

Local retailers share success stories



BY SUSAN DEMAGGIO
EDITOR

Successful entrepreneurs argue that the way to survive in retail in the '90s is to know your niche and fill it better than anyone else. They shared their thoughts at a recent idea exchange in Southfield.

A roomful of retailers gathered at the Skyline Club in Southfield, Tuesday, to learn the marketing strategies of local chain operators who are fighting the superstores successfully.

Tom Schuck of Murray's Discount Auto Stores, Sandy Bean and Chuck Papke of Harmony House, and Andy Moore of Henderson Glass, led a panel discussion hosted by Telecheck Michigan.

Proudly declaring "we have maintained our market share while watching big box companies like Media Play, Blockbuster Music, Best Buy and Circuit City come into town," Bean of Harmony House, pointed out that the Troy-

based music retailer is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

"I think there are several keys to our success," she added. "We offer great customer service. Our sales force is comprised of music junkies, they don't sell refrigerators or microwaves."

"Secondly, we have terrific locations. There's a Harmony House right in your neighborhood. Also, we stock a huge music inventory. Customers know they'll find what they're looking for at Harmony House."

Bean said the company is looking to own their own buildings and after losing their 19-year lease at Oakland Mall in Troy, Harmony House plans to reopen elsewhere in the city - on Rochester Road north of Big Beaver in the old Kuppenheimer store. Harmony

House also brought a parcel of land in Clarkston for a new store.

Harmony House has 380 employees, 37 stores, and last year posted \$40-million in sales.

Moore of Henderson Glass, agreed that having expert sales staff and handy locations are important, but also suggested "empowering management to own their own locations and lease them to the company," the way, he said, store managers run their own businesses and make all aspects of running the business work well.

"Pick your spot in the industry, know what it is. Diversify if you can do a year-round business and you will survive," he said, noting that consolidations in all industries are increasing as "small players fall by the wayside and become part of someone else everyday."

He said although his company specializes in mobile glass repair, they keep the cash register ringing by "having a presence in the community. We want people to know that if they have a problem with a cracked shower door,

a cabinet glass, there's a place close at hand that they can go to."

Schuck of Murray's Discount Auto stores, shared his thoughts on employee relations. He said retailers must make sure workers understand the value of benefits packages that aren't reflected in the hourly wage rate so important to new hires. He also said Murray's has had great success with recognition awards that let employees know their extra efforts are noted and appreciated.

"We hand out written thank you's," he said. "And often they're accompanied by \$50 gift certificates."

To keep business strong, Schuck said the company strives to build customer loyalty.

"Our main customers are the do-it-yourselfers," he said. "We try to make the shopping experience as easy as possible for them and also educate our customers on how to do the job. I think that's what sets us apart from our competition."



Coat options: Leather jackets, like this lime green design from Fantazia, doubles as sportswear and outerwear.

Coat sales rise as temps fall

BY DONNA MULCAHY
SPECIAL WRITER

The best time to shop for a new winter coat is toward the end of the season. I say that from personal experience. Last February, I was able to buy a long wool coat and a very warm parka with lots of neat features, for the price of one.

But I was lucky. Waiting until the end of the season is risky business. You may not be able to find the size, style or color you want. And besides, if you need a new coat now, you won't want to wait.

Ken Griffith, merchandise manager for Bavarian Village, with stores in Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills, Farmington Hills and Novi, said it's very fashionable to wear a ski parka off the slopes as an everyday winter coat.

Short, waist-length parkas are popular, but so are those with a three-quarter-length tip. "Women like the longer parkas because they can wear them over a long sweater," he said.

Heavy is out

When shopping for a winter coat, don't immediately dismiss those that seem too thin. Because of technical advances in fabrics, some coats can keep you very warm without a lot of padding, Griffith added.

Technical fabrics, are more "breathable" and are able to keep out wind and rain better than traditional fabrics. "Once you eliminate the wind and the rain, it doesn't take as much bulk to keep you warm," he said.

There are hundreds of technical fabrics on the market. One way to tell that you're getting a good ski jacket is to read the hang tag. If it says that all of the seams on the garment have been sealed (to keep out wind and rain), then it's a good one.

June Loy, merchandise manager of ladies apparel for Crowley's, said fleecy berber jackets, bomber jackets and trench coats made of buttery soft New Zealand lamb leather, wool pea coats in vibrant or traditional colors (including red, kiwi, black and navy), and fur-trimmed, micro-fiber active wear jackets are very popular with women this year.

The leather trench coats and bomber jackets are also popular with men, she said. "Because of the corporate casual look which many companies have adopted, people aren't getting as dressed up as they used to, and that means they have more freedom in the type of coat they can buy," she said.

Fur is back

Robert Roberts, owner of Furs by Robert in Birmingham, which sells fur, leather and other types of coats, said this year look for: Sweeping, ankle-length fur coats; fur jackets that are gathered at the waist like a bomber jacket; fur pull-overs that are kind of like sweatshirts; buttery soft, lamb leather bomber jackets and full-length coats (for men and women); and coats trimmed with fur.

Fur sales took a downturn in 1991, due to changes in the economy, warmer winter weather and anti-fur activists, but they've been on the rise since 1995, Roberts said. "When it comes to warmth, nothing beats fur," he said. "And besides, it's biodegradable." Fur coats cost anywhere from \$1,500 on up, but they can last 20 years or more with the proper care, Roberts said. Furs should be professionally cleaned and stored during the warm season, he advised.

Call for seasonal help as business increases

Finding good help continues to be the number one concern of area mall and main street retailers, especially with business picking up for the holidays. In response to the never-ending quest for good employees, The Michigan Retailers Association and The Michigan Employment Security Agency are again offering the Holiday Helpers program, soliciting job opening information from retailers, and posting the spots in MESA offices and through the Internet at <http://web.mesa.state.mi.us/helpers.htm>.

During the holidays, October through January, retailers look to double their workforce by adding many part-time employees to cover extended hours and the additional wrapping and stocking work.



We need your munchies recipes!

Help!

As we put together our holiday gift guides, we're hoping to include a page full of quick, easy recipes that make great gifts to take to school, office, the lab, or an impromptu party.

Specifically, we're looking for reader-tested and tested cookies, drinks, munchie mixes, hors d'oeuvres or dips that do the giver proud.

Along with the recipe, please include your name, address and daytime phone, so we can call with any questions. The Eccentric Newspapers will provide a special gift to each reader whose recipe is chosen for publication.

The deadline for recipes is Tuesday, Nov. 11, 1997. Mail your submission to: Susan DeMaggio, c/o The Birmingham Eccentric, 805 East Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009. Or fax them to (248) 644-1314.

Holiday exhibit opens



Dickens' tale: Guests will be transported to Victorian London as Hudson's presents its 8th annual holiday animated walk-through display "A Christmas Carol" at its Summit Place store in Waterford. The complimentary "show" with 23 vignettes, opens Saturday, Nov. 8 through Wednesday, Dec. 31. For more details call (248) 683-5299.

News of special events for shoppers is included in this calendar. Send information to: Malls & Mainstreets, c/o The Observer & Eccentric 805 East Maple, 48009; or fax (248) 644-1314. Deadline: Wednesday 5 p.m. for publication on Sunday.

SUNDAY, NOV. 2

Antique Show
Mall hosts Jeanne Fishman production with local and regional dealers exhibiting through Nov. 2. Puppet show for the kids "Peter Rabbit" daily at 7 p.m. Saturday 11 a.m. 1 and 3 p.m. Sunday: 1 and 3 p.m. Meadowbrook Village Mall. Adams/University. Rochester Hills. (248) 375-9451.

Black history exhibit
An exhibit that chronicles the dedicated men and women who brought education to African Americans despite danger and difficulty, is set up next to Saks Fifth Avenue on the upper level of Fairlane through Nov. 15. Presented by the African American Media Archives Society, the exhibit includes more than 200 images from national archives. Fairlane Town Center. Michigan/Southfield Pkwy. (313) 593-1370.

Designer visits
"Marty" Martha Carey will sign up to four pieces for collectors of her renowned animal sculptures 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at The Cord and Gift Center. Oakland Mall. 14 Mile/John R. Troy. (248) 588-6710.

TUESDAY, NOV. 4

Ultima II Hair Event
Hudson's hosts Ultima consultants transforming

ADDED ATTRACTIONS

guests with personalized makeovers 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. through Nov. 5. Visitors can see themselves in 12 different hairstyles and colors via a video to keep. Free with any \$30 purchase.

Summit Place.
Telegraph/Elizabeth Lake, Waterford. Oakland Mall. 14 Mile/John R. Troy.

• Same event Nov. 6-7 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Hudson's Somerset Collection North. Troy. And Nov. 13-15 from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. at Hudson's Lakeside in Sterling Heights and Westland stores.

THURSDAY, NOV. 6

Cookbook signing
Holiday recipes from the kitchens of Detroit celebrities are published in a new book to benefit the Michigan Thanksgiving Day Parade Foundation. Traditions: America's Thanksgiving Day Parade Cookbook is \$10 (\$3 shipping and handling) (313) 923-COOK. Borders Books and Music hosts a book signing and taste testing 7-9 p.m. 34300 Woodward. Birmingham.

FRIDAY, NOV. 7

Engagement jewelry
Tipper's hosts wedding show featuring Diana Diamonds by Design and Winward by Scott Kay through Nov. 8 during regular business hours. Orchard Mall. Maple/Orchard Lake. West Bloomfield. (248) 932-7700.

SATURDAY, NOV. 8

Holiday card sale

Charities will staff booths showcasing their holiday greeting card selections from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. More than 20 organizations will be represented at the 3rd annual event.

Meadowbrook Village Mall. Walton/Adams. Rochester Hills. (248) 375-9451.

Journalist visits

War correspondent, filmmaker and author Arthur Kent meets fans to sign copies of his book, *Risk and Redemption*, noon to 1 p.m. at WTVS Store of Knowledge, level three.

Somerset Collection North.

Big Beaver/Coolidge. Troy. (248) 637-7200.

Gifforama

48 unique stores from across the country present gift merchandise for holiday shoppers through Nov. 9. Admission \$5 per person. Shuttle service, 27th annual event to benefit Cranbrook schools.

Kingswood Campus.

1221 North Woodward. Bloomfield Hills.

Velvet Seminar

Learn to sew garments and accessories with velvet, 2-3 p.m. Free event, but reservations required. Huberman Fabrics. 117 West Fourth. Royal Oak. (248) 641-0010.