

Open your own clothing store!

FabJob Guide to
**Become a
Boutique
Owner**



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1. Introduction

Congratulations on taking the first step towards starting up your own boutique, a step into the fast-paced, ever-changing, exciting world of fashion retail. You're about to spend your days surrounded by beautiful clothing, shoes and accessories, and by fun, dynamic people.

Most people who are interested in the idea of owning a boutique have certain things in common, so we think we might already know a little bit about you. Do you love to shop? Do you enjoy the special thrill of hunting for a chic, jazzy little number, or the perfect tie to match your favorite chinos? If so, you probably already spend a lot of time in boutiques, and know what you like and don't like about them.

Perhaps you find yourself unconsciously window-shopping for friends and relatives. Do you see a sweater and think, "Oh, that's Jim!" or are

you constantly scoping out handbags that would suit your sister? If so, you'll probably be a natural success at selling in a retail environment, where you'll help people find items that match their style and taste.

Chances are you've spent a bit of time shopping in boutiques and you might possibly have worked in one or two. While it can be fun and rewarding to work in someone else's shop, nothing quite compares to the satisfaction of running your own business, and taking credit for your own ideas and flashes of brilliant customer service. You'll face interesting new challenges as you learn all of the aspects of having your own business. The profit you make will be your own, as will the accolades of the people who become your regular clientele.

One of the keys to running a successful business is being prepared, and this guide is a vital part of your research. It will provide you with concrete guidelines and a few strong opinions. It will let you gain insight from those who have already successfully done exactly what you will set out to do, and who have so generously shared their experiences with us.

So, let's extend to you a warm welcome into the world of the boutique!

1.1 Boutiques and Fashion

What is a boutique, anyway? Most people would describe a small shop that sells fashionable clothing, gifts, or jewelry. The word fashion comes up time and time again in definitions of the boutique, and most specify that a true boutique must be small.

For the purposes of this book, we define a boutique as a small retail store, usually less than 2000 square feet, and often closer to 1000. The main product a boutique sells is generally used for adornment, such as clothing, accessories or shoes. Secondary products could include cosmetics or other items that complement a fashionable look.

The popularity of the boutique is partly due to the fact that many consumers prefer shopping for products or services on a cozy and intimate scale. The department store with its vast square footage, multiple levels, crowded elevators and slow escalators can seem like a real time-drain.

As a side note, the term “boutique” is also now used to define select small hotels, ad agencies, investor firms, etc. that offer personalized, attentive service. The term has been borrowed by non-retail industries to convey the close, cozy feeling that an intimate retail experience has to offer.

A boutique can sell its products to women, men, children, teenagers, or all of the above. Its focus might be large people, small people, vintage souls, glamour girls or lovers of denim. Your imagination is your only limit. We’ll discuss later in this guide how to find a niche for yourself in the boutique market.

Since so many boutique owners pursue a fashionable flavor, let’s define fashion, too. In a general sense, fashion is a way or manner of doing something. It’s the current custom followed by a defined group of people. Specifically, fashion refers to the latest trends in clothing, shoes and accessories, and the business of designing, manufacturing and selling the same.

Don’t confuse fashion with clothing. There are large sections of the clothing market that have little to do with fashion. Not all of what we call fashion means clothing, and not all clothing is fashion. However, be aware that there is a lot of overlap.

Fashion is a fun business and a fickle one. You’ll probably have noticed that on the most scorching days of late July, wool sweaters and coats start to arrive in many shops. By September, just as the weather is cooling, many of these things are already on sale. That’s the nature of the fashion cycle.

Fashion is hot when it’s new, and it can get cold almost as fast as a plate of spaghetti. If your niche is very classic cashmere sweaters, tweed skirts and strings of pearls, your product will be less perishable than the trendy styles that grace the magazine covers.

While clothing rarely rots or grows mold, it is vulnerable to the passing of time, just as the apples and tomatoes at your local greengrocer are. Its shelf life may be longer, but it’s just as important to move the goods while they’re fresh.

1.2 The Boutique Owner

Not too many people open up new department stores these days (unless they've won big in the lottery or wound up with an unexpected inheritance), but lots of people open their own boutiques. Some of these people start small, but many eventually expand to a cluster of small shops, or to a store that grows to take up twice the square footage it did on opening day. Two of the people interviewed for this book now own several boutique locations, and almost all have expanded beyond their original store size.

To help you tap in to what it's like to own a boutique, we'll share opinions and insider tips throughout the book from the boutique owners we interviewed. Let's introduce you to them now.

- Sue joined forces with three partners in 1992 to purchase four already-established but failing boutiques. She built the business to thirteen boutiques, a catalog and online store specializing in fashion for the tall woman.
- Beth and Jacquie turned a love of yoga into a successful business retailing yoga clothing and accessories. They manufacture some of their own products, import others, and offer website sales to expand the client base of their small shop.
- Beverly owns a consignment shop specializing in vintage fashion. She and her partner started business with a cash injection of only a few hundred dollars, and then Beverly bought out her partner five years into the business. Since then, the business has paid all her living expenses and shown a profit for several years running.
- Margaret imports beautiful, one-of-a-kind pieces from Poland and sells them in a touristy, seaside fishing village. Her investment was minimal and she didn't have to borrow anything from the bank. She also managed to turn a profit in her first year of operations.
- Jane wanted to make and sell truly distinctive, high-quality children's clothing. She learned not only how to retail, but also how to design, manufacture and import everything from swimsuits to parkas for children. She now has a store in New York in addition to Seattle, where the business started, and also has numerous retail partners with select boutiques throughout the US.

- Wendy began to sew her own designs and recycle her mother's clothes at a tender age. She decided to open a boutique to sell her own creations and included the work of other local designers as well. Today Wendy still loves her work and her business, and can't imagine doing anything else.

You'll hear from these seven successful entrepreneurs throughout this guidebook, offering their opinions and advice on a variety of topics.

Every boutique will be different because every business is subtly different, and each owner has their own specific background, strengths and weaknesses. Your story will not be exactly like that of anyone interviewed for this book. The exciting thing about opening a new business is discovering exactly what your success story will be.

1.3 Benefits of the Career

If you have a love for fashion and the buying and selling of clothing, you are likely to find fulfillment in running your own boutique. Here are some of the benefits you'll experience in this fabulous and exciting career.

Being a Fashion Insider

Opening a newly arrived box of product can feel quite a bit like Christmas morning. You'll be the first one to slip on and model the latest trends in your community. You'll be surrounded by the work of designers you admire. You'll be among the first to view the newest collections just as they are launched. Your job will require insight as you learn to recognize trends and spot styles that your customers will snap up with delight six months down the road.

You probably enjoy dressing fashionably yourself, and will get pleasure from modeling your own product every day at work. Of course, if your store specializes in underwear or swimwear we'll encourage you to support the other boutiques in your neighborhood to keep yourself covered up... just make sure they know where to find your shop, too!

Your business might require that you travel to New York, LA, or even Paris or Milan to buy product for your boutique. This kind of travel will be a justified business expense and an allowable tax deduction.

Meeting and Helping People

You'll get tremendous satisfaction from helping someone find an outfit that suits her figure and coloring, or to choose a gift for someone else. You'll be able to put a reluctant shopper at ease and make him so comfortable in your environment that he'll swear undying loyalty for the rest of his shopping days. You'll feel good about the fact that you helped someone improve their self-image by treating themselves to a flattering, esteem-building new outfit from your store.

On a good day you'll be surrounded by people for hours at a time, usually one or two co-workers as well as a flow of customers from different walks of life. You'll meet new people every day — people from your own retail neighborhood, and visitors from all over the world with varying tastes, interesting stories, and unusual requests. Your regular customers will soon feel like friends.

Being Creative

This can be a creative job with a lot of room for freedom of expression. You'll be able to try new things with buying, merchandizing and displaying the line. Window dressing can be quite a high art and you'll be mingling with other creative people like designers and merchandisers, as well as fashion writers and stylists who come in to find out about your shop.

Your visual flare will extend to putting separates together to make stunning outfits and accessorizing them to give them that extra "wow." You'll become handy with a few straight pins as you recommend alterations to make a jacket or dress look as though it was tailor-made for your client.

Being Your Own Boss

You'll love making your first big sale and ringing it into the cash register. You'll enjoy that happy look on your customer's face as they walk out with a new purchase. When customers come in for the first time and express admiration for your boutique and its line of merchandise, you'll feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. At the end of a busy Saturday during the holiday season you will probably even enjoy that bone-tired feeling that comes from being run off your feet all day, be-

cause you'll have been working hard to build the success of your own business.

When you start a new business you are by default committing yourself to a lot of hard work. But if you're the type that tries hard at everything you do, then it makes sense to pursue something you love. If fashion is your passion, opening a boutique makes more sense than starting a dry-cleaning business or your own catering company, right?

Unlimited Income Potential

Retail fashion isn't likely to go away soon. Even though Internet and catalog shopping has impacted the way consumers shop, most people still like to buy on impulse. They like to try clothing on before they purchase it and like to handle fabrics to see how they feel.

Specific buying habits and trends will fluctuate wildly, and the amount people will spend will vary with economic conditions. However, human nature is such that there will always be a market for retail fashion and for general clothing. The challenge is to know the market, study your customers, observe trends and stay ahead of the game.

As the owner of your own business, your income is in your own hands. You won't have to ask your boss to give you a raise; you'll have to figure out how to sell more product at the kind of profit margin that will let you earn the money you want to. Successful boutique owners make a decent living; boutique owners who open multiple locations can make \$100,000 a year or more.

We wouldn't say that retail fashion is an easy way to get rich, but there are many examples of people who have built big businesses from very humble beginnings. When you do what you love and do it to the best of your abilities, the money will follow and more importantly, you'll create a life that you enjoy.

1.4 In This Guide

As with any business venture, the more research and planning you can do in advance, the better. This book will assist you by getting you to ask and answer the questions that should be resolved before you decide to

take that big step. We'll also make sure that you have as many practical tools as possible to ensure the viability of your business.

Chapter 2 ("*The Boutique Environment*") introduces you to the world of the boutique, with a look at retailing fashion, what the marketplace is like for boutiques, what the owner of a boutique will do from day to day, and how you can develop the skills you'll need to succeed.

Chapter 3 ("*Planning Your Boutique*") really gets your creative juices flowing. You'll learn how to get inspired, how to hone in on a niche market, and what your business options are. Then you'll see how to pull it all together into a viable business plan, how to calculate your start-up costs, and find out how to shop your plan around to lenders and investors.

Chapter 4 ("*Preparing to Open*") gives you detailed and thoughtful advice on how to select the location that will give you the best chance of success, where to find suppliers locally, nationally and internationally, how much inventory to start with, what mix of product to buy, and it explains how boutiques set their prices. The chapter concludes with tips on hiring great staff members (even if it's only one or two) and the business details you'll need to take care of before you open, from licenses to insurance.

Chapter 5 ("*Running Your Boutique*") offers a practical guide to operating your shop once it is open for business. It covers key operational issues like merchandizing, effective sales techniques, day-to-day operations from cash handling to theft prevention, and managing your staff. This chapter also shares expert advice on attracting customers to your boutique through conventional and unconventional ways. Finally, it concludes with a look at the ins-and outs of one of the hottest trends in boutique retailing these days: the bridal boutique.

Chapter 6 rounds out the guidebook with a list of additional resources, publications, associations and websites to help you on your path to learn even more about boutique ownership.

And throughout the guide you'll find bits of wisdom and advice from successful boutique owners who were kind enough to share their experiences with you, the reader. So if you're ready, let's get started!