

Too Much Information (Updated)

(This article was updated 2/2008. For more information please see [The Embroiderer Strikes Back.](#))

The men in my life suffer from TMI syndrome. Ask them a simple question and the gears in their heads begin clicking away and before you know it, they've expounded for 20 minutes on the form and substance of white bread. You wanted to know if they would like a sandwich.

This little "tick" of theirs drives me a wee bit batty at times. While I like a good yarn and enjoy telling stories, when I ask a question, I sorta want an answer. Today. God help me if I need to purchase anything more expensive than say, a new sweater. Which, incidentally, is when the penchant for verbosity dries up completely. I say, "So, which one of these sweaters should I get?" I hear, "Um... what? Sweaters? Why are you looking at sweaters?" However, if the object of my affection has any moving parts to it, this much I know: be prepared to be inundated with facts and information. Most of which, I could care less about.

And sometimes, they put this stuff in writing. They won't shut up. And it's not enough to point at the thing I want and jump up and down and shout, "That one! I want that one!" Because, even that move will set them off hunting for "more information." Should you ever wonder when enough is enough... the answer is, NEVER.

I'm not complaining, mind you. Not really. The end result is I tend to get the best there is to offer in my particular price range. No one can claim that the gifts aren't "well thought out"! But, really... there are moments when the information gathering and expounding is just overkill, and I find myself wondering what it would be like to be deaf. And blind.

In case you were looking to buy a sewing machine and are not blessed with boys who suffer from TMI syndrome in your life... my husband has oh, so, graciously typed up his "findings" for you to peruse. His report, which I might add is exactly the kind of thing Consumer Reports likes to publish, is posted after the jump. If not... Click on the "Read More" link with this warning: I told you it was too much information!

Chapter 2

I'm a techno geek perfectly able to sit in front of any computer (Mac, Windows, Linux) and get it to do whatever I want. I can tell you what brands are good, what should be avoided, and how to get the biggest bang for your buck.

But I'm a guy and my sewing experience is limited to making a pair of sweats in home-ec in Jr. High. Unlike in the computer world where we have computer magazines galore with head-to-head testing to help "regular" folks pick a good machine – there is a dearth of such information for Sewing Machines. The more I explored the more I felt I was caught in some twisted alternate reality where Warlords and secret societies were running the world. (Actually, upon reflection, there's probably more truth in this statement – but that's a different post for another time...)

As I mentioned before, I consulted with the all knowing, all seeing Internet to get a feeling for what was out there. This is where I got my first taste of brands to buy and brands to avoid. I found some *limited* pricing but not enough.

I called around to some local stores to see what they had to say. I learned very quickly to ask for in-house technician. This is important for several reasons

1. Techs see the insides of the machine and handle the repairs – if anyone knows what is reliable and what's not – it is a tech.
2. You want to buy from a dealer that has an in-house tech. NEVER deal with someone that has to send the machine out or where they have a freelance tech for hire that makes rounds between multiple stores.

These wizards of sewing mechanics were able to give me important, almost secret information about sewing machines and some of this stuff is just enough to really make a person sit and think.

Singer is a brand whose time came and went. All the way up to the 70's they were considered a truly great machine. Things began to turn for them and by the late 80's their reputation for quality had begun to slide. They were acquired by a fellow and his holding company out of Hong Kong who pushed them to serve a "low-end" volume market. Then that company was hit with its own financial break down. Eventually ownership of Singer moved to a U. S. based private equity company called Kohlberg who has been pushing the company to get better. Still, in the grand scheme of things Singer is simply not a brand to consider.

What does this matter? Everyone knows this, right? It gets better...

I then inquired about Baby Lock. They are well known for making excellent sergers and they seemed to have a decent array of machines. Everyone I spoke with loved their Baby Lock and they had a price point that was lower than the Viking, Pfaff, Bernina's of the world. Still, as I consulted with the great oracle as I talked with the Wizard of Baby Lock – I found that Baby Locks looked identical to Brother. In fact, they are both manufactured at the same factories in Japan, Taiwan, etc.

But don't be misled. Brother has two distinct lines. One line they share with the Big Box Marts of the world while the others are sold through dealerships. So, while some Brothers are indeed identical to Baby Locks, others aren't. Next time you are comparison shopping and see Brother on sale at Big Box Mart and think you are getting a similar machine that the dealer has for less (perhaps they look similar but have different model numbers) – think again! In fact, if you could take what appear to be similar machines and put them on a scale – the "nice" Brothers would outweigh the "Big Box Mart" Brothers (a sign of quality in the sewing world) by several factors.

(It was at this moment I had a flash back to a bygone era where we used the same method to measure the quality of a VCR. Back in the days before VCR's could be picked up for \$49.95 (or less) one well respected method of determining machine quality was to weigh them. Usually the heavier machine used more reliable parts – less plastic, better motors – and would last much longer. I was happy that I could resurrect this measure of quality when comparing sewing machines.)

I have to admit – I liked the Baby Locks – and everyone I spoke with did too. There were, however, some niggling complaints about little details that didn't quite always work right. Not enough that the owners didn't love their machines but enough that I decided to continue on my search.

Remembering Elna as one of the "beloved" brands I set out to find as much information as I could on this seemingly magical brand...

Chapter 3

Having recovered from the surprise revelation that Brother and Baby Lock were twins separated at birth but somehow fathered by different men and therefore being of a completely different internal structure, I began my search for a Seer of Elna to learn more about what made this brand so special. (HOW did I find myself in a soap opera? Let's continue with this episode of "As the Bobbin Turns".)

For you Elna lovers out there, what I found may surprise you. It may shock you. If you can't handle the truth, walk away now. I mean it. It is SCARY. Then again, you may not care! Elna, as it turns out, is not Elna at all. If you've fainted I'm sorry. Didn't mean to do that do you.

Yes it is true that 20 years ago or perhaps even 10 – Elna was a manufacturer of superb machines. But then they discovered outsourcing. Soon, a machine that used to be built in Europe was being made in Japan (and surrounding regions). Elna couldn't keep up and eventually sold itself to the company they had outsourced manufacturing to... Juki and Janome.

Who is this Juki? Well they make all manner of machines for lots of different players. Here's the point – there are Singers that have the exact same innards as Elnas. Janome? Well, they are a powerhouse holding company headquartered in Japan. Janome also makes a bit of something for nearly everyone including Kenmore, etc. That's right – beloved Elnas come out of the *same* factories as Kenmores and others. At some point in time Janome decided to simply acquire Elna.

Because of the nature of contracts – even though Elna is now owned by Janome, some machines are still being manufactured by Juki. So, some Elnas may be identical twins to Janome but some Elnas may also be twins to Singer, Kenmore, Etc. When Janome and Elna are identical it is truly down to everything internal. Thus when you buy an Elna at this level you are truly buying a Janome. This was confirmed by multiple Seers and Wizards of Sewingdom who actually do the repairs on the machines. There *is* a difference in software between the two machines, with Janome generally giving the edge to itself on the feature set. Did I mention you pay less for the Janome than for the Elna? (Check out the Janome HF8100 and compare it to the Elna 8007. They are identical... and not just on the outsides... again confirmed by multiple technicians that actually work on the machines.) I cringe every time I think about it. Janome is taking advantage of Elna brand loyalty by getting people to pay more for the exact same machine. The skins are slightly different, but the insides tell the whole story.

Janomes are of a similar quality level as the Baby Locks (depending on the model) but I was looking for something superior to this level. Since Elna = Janome, Elna's by proxy were off my list.

I decided to keep looking in the “upscale” brands. I spoke with someone who was offering a special “deal” on a Pfaff. Time to look seriously at this stalwart of European craftsmanship and German engineering.

Indeed, if you are a member of the Order of Quilters you probably should get a Pfaff if you don't have one. They are rock solid. They go forever. They have the IDT. (Sound of the screeching record inserted here.) What? The What?

Don't ask me what it stands for. I haven't figured out the acronym yet. But this thing is slick. The fabric literally feeds from the top and bottom at the same time regardless of stitch or of the stitch length or width. The result is no fabric slippage. Don't let the other wizards fool you. The IDT is very different than the typical walking foot. Why? Because a walking foot moves with a needle. The IDT moves the upper foot with the dog teeth yielding a far superior quilting stitch. Plus because of its location, it provides more clearance than a traditional walking foot. But buyers beware... you see Pfaffs are also notoriously complex and not a very good “learning” machine. Also, if you aren't a quilter and aren't used to the concept of the IDT – they can actually get in the way. IDT is something that you should experience for yourself to see if it would be useful – but if you are a quilter – you will likely fall in love with it.

This is where things get interesting again. As I spoke with this particular conjurer of Pfaff-craft he began to deride Vikings. “Oh, they are OK I guess but I wouldn't rep them.” (He sold Pfaffs and Berninas). This stuck in my mind. Still the deal on the Pfaff was attractive and one that I found particularly interesting.

I did inquire about the Berninas. Everyone I read that had one loved it. Berninas are still made by Bernina. They do outsource some of their production to a third party but aren't owned by anyone else. They are the Monaco of Sewing. Small, exclusive, expensive. And this is just it – Berninas make Pfaffs seem almost affordable. That's saying something! To procure a Bernina with even a half-way decent set of features and stitches will set one back roughly \$4,000. Too rich for my blood. End of conversation. Moving On...

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Chapter 4

Buying a sewing machine is *not* an event for the faint of heart. If you think getting a computer is bad, you don't know a thing until you look at sewing machines. Brother makes Babylock – but even though they look the same, they are entirely different on the insides. Janome makes Elna (and White and Kenmore and others). Although the Janome and the Elna may look different on the outside, they share the same insides except that Janomes get the better software

and cost less than the Elnas. Pfaff sounds really good and Bernina – well we can't even go there as Berninas are the Rolls Royce of sewing machines.

My final task in my quest was to uncover the secret of the vikings. Viking Husqvarna makes its machines in Sweeden. They are known for a quiet motor and longevity. In fact, they use special mechanics that require no lubrication for the life of the machine. Now, Baby Lock, Janome, Pfaff will all tell you the same thing – but that's only for "users". In other words you as the user of the machine will never oil it... but when you take it in for servicing – it will be oiled. Not so for the Vikings. And how does this impact your sewing? With a Viking you'll never ever have a problem with oil coming onto your fabric from either self-maintenance or when you take the machine in.

As I began to examine the Viking line I learned very quickly that you want something in their Platinum series. These machines use the same motors and guts as Viking industrial machines. A Platinum Viking is very different than the machines in the lower end of their series.

As I investigated Vikings I learned something about Pfaff along the way. You see – Viking makes Pfaff.

Several years ago there was a fire at the Pfaff factory. They needed a place to go. Viking offered Pfaff their manufacturing facilities. Then Viking simply acquired Pfaff. HOWEVER, because of capacity issues, Viking decided to move Pfaff manufacturing so it no longer takes place in Sweeden. Instead, Viking moved some of its manufacturing to Eastern Europe and put Pfaff there.

All of this to say that the conjurer of Pfaff-craft mentioned earlier in Part 3 of my story misrepresented his form of magic when he derided Vikings and said he wouldn't rep them. By selling Pfaff he was selling Viking – and not Viking from Sweeden but Viking from the Czech Republic. Don't get me wrong. Pfaff is still known for quality and being a workhorse. But they aren't nearly as set aside and special as a Pfaff dealer will have you believe.

Viking has worked to preserve Pfaff as its own distinct line. Even though Viking owns Pfaff and manufactures Pfaff – they don't seem to share technology or software. Pfaffs keep their IDT and are notoriously difficult to learn to use. Vikings focus on reliability, features, and easy of use – but don't get the IDT. (As an aside, it appears that Janome has a patent busting mechanism of their own that they've just introduced on one of their upper end machines that works in a very similar manner to the IDT.)

But, I learned yet another secret... guess who just bought Viking?

Remember that holding company I told you about that owns Singer? Well, they just acquired Viking / Pfaff. The deal apparently just went through at the end of 2006. Terms of the deal are such that Viking and Pfaff will retain their own heritage and their own manufacturing. If anything, the creation of the "SVP Group" (Singer – Viking – Pfaff) will do nothing but benefit Singer as they take advantage of Viking / Pfaff's manufacturing and quality control capabilities... but the benefits of such a marriage are a long way off as Singer still has existing contracts with outsourced manufacturers that won't expire for some time.

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Chapter 5

In the realm of sewing we've learned there are two competing empires. Janome vs. the SVP Group. As I mentioned Bernina is its own fiefdom that serves the "royalty" of seamstresses and tailors. (Anyone that can plunk down \$4,000 to \$8,000 for a machine is royalty in my book.) NOTE: Bernina *does* outsource some manufacturing. Juki is rumored to have made a Bernina serger and Brother has made at least one embroidery machine...

The bottom line is that the lineage of sewing machines is so convoluted it is difficult to really know what you are getting. Making matters worse is that these companies have morphed and changed and had new owners over time so it is difficult to get a real fix on who's who. I've also found that many people who claim to be in the know simply aren't so don't trust what you read in many posts across the Internet. The information I've provided has been verified by at

least three sources in each instance and has been verified by consulting directly with the parent companies of these various machines.

As such, the “pecking order” of machines based on who owns whom and manufacturing / quality controls REGARDLESS of what you feel about branding is something akin to as follows:

Bernina

Viking / Pfaff

Janome / “Upper End” Brother / Baby Lock

Elna / “Big Box Mart” Brother / Singer / White

There are some exceptions to this, however. Both Viking and Pfaff have an “inexpensive” line. These bear the name of the Viking Huskystar or the Pfaff Smart. If you are going to buy one of these, you might as well go the Janome / Baby Lock / Upper-end0 Brother route because neither th Huskystar or Smart have anything to do with the companies that bear their name. These are outsourced machines for Viking / Pfaff. From a quality and price standpoint the Janome / Upper-end Brother / Baby Lock will be better choices.

Juki is difficult to classify because their machines run the gambit between what are great and what are less so. There are plenty of other great machines so my rule of thumb is to just avoid Juki.

And herein lies the truth for purchasing a sewing machine: In general, if you are looking at spending \$1,000 or more, the likelihood of getting a decent machine regardless of brand goes up significantly compared to if you spend less. But buyer beware. If you are looking at Baby Lock vs. Brother – look closely – Brother might be the way to go. If you are looking at Elna vs. Janome – get the Janome. But BE SURE you are comparing machines of similar features. Low end Janomes are no better than Singers or Whites. The Viking Huskystar or Pfaff Smart is no better than a Baby Lock or Janome of equal caliber. See how messy this gets? Likewise, the kind of machine you get will vary depending on the feature set you are pinning for. A quilter will really appreciate the IDT in a Pfaff. A hardcore sewer will appreciate the quiet and strength of a Viking motor. If you are squeezed on budget but need a machine with cutting edge technical gadgetry like being able to embroider – a Baby Lock or Upper-end Brother offers a lot of bang for the buck.

Having talked with a wide range of seers and wizards of Sewingdom I was armed with the manufacturer and machine I thought Wende would enjoy the most based on her needs. I next had to find where to get it. Out of the frying pan – into the fire.

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Chapter 6

This is beginning to feel like the never ending story. I’ve invested oh so many hours in this process and I hope that the time I’ve spent will benefit someone else in their search. My simple summary of my experience thus far is that if you are buying a sewing machine, plan for a budget above \$1000 and find the machine that fits your needs. Understand that there are good brands vs. bad brands but also understand that buying a machine out of brand loyalty alone is not enough in today’s global manufacturing environment.

So next comes where to buy the machine... welcome to the world of the Sewing Warlords. You would think that with such stores as Big Box Mart the little guys would go out of business. However the Sewing Warlords take an almost ninja like approach to dealing with this problem.

Case in point – one such dealer used to sell Baby Lock. Remember that Baby Lock is made by Brother and they both are almost identical on the outside but there are two levels of quality in Brothers. Unfortunately people don’t get educated, assume all Brothers are identical on the insides and go to Big Box Mart and buy the Brother. In case you haven’t noticed – Big Box Mart doesn’t have its own staff of support people. When you need your machine serviced or fixed – guess where you are going to go? To said dealer. The dealer I spoke with ran the numbers and figured they

would make MORE money by NOT selling either Brothers or Baby Locks. Instead they refer people over to Big Box Mart looking in the given Brother price range because the lower-end Brothers break down more frequently. Furthermore, because the dealer didn't sell the Brother hey have no problem charging big \$ to fix the Brother. The dealer ends up with two less brands to support and in the process increases their bottom line through very lucrative repairs.

And here is an interesting little "truth" in the world of sewing machines. You see – the manufacturers may offer a warranty – but it is up to the dealer network to carry out warranty service. Manufacturers do not reimburse dealers for any labor on any warranty service. Thus if I'm a Viking dealer but you didn't buy your Viking from me – I have no incentive to service your machine under the warranty because I didn't make the money on the sale of the machine... I can even refuse to offer you service.

Such is the case for poor souls who bought Vikings from JoAnn's. (AKA "The Devil"). JoAnn's doesn't offer in-house technicians and at best only offer "drive by" techs that make their rounds between stores and are generally not considered to be the most reliable or knowledgeable tech folks in the industry. In Portland, Oregon JoAnn's will send you over to their local competition for service. Said local competition is not required by the manufacturer to honor the warranty since the machine was purchased at JoAnn's regardless of what JoAnn's promised.

The moral of this tale is that Big Box Mart or JoAnn's might seem cheaper but you'll pay for it in the long run by a lack of support and likely a much lower quality machine.

Support is the key here. If you've been sewing a while and if your machine is push button easy – needing the availability of a local dealer for lessons is diminished. But if you go out and buy a machine like a Pfaff or a Bernina – you better be sure you've got someone you can trust that can help you out in a pinch.

You *can* typically find machines for sale via the Internet but be careful. *ALL* manufacturers require that any model which is sold via the Internet must be a discontinued / closeout / factory serviced model. Some manufacturers have banned internet sales altogether. This is interesting because the machine may be "new in box" but it may have been sitting around unused for two or three years. I don't care what kind of machine we are discussing – be it a sewing machine or car – they don't like sitting unused out of the factory for such a long period of time. Your chances of required warranty repair are likely to go up. All this to say that if you do go this route – be sure you again purchase from a reputable dealer that has been around a good long time and be sure that even though the machine is being closed out it is a fairly new machine.

Many dealers include an extended warranty as an added bonus for staying local. I consider such dealers as Benevolent Warlords. For example – a typical servicing of a machine will cost about \$100. If you get a 3 year extended warranty and if that warranty includes an annual maintenance – that's a \$300 value. I know of a Baby Lock dealer here that backs everything up with a 3 year warranty of this kind. He has such confidence in his machines he'll do parts and labor and maintenance for 3 years. That says a lot.

Warlords assume you will be fearful of their status and that you will just walk in and buy a machine at whatever their asking price is. They are counting on the intimidation factor to work in their favor. Some will have "sales" but these are typically reflected of price reductions passed from the factory to the dealer network – so watch out – rarely to the dealer Warlords do a deal that isn't good for them.

As I called around I made it a point to ask for MSRP on the machines. Usually I found that pricing was similar but in a few cases the dealers gave a price that was significantly higher than the others for MSRP. Run away from those dealers. They are inflating those MSRP numbers to make it look like that 40% off the machine is a good deal. That's a technique of an evil Warlord and you should get out of their space as fast as possible.

I also really enjoyed one fellow who would lower his price by \$50 every time I called and would say in a whisper, "That's an incredible deal – you have to promise me that you won't tell anyone else – I can't afford to do this for everyone but for you I will..." Oh PLEASE! Again, sleazy, sleazy Warlord there. Trying to use manipulation as a

method for getting me to deal with them. In his case his pricing was \$300 more than others and he only offered a 1 year warranty and did not include maintenance in that. All things considered, not someone to do business with.

Here's another buying secret: Dealers pay about 40% to 50% of whatever the MSRP is for that machine. When machines go on closeout dealers often pay even less. So, that \$2000 Viking cost the dealer about \$899. That \$3,500 Pfaff ran the dealer about \$1,250. Ever wonder how these folks stay in business? Between repair charges and margins – these guys do very well for themselves... and as we've discovered – Big Box Mart and the like haven't hurt them one bit.

This is one time where you MUST go into the transaction with a plan for negotiation. First work on price. Figure out the MSRP – cut it in half – and that's the number you want to get to as close as possible when wheeling and dealing with the Sewing Warlords. If you can get under that number, you have a good deal. Think of this as a hostage negotiation and your life depends on it. In the balance lies a machine held captive by the Warlord vs. your pocket book and how poor you are willing to be when all is done. When the Warlord starts to sweat be sure to get them to throw in that extended warranty. One year is OK – but your goal should be three years – “bumper to bumper” *with* maintenance.

One note. There are a few “good” guys out there. These are the guys who are up front about their pricing... and they include a solid discount without you having to ask for it. These guys will negotiate and will include a good extended warranty without you going to extreme lengths to get it.

As for me? Well, I picked up a Viking Platinum 775 on closeout with a 3 year service and maintenance extended warranty for under \$1000 from a reputable authorized dealer. No, they aren't local. But I live in a town of 10,000 and we don't have a local Viking dealer anyway – so it doesn't matter. No sales tax (wouldn't have had it anyway living in Oregon) and no shipping costs either! If the local classes are unimportant to you (especially if you live in a rural area) talk to Paul at <http://www.poconosewandvac.com/> – he's a good guy and an owner. They sell every kind of machine made and I've found they are straight shooters about what's available. Just remember that many manufacturers limit what can be sold “by mail” so tell them up front where you are located so they can give you appropriate pricing on machines they can actually send you. Also remember you should still plan to negotiate with them. They are still out to make money...

If you need classes and or a machine that is still “current” go into the local dealer armed with what I've told you and you are already ahead of the game. I guarantee you will save at least a few hundred dollars by following this advice.

In the end, there's no doubt that purchasing a sewing machine is not an easy task. But hopefully by reading what I've been through you are well armed with what you need to make your buying process a bit easier.