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Skirting a Home-Decorating Dilemma

We Test Services That Sew to Order; Dressing a Sink

By BETH DECARBO

Let's put it this way: If we were a contestant on "Survivor" challenged to sew a button on a shirt, we would be voted off the island. And hemming a pair of jeans? It's not in our genes.



David M. Russell for The Wall Street Journal

Sew-It-All's swirls

Fear of needles is nearly endemic. The number of American adults who sew has declined by about 29% in the past 10 years, according to Mediamark Research & Intelligence. In a study released this spring, about 7% of adults in the U.S. reported having done general mending or sewn a garment from a pattern in the past six months.

But the Internet is teeming with people who can dart and darn, pinch pleats and pin tack. Custom-sewing services are an option for casual home decorators seeking a special look. These virtual workrooms take orders for a wide range of household items -- duvet covers, bed skirts, pillow shams, curtains and valances -- made from fabric chosen by the customer.

In our case, we wanted a sink skirt for our laundry-room sink to hide the sink's pedestal and plumbing. Sink skirts also can be used to create some extra storage for detergent and other things. We turned to the Internet to find four services that could sew a sink skirt to match the powder-blue walls and fun fabrics in our laundry room.

Our email query to J&M Sewing, in Auburn, N.Y., on a Sunday afternoon was answered within hours, and the owner, Melanie White, directed us to her site where we could order a sink skirt. Using pulldown menus, we noted the width and height of the sink and other specifications (fabric lining; a split in the middle; Velcro tape to affix it to the sink). Fabric options were limited to about a dozen that were in stock, but we had the option to mail in our own fabric. We selected a dog-grooming theme print, entered our credit-card number and placed the order. It couldn't have been simpler.

When the piece arrived about two weeks later, we were thrilled. It was expertly sewn, fit perfectly and even came with laundering instructions. And at \$58.59 for fabric, labor and shipping, it was also the most affordable skirt of the services we tested.

Ms. White says business is bustling because she personally sews each item. "I love to sew," she said from her workroom. "I'm a very creative person, and I'm also very fussy."

The owner of Sew-It-All described her work in the same way: "I love to sew," said Alicia Pucci, a San Francisco Bay-area seamstress and a home-economics teacher who takes on sewing projects of all types as a side job. She generally takes only small jobs and says she sometimes has to turn away work.

Visitors to the Web site (sew-it-all.com) can see Ms. Pucci's work, but functionality like online ordering and pricing guides are lacking. Still, she was very responsive to our email query, asked excellent questions and helped us figure out how much fabric to buy. For somebody who needs help creating a look or describing their project, Ms. Pucci's strong communication skills ensure that the vision matches the reality.

Fabric and notions are purchased separately and shipped to Ms. Pucci's workroom. We mailed her 3½-yards of fabric, along with a photo of the sink and a sketch of the project, with dimensions. We received a gorgeous, perfectly executed sink skirt about three weeks later, along with the leftover fabric. We paid \$65 for labor and shipping (labor is \$50 an hour), so with the \$30 in material, our skirt cost \$95.

The sink-skirt search wasn't entirely seamless, however. Of the four services we contacted, Vogue Fabrics Inc. -- the oldest company and the one with the largest workroom -- gave us the most frustration.

Based in Evanston, Ill., family-owned Vogue is mainly known as a fabric store, offering thousands of prints and styles. Its Web site (voguefabricsstore.com) touts custom services, but an online query sent on the sink skirt seemed to confound everyone at the company. Moses, a helpful representative, called to confirm the description of the project, the dimensions and took our fabric choice. Then we placed the order, or so we thought.

Two weeks later, when we called back for an update, we were told no order had been placed. After being transferred to a number of people and sending a number of emails, we got through to Joan, who told us, "This is the first I'm hearing of this order."

Still, Joan proved to be the go-to person. We gave her the description and dimensions -- the fourth time was a charm -- and she gave us pricing information and took a debit-card deposit. Two weeks later, Joan called to say the skirt was finished and being shipped. It arrived and was sewn according to plan. The cost: \$94.33.

When told of our experience, Charlotte Sussman, a manager at Vogue Fabrics, apologized for the customer-service snags, saying the company is working on implementing a Web-ordering system. "We will be growing so people can fill out a form online and submit it to the store," she says. But for now the best avenue is to make a phone call.

On the plus side, Vogue offers hundreds of fabric swatches to choose from -- and Ms. Sussman says the online selection will be expanded in coming months.

Fabric is the greatest strength of Susan Sargent Designs Inc. The company's colorful, whimsical prints were created by Vermont artist Susan Sargent and are sold in her Manchester store. Visitors to the Web site (susansargent.com) can view swatches online and contact assistant manager Erin Kaukas to detail their custom project and get an estimate. But, like Vogue Fabrics, the final order and billing information are best given over the phone.

The skirt arrived about six weeks after our initial email inquiry -- the longest of the services tested. The piece had been completed earlier, but after inspecting it, Ms. Kaukas was unhappy with the stitching and sent it back to the workroom. "If the stitching isn't perfect, I'm not happy," she says.

This piece was also the most expensive of the skirts, costing \$206 in fabric, labor and shipping. Still, the vibrant colors and geometric designs make this the most visually arresting of the skirts, offering a little personality to our lowly laundry room.

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