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CHARLOTTE SOUTHERN/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

LIFETIME COMMITMENT: Catherine Fox Milian's family-owned Bridal salon, Chic Parisien, is celebrating its 40th anniversary. Milian keeps inventory "fresh" by obtaining exclusive collections by sought-after designers and traveling regularly to the world's fashion hotspots.

THE SECRETS OF LONGEVITY

Many lessons can be learned from three South Florida firms that have thrived for decades

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In 2009 two Miami businesses reached milestones often unseen on an ever-changing commercial landscape.

Bridal salon Chic Parisien, which draws brides from as far away as South America, England and across the United States, celebrated its 40th anniversary. So did CPAs Morrison, Brown, Argiz & Farra, one of the largest independent public accounting

firms in the state.

Both say their longevity stems from offering personal service and well-honed reputations.

"In a rapidly growing area, you won't find a lot of businesses reaching a 40th anniversary," said David Denslow, a research economist at the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida.

It's even less likely in a family-owned enterprise as future generations often don't possess

the same skills or ambitions as the company's founder, he said.

Catherine Fox Milian grew up in the bridal boutique she now owns. As a 12-year-old, she spent her Saturdays sewing gowns when Chic Parisien was owned by her mom, Frances Fox, whose own mother had started the company in 1969. Though it was never part of Milian's life plan, at age 20 the English lit major bought out her mother's interest in the company.

Over the next 15 years she learned how "it's not just selling a pretty dress. There's a lot of different facets of the business."

Buying the right collections is crucial. Sample dresses shown to perspective brides cost thousands and are owned by the shop so making sound investments is important. Milian keeps inventory "fresh" by obtaining exclusive collections by sought-after designers such as Marchesa, Monique Lhuillier, Rosa Clara

and several other top houses. She travels regularly to New York and Spain to view the latest and greatest and buys what her gut dictates rather than going only by budget, trends and associates' opinions.

Top designer gowns generally run from \$5,000 to \$7,000. The national industry average is about \$600 a dress, Milian says. But, "you'd be surprised at the

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people who buy big ticket dresses." She describes the big-spending bride as not at all necessarily well heeled, but rather "the romantic girl who has dreamed about her wedding since she was 5 years old."

Milian says she has a little turnover in staff, which includes a seamstress who's worked at the shop for 35 years. But negative comments quickly turn up on an Internet search with adjectives including "snobby" and "uncaring" used to describe the attitude of sales associates.

"I have seen them and they're hurtful to read," said Milian who also cites the thank you cards she's received from satisfied clients. "Whenever I see one of those, [poor Internet reviews] I try to address each one individually. If somebody calls me, I'll help them personally, do whatever I can to get that bad taste out of their mouth."

Revenues in 2008 fell by 8 percent from 2007. To keep sales from stagnating in this shaky economy Milian's inventory includes designer "bridge" gowns with price tags ranging from \$2,500 to \$4,000. Lower prices have not redefined the type of Chic Parisien's clients — it just makes it easier to own that designer label. However, brides are taking longer to commit to dresses, Milian says.

A hands-on owner, she spends weekdays running operations in the shop. When the weekends roll around, she finds it hard to disconnect. On Monday she's excited to go back.

"The number one key is loving what you do," she said. "When I get involved with a customer, when we match her with the right dress, it's very fulfilling."