

giftBEAT

Tracking the Pulse of the Gift Industry

Build Loyalty and Your Tribe Will Follow BY JOYCE WASHNIK

When a Nevada retailer won her local newspaper's readers' choice award for best gift shop for the 14th year in a row, she attributed the honor to building a tribe of followers over the years — loyal customers vested in her store and its success.

"They love to refer people to us whenever they're complimented on what they wear," she says. "They know how long they've shopped here and often have daughters and granddaughters shopping here, too. We thank them as often as we can with samples and freebies."

Whether you call your loyal customers a tribe, community or family, in these competitive times their extreme loyalty goes a long way. "I've had the store for 37 years and some of my customers have been

shopping here from the beginning," says a Kansas retailer who refers to her tribe as a "community of loyalists." She says the key to building a tribe is customers seeing and knowing the owner.

"We consider our customers our family," says a Texas shop owner, who emphasizes consistency. "We train employees on the importance of treating everyone with respect and making them feel important and welcome, as you would your family. We get to know them and take the time to listen."

A Tennessee retailer never hesitates to lend an ear to customers, some of whom stop by just to talk. "We try and treat everyone who walks in the door as family or a long-lost friend," he says. "We talk about families, life, etc. It puts them at ease and lets them know we are people, too, and don't just consider

them a transaction."

Since the owner can't be on the floor all the time, it's important to hire quality sales associates to carry out your vision of a welcoming store. "It's your staff that greets and builds relationships with your customers, so store attitude and policies also build your tribe," says a Michigan shop owner.

Does your staff greet customers by name? Do they ask after their kids, dog or recent vacation? Do you send customers thank-you notes? "There are a hundred little and big things that build loyalty," she adds.

Retail expert Crystal Vilkaitis of Social Edge (socialledge.co) says the personal touch should

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marketBEAT

The Industry's Top-Selling Lines

FAST FACT: July sales were up over last year for 47 percent of reporting stores

GREETING CARDS

Last ran in September 2017

#1 **LEANIN' TREE:** humor, birthday, general line

#2 **BLUE MOUNTAIN:** general line

#3 **AVANTI:** humor, general line

#4 **PAPYRUS:** everyday, general line

#5 **PICTURA:** Dolly Mama, humor, general line

#6 **COMPENDIUM:** general line

#7 **OATMEAL STUDIOS:** birthday, general line*

#8 **TREE FREE:** general line

#9 **SHANNON MARTIN:** birthday, general line

#10 **CALYPSO:** general line*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Dayspring, Recycled Greetings and Cardthartic

* OF NOTE!

CALYPSO (calypsocards.com) is new to the top-10 list (it wasn't even an honorable mention when the chart last ran a year ago), while **OATMEAL STUDIOS** (oatmealstudios.com) moved up three places to number seven.

MESSAGE JEWELRY

Last ran in February 2018

#1 **CENTER COURT:** Embracelets, DaVinci, various

#2 **ALEX AND ANI:** bangles

#3 **MANTRABAND:** bracelets

#4 **CLOCK IT TO YA:** Earth Angel

#5 **RONALDO:** bracelets, various

#6 **BRIGHTON:** charms, bracelets, various*

#7 **ROMAN:** Alexa's Angels, various

#8 **KATIE LOXTON:** bracelets, various*

#9 **DEMDACO:** Honor Bands, bracelets, necklaces

#10 **MULBERRY STUDIOS:** bracelets, necklaces

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Scout Curated Wears and Spartina

* OF NOTE!

BRIGHTON (brighton.com) and **KATIE LOXTON** (katieloxton.com) jumped onto the charts from honorable mentions in February, while **RONALDO** (ronaldodesignerjewelry.com) moved up four spots to number five.



All Oatmeal Studios' cards are printed in the U.S. on recycled paper with vegetable-based ink. Shown here is the "Happy Birthday Genius" design. \$1.75 cost. (oatmealstudios.com)



Ronaldo Jewelry's silver and gold wire bracelets are handcrafted in the U.S. and sold boxed with a card explaining the bracelet's message or sentiment. From \$50 retail. (ronaldojewelry.com)

NOTE: Rankings are based on July 2018 sales data from more than 300 reporting stores.



Featuring playful designs and accessible price points, Pura Vida's bracelets are bestsellers in the teen/tween market. (puravidabracelets.com)

TRENDING NOW!
Humor! Consumers
crave laugh-out-
loud products.



Poor Boy Woodworks' 5.5-inch by 15.5-inch frames include a dowel so the frames can stand on their own or hang flat on the wall. \$12 cost. (poorboywoodworks.com)



Beatriz Ball's Soho platter is handmade from sand-cast metal and ideal for serving hot or cold food. \$51.50 cost. (beatrizball.com)

TEEN/TWEEN *Last ran in September 2017*

- #1 NATURAL LIFE: hair and fashion accessories, décor
- #2 SIMPLY SOUTHERN: t-shirts, phone grips
- #3 DM: apparel, jewelry
- #4 TY: plush
- #5 PURA VIDA: bracelets, rings*
- #6 VERA BRADLEY: crossbody bags, backpacks
- #7 ALEX AND ANI: bangles
- #8 POPSOCKETS: phone grips*
- #9 MANTRABAND: bracelets*
- #10 MULBERRY STUDIOS: Lumiela, various*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Jellycat and Da Bomb

★ OF NOTE!

POPSOCKETS dropped to eighth place this month from second a year ago. PURA VIDA (puravidabracelets.com), MANTRABAND (mantraband.com) and MULBERRY STUDIOS (mulberrystudios.com) are new.

HUMOR/WHIMSY *Last ran in April 2018*

- #1 PRIMITIVES BY KATHY: signs, LOL towels, cards, socks
- #2 ABOUT FACE DESIGNS: Say What?, baby, mugs
- #3 BLUE Q: socks, various
- #4 MUD PIE: signs, serveware, towels, various*
- #5 GANZ: signs, coasters, various
- #6 WILD HARE: towels
- #7 LEANIN' TREE: cards, magnets
- #8 MARY SQUARE: compacts, t-shirts, tumblers
- #9 SNARK CITY: magnets, compacts, notepads, cards*
- #10 EPHEMERA: magnets, buttons, various*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Lazy One, Unemployed Philosophers Guild and Dammit Dolls

★ OF NOTE!

SNARK CITY (snarkcity.com) and EPHEMERA (ephemera-inc.com) are newcomers to the top-10 list while MUD PIE (wholesale.mud-pie.com) jumped five spots to number four.

FRAMES *Last ran in March 2018*

- #1 MUD PIE: wedding, baby, various
- #2 MALDEN: wedding, baby, beach, various
- #3 P. GRAHAM DUNN: engravables, wedding, puzzle
- #4 GANZ: Generations, baby, pets, wedding
- #5 PRINZ: metal, various
- #6 ROMAN: wedding, anniversary, various
- #7 DEMDACO: Dean Crouser, baby, various
- #8 POOR BOY: beach, wood*
- #9 CREATIVE CO-OP: wood, various*
- #10 MARIPOSA: wedding, friendship, various

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Foreside, India Handicrafts and Grasslands Road/AmScan

★ OF NOTE!

POOR BOY WOODWORKS (poorboywoodworks.com) and CREATIVE CO-OP (creativecoop.com) were not on the top-10 list for frames when the chart last ran.

GIVE-BACK LINES *Last ran in September 2017*

- #1 ALEX AND ANI: bangles
- #2 CHAVEZ FOR CHARITY: bracelets
- #3 SCOUT CURATED WEARS: bracelets*
- #4 SIMPLY SOUTHERN: charity t-shirts*
- #5 4OCEAN: bracelets*
- #6 PUPPIE LOVE: t-shirts
- #7 VERA BRADLEY: breast cancer patterns
- #8 PURA VIDA: bracelets, various*
- #9 MUD PIE: various*
- #10 GOOD WORKS: bracelets, misc. jewelry

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Bridgewater and Ronaldo

★ OF NOTE!

All companies marked with a * were not on the top-10 list one year ago.

TABLETOP ACCESSORIES *Last ran in March 2018*

- #1 MUD PIE: Circa, serveware, coastal themes
- #2 NORA FLEMING: minis, serving pieces
- #3 KAY DEE DESIGNS: tea towels, drying mats, various*
- #4 CREATIVE CO-OP: bowls, various
- #5 GANZ: coasters, various
- #6 PARK DESIGNS: placemats, runners, various
- #7 CASPARI: napkins, various
- #8 TAG: platters, runners, various
- #9 MARIPOSA: serveware, various
- #10 BEATRIZ BALL: melamine, various

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Lenox and Corkcicle

★ OF NOTE!

KAY DEE DESIGNS (kaydeedesigns.com) makes a strong appearance on this chart at number three.

\$15 OR MORE COST *Last ran in February 2018*

- #1 DEMDACO: Willow Tree, Giving Shawl, various
- #2 VERA BRADLEY: bags, accessories, various
- #3 BRIGHTON: jewelry, various
- #4 MUD PIE: serveware, frames, various
- #5 NORA FLEMING: serving pieces, minis
- #6 ALEX AND ANI: bangles*
- #7 ENESCO: Jim Shore, Dept. 56
- #8 P. GRAHAM DUNN: engravables, signs, various
- #9 LIZZY JAMES: jewelry, various*
- #10 BAGGALLINI: bags, accessories, various*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Corkcicle, Pandora and Ronaldo

★ OF NOTE!

ALEX AND ANI (alexandani.com/wholesale) and LIZZY JAMES (lizzyjames.com) moved from honorable mentions onto the chart while BAGGALLINI (baggallini.com) is new.

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METHODOLOGY

A nationwide network of reporting stores completes a monthly questionnaire that asks them to rank their three top-selling items in each of the product categories. Items ranked first are assigned five points; items ranked second are given three points; those ranked third are given one point. Point values are totaled and ranked in descending order to come up with the top-selling items. Reporting stores include card, gift, boutique, specialty, gift and home decor stores across every region of the country. In addition, none of the retailers who participate are affiliated with any vendor. Unless otherwise specified, all data are based on sales (dollars) within the stated month. Tabulations are conducted by Suburban Marketing, a New Jersey-based research firm.

FROM THE EDITOR

Political Divides

Depending on your point of view, the current U.S. president is either a boon or a bust to retail sales. Among Giftbeat's reporting stores, an equal number note that the "Trump effect" is as good for business as he is bad. A Texas retailer says, "I think customers are only buying what they need because they don't know what's going to happen next with our government," while a New York store owner says, "It seems like people like what President Trump is doing, even though they might not be willing to be vocal about it," and a Minnesota retailer reports, "People are starting to get out and spend again. I think it's because the

economy is doing better under this administration." Whether the administration is having any effect on consumer spending or not, what we can all agree on is that discussing the constant political strife on the shop floor is a no-go. Beyond not knowing where your customers' political allegiances are, talking about the current political situation tends to bring out the worst in people. As one Rhode Island store owner says, "I really can't change this, so we try to present a colorful, fun atmosphere." The best solution, it appears, is to remain neutral. "Customers pay close attention to what store owners say," says an Illinois store



ERICA KIRKLAND
PUBLISHER & EDITOR

owner, while a Washington state retailer says, "We try to maintain as peaceful an environment as possible. Our customers really need to get away from work and relax. Our store is known as an oasis."



OATMEAL STUDIOS' new "Trump" card walks the line of political neutrality, with a caricature of the president that's relatable, humorous and diplomatic. (oatmealstudios.com)

regionalHITS
What's selling in your area of the country?

Table with 4 columns: Region, Product Category, Rank, Item Name. Rows include Greeting Cards, Message Jewelry, and Teen/Tween categories across Northeast, South, Midwest, and West regions.

NOTE: Reporting stores break down as follows: Midwest (23%), South (32%), West (21%) and Northeast (24%).

Hot Finds & New Releases



Cardthartic

Printed in the U.S. with soy ink on recycled paper, Cardthartic has a large and engaged following for its cards. A Wisconsin retailer, who carries all three of the company's collections, says: "Everyone loves Passages. Those looking for something fun have Little Reminders. And Meanings of Life (*shown here*) is so wonderfully unique from any other cards out there." \$3.50 retail. (cardthartic.com)



Kay Dee Designs

Giftbeat's reporting stores responded well to the new offerings from Kay Dee Designs, landing the company in the top-10 tabletop accessories chart for the first time (*see page 2*). Among the new collections it debuted at the summer markets was Crazy Cats, a whimsical collection for all cat lovers. Items include tea towels, dishcloths, oven mitts and guest towels retailing from \$6 to \$24. (kaydeedesigns.com)



Simbi Haiti

Simbi Haiti, a mission-based, socially conscious company, brings clean water and sustainable jobs to Haiti through the Aqua Haiti Initiative with its line of handmade jewelry and hair ties. The clay charm bracelets are the company's best sellers. Each bead is made with pure clay harvested in Haiti, which is hand-rolled, kiln-fired and glazed with nontoxic paint. \$28 to \$30 retail. (simbihaiti.com)



Heartfelt Emotions

Amanda Blu's double-sided Heartfelt Emotions charms feature an icon on the front and coordinating sentiment on the back. The collection is a top-selling message jewelry line for several *Giftbeat* reporting stores and the company's design director Michelle Ferrel says the line is the company's top-selling category of jewelry. "We continue to update the charms twice a year with sentiments that touch on emotions or meaningful moments in life," she says. Bracelets and bangles are \$4 to \$7.50 cost, while necklaces are \$10 and charms \$4. (amandablu.com)



Baublerella

With its sexy packaging and catchy product names, Baublerella has garnered a bevy of media recently (*People*, *Style Me Pretty*, *Real Simple*) for its line of jewelry-care products. For the holidays, the company is releasing a limited-edition champagne bottle package for its top-selling Bling Blush, a natural, on-the-go jewelry cleaning brush good for up to 100 uses. Cost \$10. (baublerella.com)



Skinny & Company

Skinny & Company was a hit during the Atlanta market – and the line is going to be featured on *The View* this month. The family-run business is dedicated to delivering chemical-free products with five or fewer ingredients, including its patented cell-nourishing coconut oil. Line items include lip balm, soap, body and face cleansers, body scrub (*shown here*) and a jar of raw coconut oil that can be used for both cooking and beauty purposes. From \$3 to \$18 cost. (skinnyandcompany.com)



Relatively Funny

The response to the initial release of Relatively Funny, a line of giftables featuring sassy, sarcastic and witty sayings, has exceeded the company's expectations. The collection of plaques, easel-backed magnets and coasters was expanded this past season to include zippered canvas bags and towels. A variety of pre-pack and displays are available as are name-drops with a minimum of 48 units per product category. The line is owned and operated by AccessAbility, a non-profit organization that provides opportunities for self-sufficiency to people with barriers to employment and community inclusion. \$2 to \$4.50 cost. (relativelyfunny.org)

SupplierSpotlight

TRENDING *Up or Down*



Even

HUMOR/WHIMSY: Sales were up for a quarter of stores and even for 47 percent. "People love to laugh," says a New York store owner, who notes that socks from **Foozys** (foozys.com) are selling quickly. Humor is also strong for a Georgia retailer, who lists dish and guest towels from both **Mariasch** (mariaschwholesale.com) and **Southern Sisters** (southernsisterswholesale.com) as top sellers. In Pennsylvania, a store owner credits her increased sales in the category to, among other lines, Late Night Snack Socks from **Pavilion Gift** (paviliongift.com).



Even

GREETING CARDS: The category is strong. Sales are up for 31 percent and even for 46 percent. A Texas store owner lists **Ronnie Sellers** (rsvp.com) as a top line, while a California retailer attributes her sales uptick to adding another spinner from **Papyrus** (prgreetings.com). The category is "always strong" for a Georgia store owner, who counts **Viabella** (viabella.com) among her bestsellers.



Even

MESSAGE JEWELRY: The category is trending flat for a third of stores and up for 28 percent. A Massachusetts retailer added and promoted more colors of **Blessing Bracelets** (blessingbracelets.net) while store owners across the country noted how well **Ronaldo** (ronaldodesignerjewelry.com) is selling in their stores. A South Dakota retailer reported that bracelets from **Good Works** (goodworksbracelet.com) and necklaces from **Julio** (juliowholesale.com) are performing well.



Iscream

Iscream has come a long way in 10 years, from a single product launch (a lenticular journal) to a 192-page catalog boasting hundreds of on-trend apparel, accessories and décor for the elusive tween market.

Its product development team has its finger firmly on the pulse of what tweens want. "We have to be at the forefront of trends, and respond with new designs immediately," says national sales manager Amy Anderson. "Our goal is to make high-quality, on-trend items that tween girls not only want but can't put down." Ongoing bestsellers include pillows, eye masks, nightlights and sleeping bags, while trinket trays (shown here), DIY kits, snow globes and jewelry boxes launched at the summer markets showed "quick sales out of the gate," says Anderson. On-trend motifs and materials include unicorns, mermaids, llamas, rainbows, stars, sloths, sequins, soft and furry fabrics and glitter. "The magical theme is on top," says Anderson. \$2 to \$54 cost. (iscream-shop.com)

Readers' Picks

Rescued Wine *(Favorite Show Find)*

Rescued Wine was a favorite show find for an Ohio retailer who was impressed with the company's candle line, handmade in Truckee, Calif., from recycled wine bottles and clean-burning American soy wax. Fragrances range from Fresh Grass and Clean Home to Merlot, Palm Sangria and Barrel-Aged Whiskey, all custom blended in small batches and infused with essential oils. Bonus! The company donates 10 percent of proceeds to animal rescue groups. From \$10 cost. (rescuedwinecandles.com)



P. Graham Dunn's Laser Engraver *(Custom Products)*



While it requires a significant time, cost and square-footage investment, P. Graham Dunn's personal engraving program has proven to be worthwhile for several of *Giftbeat's* reporting stores.

The program costs \$20,000, which includes a laser-engraving machine; touchscreen computer with built-in customization software; a variety of displays; \$1500 product credit and a variety of supplies.

"Following buy-in, stores can literally be engraving items the day the setup is received," says Anthony Burdette, the company's vice-president of marketing and product development. "The easy-to-use, touchscreen software takes the guesswork out of the equation."

The company offers both training sessions at its facility in Ohio as well as online tutorials.

"They make it so easy," says a North Carolina retailer who purchased the machine, and purchases most of the blanks the store engraves from the company. "We do a lot of frames to commemorate people's vacations, reunions, weddings and anniversaries. We also sell a lot of plaques, signs, ornaments, wooden spoons, pizza peels, cheese trays, mugs, keychains, luggage tags, wallets, coasters and glassware."

A retailer from South Carolina purchased the machine years ago and uses it to personalize many of the company's blank products. "My best items by far are picture frames that are solid-color painted wood or wood with a decorative overlay," he says. But the bulk of his customization is done on Christmas ornaments. He says, "We developed this process for our store and it's unique in our market. The laser does require a flat surface for engraving, so ornaments have to be chosen carefully." Plaques, pocket knives, business card holders and mugs are also consistent sellers for his store. (pgrahamdunn.com)

Carson's Custom Flags *(Custom Products)*

When asked to share her favorite custom product, a Virginia store owner named flags from Carson. "We have ordered many, many different styles over the years," she says. She sends the company custom artwork, including logos from schools and companies. The company also offers a variety of name-drop products (shown here). A minimum of 12 flags per size is required for custom orders. \$14.99 to \$25.99 retail. (carsonindustries.com)



SALESBEAT

July Sales Up for Almost
Half of Stores

By Erica Kirkland


Sales for almost half (47 percent) of reporting stores were up in July compared to July 2017. The reasons for the uptick ranged from better weather to good tourist traffic. A New Jersey store owner attributed her increased sales to “advertising our brains out on social media” and celebrating 21 years in business. “Customers liked the fact that we were finally ‘legal,’” she jokes. A Colorado retailer noted there was one less Saturday in July this year, yet her store still showed a small increase. For the 39 percent of stores that reported sales decreases, the reasons were just as varied, ranging from local construction to hot weather and, in the case of Florida and California, extreme weather.


JULY 2018 SALES (vs. June 2017)

↑ 10%+	10%
↑ 5-9%	16%
↑ 1-4%	21%
↔	15%
↓ 1-4%	14%
↓ 5-9%	8%
↓ 10+	16%

BUSINESS MOOD

How Stores Are Feeling
About the Remainder of 2018

 **VERY OPTIMISTIC**
13%

 **SOMEWHAT OPTIMISTIC**
55%

 **SOMEWHAT PESSIMISTIC**
27%

 **VERY PESSIMISTIC**
4%

MANAGING YOUR MARKDOWNS

How To Move Slow-Selling Products

The most popular formats for moving slow-selling products among *Giftbeat's* reporting stores are permanent clearance sections and sidewalk sales.

Dozens of reporting stores mentioned they have a sidewalk sale once a year or always have a table outside their store with clearance goods. “People will come over to a sidewalk sale who never shop with you,” says a South Carolina store owner, while an Ohio store owner reports, “We ran sidewalk sales the last two weeks of July and that helped get traffic in the stores.”

A Virginia store owner finds having a permanent sales section works best: “Reloading the sale area keeps the penny pinchers coming back to see what’s new.” A Utah retailer says, “I find it more important to mark down slow sellers early and not wait for a sidewalk or clearance sale.”

“If it’s time for something to move on, we put it on our sale shelves and mark it 50 percent off,” says a Georgia retailer. “We occasionally have a \$5 basket for shawls, scarves and coverups. People love digging in the basket and coming up with a ‘treasure’.”

If sidewalk sales and clearance sections aren’t moving your dogs, try one of these ideas on for size:

THEMES & GRAB BAGS: “Mystery bags are a customer pleaser and allow us to move out odds and ends,” says a Michigan store owner. She adds, “Theming a sale makes it fun. We’ve done ‘Lemons and Leftovers’, ‘Rocking 60s’ with everything at 60 percent off and ‘Pirate Days’ with a ‘come plunder our bounty’ tagline.”

EMAIL OFFER: A South Dakota store owner has had great success offering her email customers an extra 20 percent off clearance prices. “If a customer isn’t on our mailing list and gives us their email, we give them the same offer.”

FACEBOOK PROMOS: “When I get down to one item, especially on shoes, I post them on Facebook as a ‘last-chance item’, which has helped move some merchandise,” says an Ohio store owner. A Vermont retailer has had success posting on Facebook when the discount has been increased during a sale period: “It has helped bring customers back into

the store.” A Mississippi store owner has been posting on Facebook and says, “It has really moved our clearance items.”

GOING, GOING, GONE: Several stores find that increasing the discount over time is successful. “We start at 20 percent and go down 10 percent every week until the remaining items are at 75 percent,” says an Arizona shop owner.

YOU PICK THE SALE:

A Massachusetts retailer runs a “you pick the day” sale where customers get 20 percent off their purchase on the day of their choosing: “It usually does pretty well in getting customers in during the slow month of August.” [PB](#)

Build Loyalty

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

extend to your marketing as well. “Building a tribe is one of the best uses of social media for an independent retailer and a big advantage you have over the big-box stores. Tribes are more than ‘likes’ or ‘followers’ – they’re vested and engaged, which means they’re more likely to purchase from you and attend your events.”

To attract a tribe, Vilkaitis recommends that retailers be more transparent. “Humanize your content and show pictures or video or share info like your favorite travel spot, the story of how you started your store, info about your family.”

When she celebrated her 30th anniversary this year, a Massachusetts retailer says she “poured her heart out,” sharing updates on her four children who customers have come to know over the years. “I wrote a whole backstory and called it my ‘love story’.”

The Michigan shop owner agrees, pointing to her success building her tribe with the help of Facebook Live: “Be friendly. Pretend you are talking to your best friend. Don’t sell, sell, sell all the time. Give tips and funny tidbits, and share your pets, kids, grandkids. Make them see you as a person.” [PB](#)

CUSTOM CONTENT

The Lowdown on Embroidery, Heat-Press and Vinyl-Cutting Machines

When we asked *Giftbeat's* reporting stores whether they offered custom products and what lines or suppliers they would recommend, a dozen or so reporting stores shared that they offer truly one-of-a-kind products with embroidery, vinyl-cutting and heat-press machines in their stores.

“Vinyl is the least expensive (about \$400 cost) and it’s easy,” says an Arizona retailer. Yeti, Corkcicle, Swell and Tervis are the items the store most often customizes with vinyl lettering.

“In the past two years we’ve custom-cut at least 1500 orders,” says a North Carolina store owner. “We were skeptical about buying the vinyl cutter, but it has paid off big time.”

A South Carolina retailer purchased an embroidery machine (a Brother PR-600 for \$7000 in 2005) from Southeast Sewing (sewingmachines.com) and it paid for itself in about three years. “We monogram names and logos on Vera Bradley bags, other bags, blankets, towels, umbrellas, raincoats, etc.” But most of their monogramming is done on items customers bring into the store.

“Embroidery machines sometimes eat things, and when you don’t own the item, that makes for a bad day,” says a Virginia store owner, who offers monogramming off-site at her family’s car repair business. They do embroider items that customers bring in, but charge more for those items. They also buy “blanks” from several suppliers, including Wholesale Boutique, Otto Cap and Sanmar.

“Don’t go too deep or invest in expensive equipment unless you’re sure it will be a success,” cautions a Georgia store owner. “We did vinyl monogramming for a while but had trouble keeping a person on staff who could do it. It increased our workload and stress level more than it was worth.” [PB](#)

FOR MORE INSIGHT INTO CUSTOM CONTENT, TURN TO PAGE 5!

EXPERT Q & A

Set a Course for Success With Strategic Thinking

By Natalie Hammer Noblitt

If looking at your calendar invokes waves of panic, business coach Jason Womack can help you adopt better workflow tactics that will lead to a more successful business and a less-stressed owner.

Q. How do the strategies you teach help retailers succeed?
A. Gift retailers operate in a date-driven industry and must manage priorities to maximize their bottom line as chaos is always around the corner. Store owners need to plan purchases and promotions in advance, yet often wait until the last moment.

Q. How can store owners avoid last-minute approaches to their planning and promotions?
A. Schedule time blocks for strategic thinking. Start by thinking just 30 days out. For 30 minutes each day, work on something that isn't due for 30 days. Ask yourself, "Thirty days from now, what will we wish we'd already thought about?" Is your oldest daughter heading to college? Will you need to take time off and schedule staff differently? Set aside time now to plan and make it work. This is strategic thinking.

Q. Can you share some other strategic-thinking strategies?
A. Schedule a meeting with your business partner or manager and for 90 minutes focus on projects not due until 90 days (or more) from today. Involve trusted staff, specifically those who've experienced past promotions or holiday seasons. If they've been on the team for more than a year, ask them what could be done better and what should be repeated. This gives you time to generate ideas and delegate tasks.

Q. How can losing sight of strategic thinking impact a business in the long run?
A. Not thinking strategically puts you at great risk. You risk finding out an employee is taking a long weekend right before a holiday. You risk your ability to be innovative because you're under



Jason Womack

the gun and can't deliver the quality customers expect. You risk losing long-term customers because you're always working "last minute." Financially, there may be penalties for ordering at the last

minute or not working out deals with vendors. You're in a competitive world and if you're not thinking at least 90 days out, you're working in real time — and falling behind.

Q. Any final words of advice?
A. What it means to be productive is defined differently for each person and business. Create one to three long-term goals for revenue, staffing, new customers or other milestones you'd like to achieve. [PS](#)

Jason Womack is a consultant and speaker based in Ojai, Calif., as well as the author of Get Momentum and Your Best Just Got Better. He founded www.getmomentum.com with his wife Jodi Womack, and the website features many resources. You can email him at jason@getmomentum.com.

INVOLVE EMPLOYEES IN STRATEGY SESSIONS

By Natalie Hammer Noblitt

Employees often want to be more involved in a store's mission, says Jason Womack, founder of Get Momentum. He suggests involving employees in long-term planning: "When your staff contributes, they buy into the plans you make at a new and higher level." Ask employees the following questions to get them thinking strategically:

- 1. What do we want to be known for?**
Your community will shape its own opinion about your store. If it's positive, work to reinforce that message. If not, brainstorm actions you can take to magnify exactly what your business is all about.
- 2. Whom can we learn from and what is our competition doing right?**
Visit other stores in your area and around the country – in your industry and outside – to learn how they sell. Also, tap into the knowledge of staff who may have come from other industries.
- 3. What is working and what are we doing well?**
This question puts employees in a position of power as they share their success. The goal here is to reinforce them as they build on those wins.

FACEBOOK LIVE

How to Use Live Videos on Social Media to Boost In-Store Traffic

A Massachusetts store owner started doing weekly Facebook Live videos in the past few months and has noticed a significant uptick in business. "I started by doing videos themed around holidays, like Mother's Day, graduation gifts and Father's Day," she explains. Then she moved on to general themes like summer, baby and wedding gifts as well as "hope and encouragement" featuring gifts for people grieving or going through a rough time. She says, "I couldn't believe how many new customers that video brought in." She limits the videos to a maximum of 10 minutes and shares them on a variety of Facebook groups, paying to boost a few within 25 miles of her store. In tandem, she creates a Facebook photo album that includes the items she highlights in the videos and – taking a tip from the Social Edge (socialedge.co) — she screenshots the weekly video and places the picture with a link to the video in her weekly emails: "It really increases how many people watch the video from the email!" [PS](#)



FUN FALL EVENT IDEAS

Beyond the traditional fall open houses, Giftbeaters share some fun events they have booked for fall.

LOCAL CONNECTIONS

A South Carolina retailer hosts an evening with her local jewelry designer: "She has a great following, so that's a good night for us." A New Jersey store owner invites a local artist to the store for the evening who makes one-of-a-kind scarves on-site.



WITCHES NIGHT OUT

A Michigan store owner holds a Witches Night Out event in the fall, which attracts 200 or so customers, most of whom dress as witches to receive a gift. "We serve all kinds of desserts and have a Bloody Mary bar, and I hire a very good fortune teller to read palms and do card readings. We tape numbers on the floor throughout the store and every 15 minutes we draw a number and whoever is standing on that number gets a prize." The event is held on a Saturday in mid-October from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

MOMS, MIMOSAS & MUFFINS

On the first day of school, a Nevada store owner invites moms to come to her shop to enjoy mimosas and muffins: "They all have fun enjoying their first day without the kids and telling us their stories about dropping the kids off at school."

Next Month:
Apparel
Baby Gifts
Home Decor

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Profiles of the Industry's
Best & Brightest

Gift Boutique Serves as Cornerstone of Resort Community

By Jessica Harlan

Come summer, the picturesque town of Lake Geneva, Wisc., fills with vacationers, tourists and second-home owners. Few leave the bustling downtown area without touring the meandering layout of the Cornerstone Shop. Here, Karin Bennett shares how she has evolved the popular store since acquiring it in 2007.



Q. What makes your store unique?
We're always changing the selection we offer and we have amazing, talented designers and merchandisers who create new displays by season or occasion.

Q. How would you describe your store and its atmosphere?
A. We're in a wonderful historic building in a prominent location right on main street. Many people call the store their happy place, and that's about the nicest thing they can say about us! Our store has 10 separate rooms. Each one has a distinct look and product mix. There are also cool architectural and design

details throughout, like original hardwood floors. My favorite is an archway with an amazing stained-glass window.

Q. What are some of the reasons for your success?
A. Customer surveys have really helped guide our business. We survey every few years during key months. Customers can complete them in-store (paper forms) or online (through Constant Contact) and we always have an "A-ha moment" when reading the responses.

Another thing that makes us successful is we have "customer relation specialists" on staff who help employees get to know customers.

Q. How do you promote your store?
A. We send out e-blasts, use social media and update our website regularly, and we coordinate our efforts. If we do an e-blast about bridal gifts, we'll do a Facebook video of a customer picking out their favorite bridal gift and post a product photo on Instagram. Social media is a great way to boost foot traffic during slow times or when we have stock we want to move. Recently we had an overabundance of scarves, so we did a promotion where if you buy \$100 in clothing you get a free scarf.

Q. What has been your most successful recent event?
A. Our Joseph Ribkoff trunk show went really well. We sent invitations by mail and email and called our top 50 customers. We ended up with about 50 guests and they had a great time. It was a lot of work, but we got a great return from a sales perspective. Plus, we had additional



momentum afterwards from the visibility the show provided. I learned that you need to spend at least six months planning and promoting an event, and the sales rep makes a huge difference – they need to be good at sales, personable and outgoing.

Q. Looking back, what's the biggest lesson you've learned?
A. I'm not always good at following it, but store owners need to take time for themselves and connect with people outside of their bailiwick. It's easy to work in the store 24/7, but if you do, you won't come up with fresh ideas or have the creativity and perspective to keep your business exciting and relevant. [QB](#)

PROFILE

STORE: *The Cornerstone Shop & Gallery!*

LOCATION: *Lake Geneva, Wisc.*

SQUARE FOOTAGE: *10,000*

EMPLOYEES: *Four full-time and up to 26 part-time*

WEB: *cornerstoneshoppe.com*

TOP LINES: *Joseph Ribkoff, Spartina, Mud Pie, Mariposa, Lizzy James, Uttermost, Vera Bradley*

Backstory | From a Small Gallery to a 10,000-Square-Foot Store

After a corporate career, Karin Bennett wanted an insider's perspective before opening her dream shop – a gallery selling local artisan goods. A store owner with a similar store in the surrounding area offered Karin the chance to work at her store for six months. The experience was invaluable, and in 2004 Karin opened Artopia, a 1000-square-foot shop on a quiet side street in downtown Lake Geneva.

At the time, Alan Rhode owned Cornerstone. Karin was talking to him about wanting to relocate Artopia to the main street, and he offered to sell her the store. She was hesitant at first. "But I kept noticing that even in the dead of winter, there were always people in his store," she says. After months of deliberating, Karin and her husband Bruce decided to buy the store.

They didn't want to alienate long-time customers, so they slowly updated the store's technology, changed ordering habits and evolved the merchandise mix to include products that appealed to younger audiences. Originally, Artopia was a gallery within the store, but today the artisan goods are integrated into the store's product mix, and they now have products for a wide range of customers, she says, "from the \$10 tchotchke for the ladies who come in off the tour buses to a \$10,000 consignment oil painting."