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Custom Vs. Catalog Costumes

Written by Deborah Nelson

Custom versus catalog dance costumes is like comparing apples to oranges. There are good reasons for both options.

Dance costume catalog companies provide a service for mass-produced costumes that are inexpensive, and are marketed towards all the mom-and-pop dance studios that specialize in lessons for our kids, with their dance recital at the end of the season. Synchronicity is important, hence, the reason for all dancers wearing the same costume.

These are all the students where dance is a hobby, an activity to create a well-rounded childhood experience. They don't live and breathe dance. Dance is one fun part of their life. They probably also play soccer, participate in a school musical and/or work on the science fair.

All studios strive to keep their costs down, so parents can afford to pay for these costumes, in addition to the dance shoes and lessons. Most studios simply hope that the costumes that they choose, last through the class pictures, dress rehearsals and the recital performances. They hope all the costumes fit the dancers, and add a positive visual to their recital numbers. They don't want mix-ups or missed delivery dates. Uniqueness is not necessary.

Costume manufacturers are able to keep the costs for their garments down, because they can divide the costs for pattern development among hundreds or thousands of costumes, all of the same style. Mass production. They are able to get the best prices for the fabrics and trims, when they are able to buy in bulk. It is the same principle where huge companies such as Wal-Mart or similar stores can price goods lower, as they are able to make deals to purchase more of an item, and get it for less, which is passed on to customers. The big costume manufactures are able to do the same.

Once dancers are beyond the simple recital level lessons, and sign up for, or win a spot on a competitive line, studio personnel should strive for a more unique style, for their costuming. Now it is time to move beyond the catalogs. When you are competing against other dance studio lines, you want a competitive edge with costumes that are eye-catching and unique.

What are your unique costume options? Some dance studios work with the catalog companies to try to have them customize a costume. Remember that they are not set up to easily do this. They are set up for mass-producing costumes. Another option would be to work with (usually smaller) companies that may have a catalog, but also "customize" styles. This means that they are not adverse to making some minimal changes to their stock patterns/styles, such as using a top of one style and a bottom of another, or simply using a different fabric for an already existing style. "Customization" only adds minimal cost to the original style, mostly in "retooling" the manufacturing, with alternate fabrics, trims and notions.

Remember that this is not true "custom" design. True custom design is when a style/pattern is developed for you. It is much more expensive for custom design. The reason? Because of all the patternmaking and development time that is involved, plus the cost involved in purchasing fabrics for only a minimal of costumes.

Who offers custom designed dance costumes? Many competitive dance studios choose to work with local dressmakers or custom costume makers, or simply work with amateur sewing studio parents. Most of these options may not have the professional draping and patternmaking skills, nor expert fitting skills that a professional, custom design company, such as Satin Stitches Ltd. has. The trade-off is that if you are not paying a business, but are using bartered labor or inexpensive labor fees.

What is involved in the custom creation of costumes? You need a company or various individuals that have the following talents:

- Styling & Design - the ability to put together pleasing color combinations, fabric and trim combinations and have the esthetics of what styling features are suitable for your performance.

Deborah Nelson
To better serve our dance costume clients, in our current economy, Satin Stitches has added a service that can address your costume budget as well as your need for drama-free costume creation, with our new "Simply SEW! Service". We will help you with the design, create the patterns and sizing, and cut your costumes. You save money by providing the sewing and trimming part of the process. Check out our website, www.satinstitches.com

- Draping & Patternmaking – the ability to create the patterns for the styling designs that you want for your costumes.
- Fabric & Trim Sourcing – the ability to find suitable sources for all the material needed for producing your costumes.
- Sizing & Cutting – the ability to choose & create the proper sizes that you need, and be able to cut the differently proportioned costumes to fit all your dancers.
- Sewing – the ability and the proper sewing machines to be able to properly sew all the different types of performance fabrics and trims for your costumes.
- Trimming – the ability to choose and create attractive trim options that are suitable for your costumes' needs.
- Fitting – the ability to make adjustments to costumes, once they are made, to get them to fit your dancers properly.

These are all the things you need to consider when you are choosing your options for creating custom designed dance costumes. All these talents are necessary, or you will have problems. And headaches. Maybe you, yourself feel you have the knack and experience to cover the styling and design, fabric and trim sourcing, and maybe the trimming. Maybe you have local seamstresses or talented sewing moms that can cut, sew, trim and maybe fit, at least do a pretty good job with these tasks. But the actual draping, patternmaking and sizing might be a stretch for most non-professional costumers.

If you want to eliminate the headaches of trial and error patternmaking and designing and fitting – you really should be working with a professional costume manufacturer. Isn't your job to run a studio and make sure that your competitive dance groups are wearing costumes that fit the dancers and the routine, and will last through your season? Leave the actual costume making to professional costume makers!

How do you choose a professional, custom costume manufacturer? As with any company that you plan to work with, you need to feel comfortable with them. You need to know something about the company. What do you need to know?

- How long have they been in business?
- How long have they been creating custom costumes?
- Do they have professional designers on their staff?
- Do you interact with the designers, to work out your styles?
- Does this company have a good reputation?

When you step up to the next level of competition, you need to step up to the next level of costuming. Catalogs are great for costuming the masses. If you want your dance group to stand out, in every way, you need unique, custom costuming. If you want drama-free costuming, consider using professional costumers, rather than leaving it to the nonprofessionals.

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