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3 1/4" x 6 5/8"



Where The Action Is

With its motto, "Dress Energized," Action Dancewear brings a vibrant energy to the Oshkosh, WI, dance community.

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BY TOM SHAY

BY JEN JONES

In the heart of Oshkosh's bustling Main Street district lies Action Dancewear—a fitting location as both the store and the area have seen tremendous growth in the last decade. "When we first moved here in 1997, the street was really dead," says storeowner and Oshkosh native Kathy Sakschek. "Now it's thriving, yet it still retains its quaint charm."

She's not kidding—last winter, the area was chosen as a filming location for the upcoming Johnny Depp film *Public Enemies*. Hollywood buzz is yet another earmark of the synchronicity between Action Dancewear and its community. Sakschek chose the name to evoke "Hollywood lights and an atmosphere of energy and entertainment." (Her vision seems to be coming to fruition—for the 2007 Kids Choice Awards, Sakschek was tapped to provide unitards for the promotion crew of *Nacho Libre*.)

Although Main Street is scheduled to undergo an eight-month construction period in 2009, the storeowner isn't worried about the shop's livelihood—even during a recession. "Our customers come here for a reason; we are definitely a destination store," she says, adding with conviction, "I know we won't have a problem."

GOOD ENERGY

So what makes Action Dancewear the chosen destination for Oshkosh's dance community? Sakschek credits it in part to her commitment to providing a wide selection of high-quality apparel. "We believe that if you dress energized, you feel energized—so the clothing we purchase has to give you that feeling when you touch or view it," she says. "Kids literally come out of the dressing room saying, 'Mom! This feels so great!'"

The staff also strives to maintain the highest level of customer service. With such a broad clientele—from dance teams to gymnasts to figure skaters and even restaurant workers—store employees must be knowledgeable on many fronts, as well as sensitive to various needs. "In our business, it's all about caring for the 'I need it yesterday' mentality," says Sakschek. "We lose sleep over team orders, special orders and recital performances. We strive to make miracles happen for customers—to bring order from chaos!"

A long history and deep roots in the community also account for the retailer's success. Sakschek and her husband opened the store in 1993 after she became



Kathy Sakschek's daughters Franki and Randi in Action Dancewear

Courtesy of Action Dancewear

Just the Facts

Action Dancewear

452 N. Main Street
Oshkosh, WI 54901
920-232-4999
<http://e-dancewear.com>
kathy@e-dancewear.com

Hours: Monday through Thursday:
10 am–6 pm; Friday: 10 am–5 pm;
Saturday: 10 am–4 pm; closed
Sunday

Square Footage: 1,200

Number of Employees: 3

Merchandise Carried: Men's, women's and children's apparel and shoes for all types of dance (including ballroom), gymnastics, figure skating and fitness

Best-sellers: Legwarmers, jazz pants and T-shirts

Cientele: Teens make up the largest percentage of Action Dancewear's customers.

Number of Manufacturers: 16

Memorable Customer Encounter: When Hollywood came calling! "The costume designer from *Nacho Libre* called and needed 40 unitards in eight days for the Kids' Choice Awards," says Sakschek. "This particular manufacturer is all made-to-order, but because we've done business with them for so long, they did it!" Today pictures of Robin Williams and Bruce Willis looking at the unitard the crew wore adorn the store's "Wall of Fame."

pregnant with her daughter Randi. "It wasn't financially feasible for me to be a stay-at-home mom," she says, "so we decided I would leave my job and focus on starting an enterprise where I could earn an income, but not sacrifice raising our child."

Though the Sakscheks considered a range of business ideas, starting a dance shop seemed the most attractive option in light of the area's many fitness clubs and dance studios. "We were intrigued by the high-energy, passionate audience to which they catered," says Sakschek. "It was appealing to us to get into the business of supporting this audience with activewear."

Initially named Saks Moving Wear, the store was located in the nearby college town of Madison. Moving to the larger Oshkosh location in 1997 allowed the apparel and shoe inventory to expand. The store's steady success hit a snag three years later when Saks Fifth Avenue threatened to sue over the name. That was when Action Dancewear was born. "We love it, as the letter 'A' always gets us first in listings, and the name really reflects the spirit of what we are about," says Sakschek.

LASTING CONNECTIONS

Another secret to the store's success has been the relationships Sakschek has formed with vendors, customers and, perhaps most important, her staff. "I have the greatest, most fantastic women working with me," she says of employees Pam Seibold, a former dance instructor, and Ann Mosling, a former gymnast. Since Sakschek works primarily from home, a high level of trust is a must: "People can't believe it is run so smoothly by just three women, but it works out fabulously

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Store manager Pam Seibold at work in the store.

because I know them so well.”

She also has strong support from her husband of 21 years, who deals with the website and marketing efforts. “John is very creative and is the master of getting the word out,” she says. “I couldn’t do it without him—he’s my biggest supporter!”

Indeed her husband’s expertise is much needed, since the website has become a formidable extension of the shop’s offerings. Launched in 2000, it has attracted customers from across the country and overseas. According to Sakschek, she spends about 85 percent of her workweek at home fulfilling web orders and doing store paperwork, as well as connecting with customers virtually. “It’s amazing communicating with people all over the world,” she says. “A Canadian web customer recently stopped in to see our brick-and-mortar boutique; it’s a great feeling to know we’re touching people at such a distance.”

And, of course, the team at Action Dancewear relishes the relationships they’ve built over the last 15 years with dancers, their families and studios. The store’s “Wall of Fame” is a homage to these connections, proudly displaying group photos and stories of dancers wearing Action Dancewear uniforms. Sakschek believes that this bond with the dance community is what will keep the store afloat during tough economic times. “We find that people hold close the things they love,” she says. “It’s easy to bypass a new flat-screen TV, but eliminating something that you or your kids are passionate about just isn’t going to happen.”

Sakschek’s passion for dance is as palpable as her customers’, according to Seibold: “Kathy loves the performing arts. She becomes filled with joy just knowing she has played a part in the performance by providing their dancewear.”

As for the future, the owner’s plan is to capitalize on the growth of the business, possibly by opening a franchise. “Pam always says to me, ‘We’re goin’ global, girl!’ I want to make it huge, and it seems to be going in that direction,” says Sakschek. “It takes teamwork, and that’s what we are—a team. No one works for anybody; we are all one.”

Jen Jones is a dance instructor and freelance writer based in Los Angeles.

Q & A

GRASSROOTS MARKETING

Being relatively new to the dance world, Kathy Sakschek employed some serious marketing techniques to get the word out about Action Dancewear.

DRN: When you first opened the store, how did you spread the word?

Sakschek: Being a new storeowner, there was little budget for advertising and nobody knew us. Our approach was roll-up-your-sleeves, grassroots, guerrilla marketing. We obtained an old copy machine and pounded out thousands of newsletters, coupons and flyers. We stapled our name on poles, stuffed cards under wipers and partnered with everyone from health food to haircuts, exchanging flyers. If we had your address, we sent you holiday recipes for cooking and healthy living—along with our motto to “Dress Energized.”

DRN: What kind of outreach did you do to the dance community?

Sakschek: Most important, we did road shows. We actively participated in skating events, dance workshops and style shows. We paid special attention to area instructors and dance students who could spread the word about our attitude of only providing the highest quality, hand-selected activewear. To learn the ropes, I surrounded myself with performing artists and made friends with instructors. I dressed like a dancer, read dance magazines and joined a tap fit class.

DRN: How quickly did your efforts pay off?

Sakschek: It was pretty instantaneous. One really effective thing we did was give stacks of coupons to instructors with their names on the back. When the students used those coupons the instructor would get an extra percentage off their current 15 percent discount. Right away, our store blossomed.