

Open your own stationery, paper, or card shop!

FabJob Guide to  
**Become a  
Stationery  
Store Owner**



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## 1. Introduction

Congratulations on taking the first step towards starting up your own stationery store, a step into the fast-paced, ever-changing, exciting world of stationery and related products. You're about to spend your days surrounded by beautiful paper, specialty products, creative accessories, and the people who seek them out.

Most people who are interested in the idea of owning a stationery store have certain things in common, so we think we might already know a little bit about you. Do you love finding a handwritten note in the mail? Do you stock up on greeting cards and note cards to send for special occasions and sometimes for no reason at all? Do decorative journals put you in the mood to write?

Do you find it hard to resist the pull of a stationery store? Do you just “have” to go in to check out the displays whenever you pass a stationery store? If your preference is printed to-do lists and memo pads over blank paper, if you believe a decorative storage box is so much nicer than using an old shoe box, then you already know the special place stationery products hold for many people.

Chances are you’ve spent a bit of time shopping in stationery stores 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.

This chapter lays the foundation for the rest of the guide. It identifies some of the growth trends in the stationery industry and explains the difference between office supplies stores and stationery stores. It also covers the benefits of this exciting career choice and outlines the steps needed to get started.

## 1.1 The Stationery Industry

As you start out in your new business, have confidence that you will be part of a highly select and ever-growing market. According to the most recent figures available from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, office supplies and stationery stores were a \$24 billion industry in the United States in 2007, with stationery stores making up around \$8 million of the overall industry.

The office supplies and stationery store industry encompasses a variety of products sold at stores from the small independent stationery store to the large office supply superstore chains like Staples, Office Depot, and OfficeMax. Items sold in these stores include office supplies, such as office products, forms, furniture, and equipment; school supplies; writing supplies; stationery; greeting cards; gifts; and home decor items. For decades, independent stationery stores sold merchandise from all of these categories. With the rise of the superstore chains in the 1980s and 1990s, many stationery stores stopped carrying products in many of these categories and started carrying more stationery products, greeting cards, gifts and novelties, and related items, such as picture frames.

Since stationery stores sell a variety of products not classified as office supplies and stationery, the actual sales of stationery stores are much higher than those reported by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. In addition to the office supplies and stationery industry segment, stationery stores sell items from a variety of industries. Most notable among these are greeting cards, party supplies, and gifts. The market research firm Unity Marketing, Inc. reports that sales of stationery products that cross all industries were \$37.4 billion in the United States in 2007. Based on the total sales of products sold in stationery stores, the per capita spending in stationery stores equaled nearly \$123.

Unity Marketing also reports on trends in the stationery market. Consumers are showing a growing preference for smaller, specialty, and/or independent stationery retailers as opposed to large national retailers. Despite overall declines in retail spending, certain stationery products showed modest gains in sales. The most dramatic growth was sales of luxury, specialty, and custom-printed products, such as custom-printed stationery. Whereas sales declined for items such as party goods, gift wrap, and specialty writing instruments, these categories are expected to regain their popularity once economic conditions improve.

According to Unity Marketing, based on consumer shopping behavior, the best marketing opportunities in the stationery field will be for stores selling specialty and luxury items. More and more consumers are turning away from mass merchants and to independent stationery stores for their stationery needs, and this trend is expected to continue in the coming years.

## **1.2 Owning a Stationery Store**

### **1.2.1 Products**

Holding a venerable place in the retail industry for decades, stationery stores experienced many challenges that threatened their existence and ways of doing business in the 1980s and 1990s. Chief among these was the advent of the computer and the way it changed business practices and companies' reliance on office products and stationery stores to supply all of their business communication, forms, and paper needs. Next was the emergence of the superstore and its growing dominance as a

one-stop source for products formerly purchased primarily at smaller office supplies and stationery stores.

In order to survive and prosper, stationery stores had to reinvent themselves—and they did. Today, many stationery stores no longer sell office supplies and products. They sell a vast array of products, from novelty pens and fun wall stickers to fine handcrafted papers and luxurious boxed stationery. The primary products sold in stationery goods include stationery, invitations, announcements, paper, greeting cards, party supplies, gift wrap and packaging goods, and gifts.

The heart of many stationery stores today is not to supply local businesses with all of their office supply needs but to provide both businesses and individuals with products that allow them to communicate and connect with other people. Stationery stores continue to supply companies with business stationery, business cards, and related supplies, but there is a far greater focus on individuals—and a far greater diversity among stationery stores and their targeted markets.

Some stationery stores sell high-end stationery made of the finest materials. They target the most discerning customers who seek the best stationery in the world and are willing to pay the high price such stationery commands. Other stationery stores sell less expensive stationery and a variety of products that allow for personal expression and communication. They may carry journals, note cards, and greeting cards as well as novelties such as word games and decorative photo frames.

Many stationery stores sell items that allow people to celebrate life's special moments—from the small moments such as wishing a person a good day to births, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, romance, and graduation. They sell greeting cards, invitations, and announcements. They may sell party supplies such as tabletop decorations, streamers, and party favors. Other items frequently sold are gift wrap, ribbons, toppers (decorative items to “top” off a wrapped gift), and packaging supplies such as gift bags and boxes.

One of the biggest categories for many independent stationery stores is wedding items. Wedding items include not only the invitations and announcements, but many related accessories such as guest books, pens, wedding albums, photo cards, place cards, picture frames, and framed seating charts. Because weddings are a momentous occasion, many

customers seek a number of items that will help them to make the day special and create memories for years to come.

Stationery stores may target a youthful market looking for fun, off-beat, and funky items or an older market looking for more sophisticated and fine items. In both cases, customers are seeking items that are different than what they would find in a mass market store. They want unique items that allow them to communicate and connect with others in an individual, personalized way. And they want things that are nicer, a bit more special, than what they would find elsewhere.

Products that allow people to express themselves and communicate quickly and without extensive writing are gaining in popularity. Many people love to express themselves through personalized written communication but lack the time and means for lengthy correspondence. Greeting cards and note cards provide the perfect means for these communicators. Sticky notes also are rapidly gaining popularity among the time-challenged communicators.

Current trends in the stationery industry closely follow those in other retail segments, such as fashion and gifts. As with the fashion industry, the most popular colors change with the season. Past seasons have shown popular colors such as bright pink and orange or chocolate and light blue. One year bold prints may be in; the next year subtle intricate designs may be popular.

One trend that has remained constant throughout the past decade has been nature themes. Consumer interest in the environment is high, and this interest is reflected in designs and patterns used in stationery products. In 2008, many stationery items reflected this theme with bird motifs. In years past, flowers were popular. Similarly, animal and nature patterns are popular, although the type of patterns varies from year to year. One year it may be cheetah prints or wood grains. The next it may be zebra prints. Because consumer interests and preferences can fluctuate wildly, it is impossible to predict what specific trends will be popular when you open your store. In order to stay on top of the most current trends, you will want to closely monitor trends through industry publications and trade shows (see sections 2.6.3 and 2.6.5).

## 1.2.2 Services

At one time, stationery stores were the prime place for business and personal printing needs. Business printing included custom forms, letterhead and envelopes, business cards, and other items. Printing for individuals included holiday cards, invitations, and social stationery. With the advent of the computer, the need for these types of printing declined significantly. Yet, as they did with other changes during the 1980s and 1990s, many stationery stores adapted by offering new printing services.

Stationery stores may do in-store printing or send items out to be printed, depending on the printing technology and store resources. Stores that do a significant amount of printing may invest in the equipment for doing the majority of their printing in house, whereas stores that do a limited amount of printing find it more economical to send items to printers.

Printing services allow customers to personalize stationery, greeting cards, invitations, announcements, and other items. Inkjet and laser printing are the most common forms of printing and are used for stationery, envelopes, invitations, announcements, nametags, place cards, certificates, programs, and brochures. Other printing methods are letterpress, thermography, engraving, and offset.

## 1.3 Benefits of Being a Stationery Store Owner

### Financial Rewards

Owning a stationery store can be a fulfilling and rewarding career. In addition to the benefits of working for oneself, it offers financial benefits to owners who work hard and satisfy a market niche. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average annual sales for office supplies and stationery stores are over \$2 million per establishment. Since this figure includes sales of large superstores, it's hard to predict how much an independent stationery store would bring in a year, especially during its early years. Based on Census reports that about 40% of year-round shops have annual sales in the \$100,000 to \$999,999 range, successful stationery store owners can expect lucrative earnings.

## Providing a Needed Product or Service

Many stationery store owners opened their shop because they saw an unmet need in their community and wanted to fill it. Knowing that they are offering the community something of value brings them great pleasure. Terry Clougherty, owner, Carmody & Co., sums this up: ““I opened my store to provide a great product to the customers in my community.” Kristie Lee Wagner, owner, Anjénu, agrees, stating that what she finds most rewarding is “the customers. When someone comes in and finds ‘the perfect card’ it is enough to make my day. I know at that moment I did my job well. When customers walk in and say, ‘This is so cute’ or ‘I love this shop’ it can be so rewarding.”

## Building Relationships

Many store owners derive great satisfaction in developing relationships with customers and employees and seeing the satisfaction of delighted customers. Cathy Zuniga, owner, Paperie & Co., explains that what she finds most rewarding is the enjoyment she has in building relationships with her staff and her customers. She says, “The most rewarding thing for me owning a store is the personal relationships I have developed with my customers. Be it a bride that returns time and again, then becomes a mother and returns time and again and then brings her children in to start them on stationery products, to just a customer searching for a unique and personal gift. Every customer is special to us and we try to insure that is felt in our store.”

## Sharing a Passion for Paper

Several stationery store owners opened their stores because they had a passion for paper and stationery products and wanted to share it with others. Chantal Osborne and Aledia Alonso, stationery designers and co-owners, Stylish Invitations Designs, describe their reasons for opening a stationery store as “we love the art of creating, designing new stationery, the look and feel of paper, and being entrepreneurs.” Cathy Zuniga, owner, Paperie & Co., describes one of the rewards she reaps by owning a stationery store: “I love seeing a bride light up and get excited when she sees her dream come to life.”

## 1.4 Inside This Guide

*The FabJob Guide to Become a Stationery Store Owner* is organized to help take you step-by-step through the basics you will need to open and operate your own store. The chapters are organized as follows:

Chapter 2 (“*Getting Ready*”) explains how to learn the skills you will need as a stationery store owner. It covers ways of learning from experts and through observation, communications, research, and hands-on activities.

Chapter 3 (“*Starting Your Stationery Store*”) will help you decide what kind of store you should open. This chapter discusses different products you can sell and will help you decide whether to buy an existing store, operate a franchise, or open a new store. It also explains what you need to get started, including your business plan, start-up financing, store name, and other important matters.

Chapter 4 (“*Setting Up Your Store*”) offers the information you need to actually set up your store. It gives advice on how to choose a location, get merchandise to sell, and arrange displays. You will also discover what equipment and supplies you will need, and how to find suppliers for obtaining your inventory.

Chapter 5 (“*Running Your Business*”) takes you into the day-to-day challenge of running your store once it’s open. It explains how to develop a procedures manual and an employee handbook, and covers inventory management, financial management and pricing, marketing your business, and working with staff and customers.

Chapter 6 (“*Getting and Keeping Customers*”) tells you ways to build up your customer base and how to keep your customers happy so they keep coming back. It describes ways to promote your shop through advertising, press releases, a website, and other marketing techniques. It describes quality customer service—and how to ensure you are providing it so you keep customers coming back.

By following the steps in this guide, you will be well on your way to living your dream — opening your own successful stationery store.