

Maria Erickson

Bette & Court founder is giving women golfers a reason to buy



Maria Erickson designs her apparel with fit and comfort in mind.

Armed with an MBA from Harvard's Wharton School of Business, Maria Erickson thought when she graduated that she was headed for a career on Wall Street. "I never imagined," says the CEO of Bette and Court, one of golf's most successful brands, "that I'd end up in the rag business!"

Erickson did work on Wall Street for a short time. Then, she moved to Florida to help her mother with her business. She began playing golf and fell in love with the sport, but found there were not many options when it came to women's golf apparel.

"For the longest time, all you could find were three-button polos in different colors. Maybe there was a little different texture in the fabric, but that was it," says Erickson. "Once you have several of those sitting in your closet, there's really no reason to go out and buy another one. I thought, if you could offer a woman something she doesn't already own, you'd be giving her a reason to buy."

The idea took hold, and Erickson founded Bette and Court in 1991. "I thought, how hard can it be to make golf apparel?" laughs Erickson. "I was very naïve, and thought it was going to be easy. Sometimes I think that was a good thing, because I probably wouldn't have done it if I had known what was in store!"

Because golf tends to appeal to women who have both the time and money to spare, the majority of Erickson's customers fall in the 35-65 age range. While that demographic hasn't changed, Erickson says, what her customers want in terms of fashionable golf apparel has evolved. "Today's 50 year old woman dresses very differently than

a 50 year old woman dressed 15 years ago,” says Erickson. “So what we’re offering is a more youthful, athletic, performance-driven type of apparel. It’s a contemporary look and style, without being too clingy or young.”

She adds that, “We’re making sure that we honor the fact that our bodies are not 20 year old bodies anymore, even though we’re fitter and taking better care of ourselves. Some of these young women on the LPGA are wearing skin-tight clothes, and it looks flattering on them because they’re a size four and haven’t had any kids yet!”

Creating a buzz in golf retail

Erickson says that one of the conundrums that has plagued the golf apparel industry is that many pro shops are reluctant to stock a wide variety of women’s styles, for fear they won’t sell and they’ll be stuck with the merchandise. As a result, women can’t find the styles and sizes they want, so they don’t buy the clothes. The resulting perception is that there is little market for women’s golf apparel.

Bette and Court tackled the problem with its new “Buzz” campaign, which is designed to give retailers more flexibility in the styles they carry. First, the company designed its fashion collection around what it calls ‘Essential’ colors, which include basic black, khaki, stone, red and navy. This makes it easy for customers to mix and match individual pieces with clothes they already own, rather than forcing them to buy an entire outfit. “Women like the fit and the fabrication of our pieces, which makes it very easy for them to buy,” says Erickson. “Once you find something that fits, you can get it in four or five different colors.”

Secondly, the company introduced its “Bottoms-Out” program, which allows retailers to try out different colors and styles of bottoms, such as shorts, skorts and capris. If one style doesn’t sell, the retailer can then swap it out for other pieces. “It has worked very well,” says Erickson, “because the Buzz is, we carry 50% of your risk.” Since the campaign was introduced, Erickson says the company has opened over 500 new accounts.

“The great thing is, we’re not scared anymore as women to wear something that doesn’t look like a man’s outfit—whether that’s in the boardroom or on the golf course.”

Evolution is critical

Erickson says her philosophy for the company is to continually evolve. “We’re always challenging ourselves to grow and evolve the product line, because the minute you stand still, that’s when you start losing momentum.” In that spirit, the company is introducing another innovation this September with its Swing by Bette and Court brand, a new line of performance-driven sportswear.

“It’s for the customer who loves her Bette and Court outfits, but would like to have something that’s a little more athletic,” says Erickson. “To the degree that we can, we’re trying to incorporate that performance element, because it is a sport, and when you play golf, you are exposed to the elements. So the shirts have properties like moisture wicking and UV protection, the jackets have insulated mesh

and are water repellant, and the shorts have utility pockets.”

In fact, Erickson says she often finds inspiration for her designs in other sports, such as hiking, swimming, yoga and cycling. “My husband is a cyclist, and he has these little pockets inside his shorts where he can carry his keys and other stuff. We took that idea and added it our shorts to give women a place to discreetly carry her things.”

With new innovations in fabrics, Erickson says the combination of variables has grown exponentially, giving women more options than ever. “The whole industry is much more fashion-driven,” she observes. “The great thing is, we’re not scared anymore as women to wear something that doesn’t look like a man’s outfit—whether that’s in the boardroom or on the golf course. We feel like we can have our own feminine style, and that doesn’t detract from our ability as players or as professionals.”

Championing women’s golf

In the future, Erickson plans to continue to grow her company, and women’s golf in general. As the longest-running sponsor of the Executive Women’s Golf Association, her support for women’s role in the game is strong. “I want to continue working to help promote golf, through EWGA and junior programs, especially with girls,” says Erickson. “I’ve always been a sports enthusiast. I grew up before Title IX, so I didn’t have that kind of support. Through my business, I want to be able to give something back.”

Erickson also plans to continue to grow personally. “I started playing soccer at 40!” she laughs. “I’ll play until I can’t play anymore. It’s all a state of mind.” 