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Material Things

James and Ewa Powell scored the perfect business model: improve an industry, benefit its consumers, and even help the environment, all while doing something they love

James and Ewa Powell of South End's Modern Fabrics scoop up the excess fabric from furniture manufacturers. The result: exclusive designer fabric from lines such as Kravet, Knoll, Maharam, and Designtex for 50 to 75 percent below the net or wholesale price.



A match made in material heaven: meet Ewa Powell, a graphic designer, and her husband, James, a former commercial interior designer who specializes in fabric and furniture. Their company, Modern Fabrics, rescues designer fabrics that are destined for the landfill and sells them to consumers at discounted prices. "We're able to turn fabric around and pass the savings on to customers, who get rates 50 to 75 percent below the net or wholesale price," says James. "It's still not cheap—but it's a lot cheaper than what you would normally pay for these great fabrics."

Just a few years ago, Modern Fabrics began partnering with several regional contract furniture companies who make customized furniture for places like hotels, malls, offices, and banks. The relationship: after furniture is designed and fitted for a project by said companies, Modern Fabrics buys the unused raw materials. "The manufacturer always overestimates, and about 30 to 40 percent of the fabric becomes industrial waste. We've carved out the business solely on reclaiming and collecting on that estimate," says Powell.

Modern Fabrics carries fun and fancy fabrics from reputable manufacturers like Knoll, Maharam, Designtex, and Kravet—fabrics that are difficult to pick up as a general consumer, especially at a discounted price, without having to go through an interior designer or architect. Different from residential furniture textiles, these materials are a higher quality and more durable. Also, the designs are usually more contemporary.

Though the majority of sales stems from their Web site, modern-fabrics.com, which has been live since 2007, customers can now walk through their 8,000-square-foot retail shop in South End. The stock, which changes on a regular basis, ranges from small scraps to thirty- to fifty-yard pieces. "We are constantly getting new fabrics—there is no way we can immediately get them all on the Web site," says Powell. Since starting the business, the couple, each thirty-three years old, estimates they have diverted tens of thousands of yards of fabric from regional landfills.

"The patterns push the envelope a little bit," adds Powell. "Typically, Charlotte is more conservative and traditional; people are used to a certain neutral color palette. But more and more people want something fresh, something bold. Charlotte is definitely becoming more open to international design." —Amy Strauss