

## Marsha Hallet's Story

Written by Angela Newman

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You have probably heard the term 'dress for success' and the importance of what that means. If women want to be seen as confident, intelligent and taken seriously by peers, vendors and customers, it's important to dress the part. However, in today's environment many companies have traded the "power suit" look for the "business casual" look. But what is business casual and how can a professional, executive woman still portray the *dress for success* image?

According to Marsha Hallet, president of Hallet Sweater Art, today's executive woman can find her perfect business casual fashion with her natural fiber alpaca and cashmere sweaters; and if anyone would know, Marsha would. She has been in the textile business for many years and hosts a blog on dressing appropriately and with clothes that flatter individual body shapes.

Marsha said, *"I started knitting as a young girl- inspired by my grandmother who was an expert knitter and prolific producer of sweaters, dresses, scarves, and afghans for our entire family. From the very first pair of mittens she helped me make, I have been infatuated with this craft."* It was only natural that Marsha would take her love for knitting and build a career around it. But before pursuing her passion Marsha worked as a paralegal for several years after graduating from college. It wasn't until she returned to business school to pursue her MBA that she became interested in the apparel industry. She was able to gain knowledge and experience through job opportunities at Levis Strauss and Macys SF before starting her own knitting business.

Her first company was called Bo Peep which sold children's cardigans that looked like animals. Although business was going well, she wanted to know and do more than just knitting itself. Since she always had a desire to visit Machu Picchu in Peru she decided in 1982 to pack her bags and fulfill that dream. Soon thereafter Hallet Handknits was formed, a company that made and sold alpaca sweaters for men and women. They were well known for their patterns that contained intricate non-repeating textures and for intarsia knits with re-embroidery. Not being an avid knitter myself, I decided to look up the word, intarsia knitting which according

to About.com, it is “a knitting color work technique that involves knitting with blocks of color. They can be in any shape or design you like.”

Marsha’s products were featured in prominent catalogs such as Talbot’s, Bullock & Jones, and Paul Stuart and sold in department stores like Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus. The sweaters were also worn by Angela Lansbury and Tim Allen as “seen on TV”. As one can imagine, reaching this level of success was not done easily or overnight. Marsha tells her story and a lesson learned in starting her business. *“When I started Hallet Handknits in 1982, my product was unique in the market. I remember when my first shipment of sweaters arrived and the ones I could not sell to family and friends I sold to Nordstrom’s by driving from San Francisco to Seattle and basically walking in the door with them. Reps also found me at shows and contributed to my success by opening stores like Nordstrom and Talbot’s”*. One of Marsha’s significant relationships was with Talbot’s. She worked with them for eight years producing private label merchandise for their stores and catalog. While building her business through private label sales, she learned how to make a better product from the Talbot organization.

*“Hallet Handknits was successful for almost 26 years. In the last few years our business started to decline because of our price point, because a major customer decided not to use our product, and because many small traditional stores that bought the product closed. The hard lessons I learned were: 1) my concentration on private label business meant that I did not have a recognizable brand 2) my look had not kept current with market trends and 3) I did not have personal relationships with enough customers.”*

Marsha realized that Hallet Handknits had run its course at just the right time so she changed direction with a new name and new products with the launch of Hallet Sweater Art in 2009. *“The new name reflects a new direction, art inspired optical illusion slimming sweaters. It also reflects an effort to correct the problems that lead to the closure of Hallet Handknits. I still specialize in luxury fibers and intarsia knitting, but I have changed to lighter yarns and hand-loomed sweaters that have lower costs and a modern look.”* The new sweaters are lightweight and wholesale for about 25% less than the Hallet Handknit products but in today’s economy starting a wholesale/retail apparel business has been a trial for Marsha and possibly her most significant career challenge. She says, *“Business has really changed. Today, you need a great story and fantastic marketing effort.”* There is no doubt that Marsha Hallet’s Sweater Art business will be a success! After all she is a very persistent entrepreneur

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with 26 years of business experience. She attributes her success thus far to hard work, being in the right place at the right time and having luck on her side.

*“Hallet Sweater Art wants to lead the way in powerful feminine work attire.”*



Picture of Marsha Hallet and her suppliers in Inner Mongolia.

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You can see Marsha’s beautiful cashmere sweaters on her website at [www.sweaterart.com](http://www.sweaterart.com)  
You can learn how to dress business casual by reading her blog at <http://sweaterart.com/blog.php>  
Marsha can be contacted at [marshahallet@gmail.com](mailto:marshahallet@gmail.com) and would love to hear from you.