

Business

Marilyn Fitchett editor/591-2300

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Brenda Wallace believes resellers should put some of their earnings back into their shops. She owns Born Again Resale in Plymouth.

Bill Dresler

Resalers seek a little respect

By Peggy Aulino
staff writer

Merchants who sell used clothing, furniture, jewelry and toys have a surprise for you: Their stores don't stink.

Resale shop owners are accustomed to being insulted. It's par for the course, they say. But resellers are working to change the notion that their stores smell funny and are only attractive to those who are too poor to shop elsewhere.

Shoppers who venture into resale establishments are likely to have some stereotypes changed, said Victoria Halton, owner of It Ain't Birmingham in Detroit.

"One woman stood in the middle of my store and said, 'Gosh, it doesn't even smell,'" Halton said.

Another potential customer picked up a new toy and remarked: "They

just put these things in their store so people will think they have nice things," Halton recalled.

"Eventually you have to get a sense of humor about these things," she said.

But Halton and other area resale store owners are doing more than grinning and bearing it. They have formed the Metro Resale Association to offer each other support, share information and join forces for business purposes.

"If you own a franchise, you have a lot of help, a lot of support. Resellers are by themselves," Halton said. "People in resale businesses are hungry to talk to each other."

THE METRO RESALE Association was formed last year and has 10 members. Another 12, including owners of suburban Wayne and Oakland county stores, are expected to

join before the group's April meeting, Halton said.

Besides just talking about the difficulties their businesses must face, the local association has done co-op advertising and is investigating the possibility of getting group liability and employee health insurance. Many resellers also belong to the National Association of Resale & Thrift Shops, which sends members a newsletter full of information on legal issues, taxes and other issues relevant to their businesses.

Resale, or second-hand, shops have been around for decades, but the trend really took hold about five or six years ago, Halton said.

At that time, she said, "garage sales started to be big business, and that really helped the resale business." Halton described garage sales as the "non-professional approach to what happens when you

open a resale shop."

Halton and others stress the fact that they are professionals who must work harder than their small business peers in order to overcome the negative image resale has had.

Brenda Wallace, whose Born Again Resale Shop is in the Old Village section of Plymouth, blames the negative image on resellers of the past.

"I think resellers were guilty of not putting some earnings back into the shop and not being very careful of the kinds of clothes they sold," Wallace said.

Wallace, who opened her store 2½ years ago, accepts clothing and other items on consignment. She said it's rewarding to help people find a market for things they want to sell.

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Boating industry offers bridge over troubled waters

By Peggy Aulino
staff writer

People involved in the buying, selling, maintenance and storage of boats will no longer have to say, "I'll see you in court" when a dispute involving recreational craft arises.

The Michigan Boating Industries Association, based in Livonia, is launching an Alternate Dispute Resolution program designed to get the opposing parties to sit down and agree on a solution instead of filing a lawsuit. It will involve volunteers acting as mediators and arbitrators and will cost the parties a fraction of the price of litigation — in terms of both time and money.

"The whole premise behind the program is to take the disputes out of the courtroom and out of the high-priced attorney's hands, bringing it down to a level where two people can very easily mediate a dispute and everybody's happy," said Anne Masterson, MBIA administration executive.

Other industries use alternative dispute resolution programs, but this is the first of its kind involving recreational boating cases, Masterson said. She called Michigan, which has more registered boats than any other state, a leader in the recreational boating industry.

Masterson said the service would be useful in a situation where a boat owner is not satisfied with work done at a marina, for example. Typically, the customer would refuse to pay the bill, the marina would refuse to release the boat and one or both parties might have to file suit.

"THE COST OF litigating has gotten so high that oftentimes you either have to take your lumps and not go to court, or you have to invest a

lot of money in a case to try to get some . . . satisfaction," Masterson said.

Under the MBIA alternative program, the parties could meet with a mediator to discuss the issue. The mediator's decision would be non-binding. If the parties are not satisfied with the results, or they do not want to use a mediator, they could present the matter to a three-member panel of arbitrators. The parties can choose from among a group of arbitrators, but both sides would have to agree in advance to abide by that panel's decision.

The MBIA has budgeted about \$40,000 to cover start-up costs, Masterson said. The cost to those who use the service has not been decided, but she estimated it will be \$200 to \$250. That charge is to cover administrative and processing fees.

"Nobody's going to make a profit on this," Masterson said.

The MBIA is seeking volunteers from the small business community to serve as arbitrators. It hopes to have a pool of 20 to 30 volunteers.

The concept of arbitration is not new to the marine industry. Freighters and other commercial craft have been using it for more than 100 years in New York and London, Masterson said.

"It was set up because the courts don't have the technical knowledge to address the problems of the marine industry because it's so specific," she said. "We're trying to take that program and adapt it to the recreational boating industry which, too, is highly specific and difficult to understand unless you are directly involved with it."

The 285-member association is made up primarily of marina operators and boat dealers. The program is expected to be operational in May.

It's all in the family when it comes to selling carpets

By Peggy Aulino
staff writer

Some families pass down jewelry or china. The heirloom of choice among the Kramers is a carpet store.

A.R. Kramer Flooring was established in 1925 by Archie R. Kramer, whose son, Alan, came aboard in the 1950s. Earlier this year the business was bought by Alan Kramer's sons, Art and Mike.

The family-owned store, on Middlebelt between Five Mile and Six Mile in Livonia, is a holdout in this age of chain stores and subsidiaries. The Kramers say their continuing independence is based more on a desire to maintain quality control than on any grand scheme on the part of their ancestors.

"We don't have any great desires to get big," said Art. "There's really no value in it for us. You lose basic control over your business to a point."

The Kramer strategy is to be involved in day-to-day operations and stand behind their service. The store sells carpet and flooring that can be installed either by Kramer employees or subcontractors.

"It comes down to service and being able to meet the needs of people," Art said. "My grandfather was

always very particular with that. That's really been the mainstay of the business."

THE KRAMERS SAID they have as much faith in their subcontractors as they have in their own employees.

"Sometimes you even have a little better leverage over subcontractors, being that they would like to continue working," Art said.

Mike said chain stores try "to get the customer to think about price rather than quality." And he believes the Kramer sales force is more knowledgeable than the competitors and better able to "make sure the customer's buying the right product."

"In some instances, they might pay a little more (at Kramer's), but they know the finished product is going to be exactly what they want," he said.

Kramer Flooring counts among its larger accounts much of Ford Motor Co.'s North American operations and the University of Michigan.

The store has customers whose grandparents bought carpets from Archie Kramer, Art said.

"Much like we are the third generation of Kramers here, we are on the third generation of their families," he said.

And 89-year-old Manny Eisenberg,

hired by the store's founder, is still selling carpets for Archie's grandsons. Eisenberg said he worked in carpet mills before going into the sales end, and Mike called him the best salesman in the business.

THE ORIGINAL Kramer store was on the West Side of Detroit, where as youngsters the current proprietors used to visit their grandfather. The store moved to its present location in 1971. Archie Kramer died two years ago, and Alan Kramer is retired and living in Florida.

"I wasn't really planning on coming into the business," said Art Kramer. "My grandfather felt otherwise. He would give me different things that I would find interesting to do, and the next thing I knew I'm working on a regular basis."

The fact is 35-year-old Art Kramer is the president of the company. Mike, 29, is the vice president, but neither of them places much stock in titles.

Art, who lives in Green Oak Township, handles accounting and operations; Mike, a Farmington Hills resident, does marketing. But Mike summed up the division of duties this way: "I don't know how to do what he does, and he doesn't know how to do what I do."

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Mike (left) and Art Kramer take over where their grandfather and father left off.



ART EMANUELE/staff photographer