet support in your store at least once a week, then pointedly let customers know which days your crochet expert is available. Karen Rattoo-Whooley is "bombarded" by crocheters seeking her advice on the one weekday she's in residence at Great Yarns! When she's not at the store, she fields calls from customers interested in private lessons or shop employees trying to answer crochet questions more completely.

Many shops are hooking up with local crochet designers. Tracy St. John, a nationally published designer, works and teaches at Stix in Bozeman, Montana; the development of her design career has inspired the shop's customers. "It has been a little bit like having crochet rock-star status, and I think that has had a definite effect on the number of crocheters we have created and re-inspired here," says St. John. "People are very happy to get help from a crochet 'expert.' I don't think you could walk into many chain stores to ask what a foundation single crochet is and get a decent answer."

St. John notes that some of the most inspiring events at Stix have been crochet-based. For instance, she says, "Knitters and crocheters alike are still talking about a crochet-along we had two years ago, and the beautiful bags people made. It inspired knitters to learn to crochet, and it drew several in-remission crocheters back into the love affair."

## Offer a Range of Classes

Even if you can't put a crocheter on-staff, seek someone in your community to teach crochet classes. Both Rattoo-Whooley and Marty Miller, president of CGOA and a teacher at Stitch Point in Greensboro, North Carolina, have noticed an uptick in class interest, which they feel may be related to chain stores decreasing their class offerings. In fact, Rattoo-Whooley approached Great Yarns! when the Michaels at which she had been teaching stopped offering classes. She suggests starting with a few beginner classes on simple techniques. "As your base grows, you can poll students to see what kind of classes they would like," she says. "I now have people asking for classes on Tunisian crochet, embellishments, socks and a whole lot more."

Joanne Turcotte, who owns The Knitter's Edge in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, recently began offering crochet instruction. "I started to take notice of just how many cute crochet items there were on Ravelry—new ones every day—and I began to think that maybe we were missing something," she explains. "So we offered a beginning crochet class—just one class—and it filled up in a day, 15 sign-ups in just one day." So Knitter's Edge offered a second, then a third, then a fourth class, creating a crocheting customer base largely from Turcotte's existing knitters. Means and Miller have also had success in piquing knitterly interest through course offerings in Tunisian crochet. "Both crocheters and knitters can learn Tunisian. It brings them closer to the other technique," says Miller.

## Keep Samples Fresh

To really sell crochet, stock your shop with enticing samples. Pattern availability is much better than it was even a few years ago, so aim for projects so divine they'll keep your customers guessing which craft was used. Crocheted samples are especially important, since crocheters are grossly underserved by most yarn companies when it comes to swatch and pattern support.

Without any examples of what yarns look and feel like worked up in crochet, customers are reluctant to spend. One-skein samples are a great way to encourage crocheters to try new yarns, patterns and books.

Go beyond the tired granny square and work up a lace-weight shawl, or maybe some socks. Make sure to add new pieces as often as you add knit samples. "Two things will happen," says Burger: "Crocheters of all skill levels will feel welcomed and inspired, and knitters who had no idea that a delicate silk lace shawl could be created in less than a month, or that finely draping garments are possible in crochet, will have their horizons stretched."

## Stock Patterns

A few yarn companies stand out in their pattern support; stock their leaflets if you can. Rowan, which always includes one or two crochet designs in its magazines, recently published its first-ever crochet-only pattern booklet, *Summer Crochet*. The designs in this on-trend booklet have cross-craft appeal and are easy enough that knitters with minimal crochet skills should be able to complete them.

Tahki•Stacy Charles has published four booklets featuring crochet patterns exclusively, two of which have completely sold out. TSC's Debbi Skinner and Diane Friedman saw the gap in the market early on, when fashion-conscious crocheters were looking for updated designs, and hired two well-respected designers, Doris Chan and Kristin Omdahl. The crochet patterns have done so well, the company has plans to keep them coming.

There is still quite a gap in one-off pattern offerings that magazines and Ravelry help fill. Both *Interweave Crochet* and *Crochet Today* offer a good variety of modern patterns at a great price, and online sites offer tutorials and downloadable PDFs. Keep a good selection of crochet books on hand; publishers like Interweave, Potter Craft and Lark offer beautiful titles using high-end yarns. Even crocheters who won't spend a lot on yarn will buy books, and the tomes will further showcase the yarns you carry.

## Choose Yarns and Tools Wisely

The final consideration is the one with which LYS owners are most familiar: inventory. It goes without saying that a good selection of hooks and tools is imperative. Be sure to stock a few different types of hooks, including aluminum and bamboo or hardwoods, plus Tunisian and afghan hooks, and be ready to explain the difference. Although hooks

may not move quickly at first, a developing crochet clientele will eventually vastly prefer your organized inventory to the hit-or-miss displays at the chains. Notions like hairpin-lace looms and large needles for broomstick lace can be hard to find, so set yourself apart by keeping them in stock—and knowing how to use them.

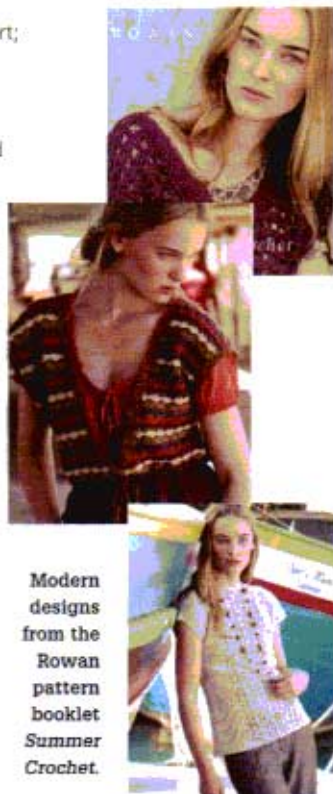
Next, consider the yarns you carry. Of course, it is possible to crochet with any yarn, but yarn behaves differently depending on how you work it. Long color repeats and kettle-dyed yarns tend to work up well in crochet, whereas short repeats and variegated colors can lead to a patchy fabric. Thinner yarns look absolutely amazing; show off samples made with sock or

DK-weight yarn to inspire those who rarely venture away from worsted.

Most importantly, seek yarns with generous yardage and lower price points. Inexpensive yarn will appeal both to crocheters used to craft-store prices and to knitters feeling the economic crunch. Staples like Plymouth Encore and Berroco Comfort are available in a variety of weights at a price that won't intimidate new customers.

Remember, there's no shame in providing affordable yarns that keep customers coming back. After some hesitation, Sheryl Means recently responded to a customer request by ordering some dishcloth cotton for Yarnopia. "Why should I let the craft chain get that sale?" she asks. Although you want the more expensive yarns to sell first, think of the cheaper yarns as a gateway to all of the wonderful fibers you stock.

Underserved crochet customers are seeking the exact same things that knitters already receive at local yarn shops. It's not just about the yarn; it's about support and encouragement. Consistency in offerings, constant availability, always being there will bring people back—crocheters and knitters alike. From a business standpoint, it just makes sense to serve all fiber crafters. Margaret Schroeder, who owns The Gourmet Yarn Company in Oklahoma City, finds it hard to believe that any yarn store would not be crochet-friendly. "I want to sell yarn," she says. "I don't care if people want to hang it from their chandeliers!"



Modern designs from the Rowan pattern booklet *Summer Crochet*.

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