

giftBEAT™

Tracking the Pulse of the Gift Industry

marketBEAT

The Industry's Top-Selling Lines



Store owners love the wrap bracelets from **Scout Curated Wears** along with the company's new necklace which doubles as a bracelet and anklet. Pictured here are items from their Refined Collection. (www.scoutcuratedwears.com)

SPA RELATED

Last ran in November 2023

- =====
- #1 **DM:** Lemon Lavender, various
 - #2 **INIS:** all, lotion, fragrance, various
 - #3 **SNOOZIES:** slippers, socks
 - #4 **INTELEX:** Warmies, hot/cold packs, eye masks
 - #5 **THE NAKED BEE:** gift sets, lotions, lip balm
 - #6 **BAREFOOT DREAMS:** robes, socks
 - #7 **OPPORTUNITIES:** robes, slipper/spa socks
 - #8 **MICHEL DESIGN WORKS:** soap
 - #9 **CAMILLE BECKMAN:** lotions, cream, bath salts*
 - #10 **MUSEE:** bath bombs*
- HONORABLE MENTIONS:** Spongelle, Candle Warmers, Hydra Aromatherapy
- =====

*OF NOTE!

CAMILLE BECKMAN (www.camillebeckman.com) did not rank when this chart last ran, while **MUSEE** (www.museebath.com) moved from an honorable mention onto the chart.

{ *HOLIDAY BLUES* }
Sales were down year-over-year
for 50% of store owners

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The new Brush Bestie from **DM** combines four different makeup brushes in one convenient package. (www.247dm.com)

JEWELRY

Last ran in October 2023

- =====
- #1 **SILVER FOREST:** earrings
 - #2 **BRIGHTON:** earrings, watch bands, various
 - #3 **ENEWTON:** bracelets
 - #4 **CENTER COURT:** Layers, Stacks, various
 - #5 **RAIN:** earrings
 - #6 **PANDORA:** charms, bangles, various
 - #7 **MULBERRY STUDIOS:** Lumiela*
 - #8 **PERIWINKLE BY BARLOW:** earrings
 - #9 **KENDRA SCOTT:** earrings, necklaces*
 - #10 **SCOUT CURATED WEARS:** bracelet/necklace combos, bracelets

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Ronaldo, Howard's, Fahlo

*OF NOTE!

KENDRA SCOTT (www.kendrascott.com) did not rank when this chart last ran, while **MULBERRY STUDIOS** (www.mulberrystudios.com) moved from an honorable mention onto the chart.

PLUSH

Last ran in August 2023

- =====
- #1 **INTELEX:** Warmies
 - #2 **JELLYCAT:** plush with books, various
 - #3 **DOUGLAS:** animals, dolls
 - #4 **AURORA:** Palm Pals, various*
 - #5 **TY:** Beanie Boos, Beanie Babies
 - #6 **GANZ:** various
 - #7 **KELLY TOY:** Squishmallows
 - #8 **DEMDACO:** bears
 - #9 **MARY MEYER:** various
 - #10 **MUD PIE:** various*

*OF NOTE!

Since this chart last ran **AURORA** (www.auroragift.com) and **MUD PIE** (www.mud-pie.com) moved from honorable mentions onto the chart.



For the second time in a row, **Warmies** has come out on top as the best-selling plush supplier. Pictured here is a sweet new heart-shaped plushie. (www.intellexusa.com)

NOTE: Rankings are based on **December 2023** sales from Giftbeat's reporting stores.



World's Softest Socks, the top-selling fashion accessories line this month, is part of Crescent Sock Co., a family-operated sock company founded in 1902. All socks come with a one-year guarantee. Top collections are weekend, cozy and holiday. (www.worldssoftest.com)

"The 100% soy is what helps us sell Swan Creek candles, as well as the decorative vessels."
— South Carolina retailer



One of the top-selling napkin suppliers, **Design Design**, focuses on creating humorous cocktail napkins. Priced at \$6.50 retail for 12, the napkins are great to give as a gift or a personal purchase. (www.designdesign.us)

FASHION ACCESSORIES Last ran in October 2023

#1 WORLD'S SOFTEST SOCKS: socks*

#2 DM: hats, gloves, scarves, Night Scope Beanie, various

#3 SNOOZIES: slippers, slipper socks

#4 JEN & CO.: bags, wallets, various

#5 VERA BRADLEY: crossbodies, wallets, various

#6 HOBO: crossbody, clutches, wallets

#7 BRIGHTON: earrings, jewelry

#8 MYRA BAGS: various

#9 JOY SUSAN: hobo, wristlets, various

#10 SIMPLY SOUTHERN: purses, socks, t-shirts, various

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Opportunities, Corky's Footwear, Chala

***OF NOTE!**

WORLD'S SOFTEST SOCKS (www.worldssoftest.com) moved from an honorable mention to number one on the chart this month.

CANDLES Last ran in November 2023

#1 THYMES: Fraiser Fir, various

#2 SWAN CREEK: Drizzle Melts, jars, various

#3 TYLER CANDLE: Diva, various

#4 CAPRI BLUE: Volcano, holiday, various

#5 BRIDGEWATER: Sweet Grace, various

#6 WOODWICK: jars, holiday, various

#7 AROMATIQUE: holiday, various

#8 ROOT CANDLES: jars, tapers, various

#9 A CHEERFUL GIVER: jars, various

#10 YANKEE: jars, melts*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Candleberry, Crossroad

***OF NOTE!**

YANKEE (www.yankeecandle.com) did not rank when this chart last ran.

PAPER NAPKINS Last ran in August 2023

#1 BOSTON INTERNATIONAL: holiday, cocktail, lunch

#2 MICHEL DESIGN WORKS: holiday, guest, cocktail

#3 CASPARI: custom, guest, holiday

#4 DRINKS ON ME: cocktail, humor

#5 PAPERPRODUCTS DESIGN: holiday, cocktail, humor

#6 DESIGN DESIGN: holiday, humor, cocktail

#7 NORA FLEMING: guest

#8 SHANNON MARTIN: humor, cocktail

#9 VIETRI: Old St. Nick, cocktail, guest*

#10 GIFTCRAFT: Woodland*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Harman, Meri Meri, Mud Pie

***OF NOTE!**

VIETRI (www.vietri.com) and **GIFTCRAFT** (www.giftcraft.com) did not rank when this chart last ran.

STOCKING STUFFERS Last ran in February 2022

#1 DM: personal accessories, novelties, spa-related

#2 GANZ: pocket tokens, nail files, various

#3 ABDALLAH CANDIES: candy, chocolate

#4 THE NAKED BEE: lip balm, heel balm, lotions

#5 BLUE Q: gum, coin purses, socks

#6 SCHYLLING: Nee Doh, various*

#7 FAHLO: animal tracking bracelets*

#8 GIFTCRAFT: nail files, personal care, various

#9 KIKKERLAND: novelty items, makeup glasses, various

#10 PURA VIDA: bracelets

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Simply Southern, Natural Life, Michel Design Works

***OF NOTE!**

SCHYLLING (www.schylling.com) and **FAHLO** (www.myfahlo.com) did not rank when this chart last ran.

FUNCTIONAL HOLIDAY Last ran in February 2023

#1 NORA FLEMING: minis, bases

#2 MICHEL DESIGN WORKS: soaps, various

#3 MUD PIE: kitchen accessories, various

#4 KAY DEE DESIGNS: tea towels, aprons

#5 OPPORTUNITIES: mugs, Santas, lanterns, Pine Forest

#6 PRIMITIVES BY KATHY: tea towels, mugs, various

#7 GREENWICH BAY TRADING: soaps, lotions*

#8 CREATIVE CO-OP: tabletop, textiles*

#9 DM: kitchen accessories, personal care*

#10 DEMDACO: various

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Tag, C&F Home, Nidico

***OF NOTE!**

GREENWICH BAY TRADING (www.gbsoaps.com) and **DM** (www.247.com) did not rank when this chart last ran while **CREATIVE CO-OP** (www.creativecoop.com) moved from an honorable mention onto the chart.

HOLIDAY DECOR Last ran in February 2023

#1 RAZ IMPORTS: gingerbread houses, water lanterns, various

#2 GERSON: light-up lanterns, snow globes, various

#3 MUD PIE: tabletop, ornaments, various

#4 OPPORTUNITIES: glitter lanterns

#5 DEMDACO: Willow Tree, various

#6 GANZ: ornaments, snowmen, various

#7 CREATIVE CO-OP: felted items, ornaments, banners, pillows

#8 OLD WORLD CHRISTMAS: ornaments

#9 ENESCO: Jim Shore, various*

#10 NORA FLEMING: minis, bases*

HONORABLE MENTION: Roman

***OF NOTE!**

ENESCO (www.enesco.com) did not rank when this chart last ran, while **NORA FLEMING** (www.norafleming.com) moved from an honorable mention onto the chart.

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ABOUT

Giftbeat is owned and operated by Instore Magazine Inc. The newsletter was founded in 1992 and has been dedicated to reporting unbiased, factual market trends and business advice from the best and brightest independent store owners for 30 years. Giftbeat tracks the top 10 vendors in 50+ product categories, garnering this vital information from a stable of 300 reporting stores across the country. In addition, Giftbeat makes no warranty or guarantee, express or implied, regarding potential sales of any products referred to in the publication.

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The Holiday Blues

For the second year in a row, the holiday season failed to deliver the Q4 sales bump store owners have come to rely on. Scrolling through my social media feeds each day in December, there were posts from store owners encouraging their customers to shop local alongside comments that the support local movement must be waning as traffic was slow or people simply weren't shopping with them.

My perspective is that main street retailers play integral roles in their community, and when budgets allow, data shows that consumers will support them. Unfortunately, this year money was tight for a lot of shoppers. A buyer that last year or the year before

would have gladly spent \$15 on a beautiful scrunchie from an independent store owner was forced to purchase a \$3 scrunchie instead from a mass merchant due to inflation and other pressures placed on their discretionary income.

When money gets tight, where consumers shop changes. Store owners who've been in business for multiple decades commented that their loyal customers kept their doors open this season, demonstrating that when your connections with customers are deep-seated, they will return if you continue to offer great products and great service.

As a result of this poor holiday performance, store owners are approaching



ERICA KIRKLAND
PUBLISHER & EDITOR

buying in the first half of 2024 very cautiously. Even though attendance at trade shows appeared to be brisk, and vendors came to the table with lots of new products, judging from what our store owners are telling us, the orders they wrote or are planning to write in early Q1 won't be ones for the record books.

The upside is that market did deliver. Vendors came to the table with an abundance of new items – always a sure-fire way to drive excitement and traffic. **EB**

chartMOVERS

A deep dive into the companies trending up and down in this issue's charts

CANDLES

For the first time in recent memory, **Swan Creek** (www.swancreekcandle.com) was bumped from its top spot on this chart by **Thymes** (www.thymes.com), indicating demand for its Fraiser Fir products during the holiday season was even greater this year than last. The only other chart move of note was that **Root Candles** (www.rootcandles.com) took a bit of tumble from fifth to eighth place.

FASHION ACCESSORIES

World's Softest Socks (www.worldssoftest.com) bumped **Vera Bradley** (www.verabradley.com) from the top spot on the Fashion Accessories chart. Other climbers included **Snoozies** (www.snoozies.com), from eighth to third, and **DM** (www.247dm.com), from fourth to second.

HOLIDAY MERCHANDISE

While **Nora Fleming** (www.norafleming.com), **Michel Design Works** (www.stonewallkitchen.com) and **Mud Pie** (www.mud-pie.com) retained their first, second and third spots respectively in the Functional Holiday chart, there were several notable shifts. **Demdaco** (www.demdaco.com), fourth place last year, dropped to 10th while **Greenwich Bay Trading** (www.gbsoaps.com) in seventh place, did not chart last year nor was it an honorable mention.

In the Holiday Decor chart, **Raz** (www.razimports.com) and **Gerson** (www.gersoncompany.com) retained first and second place respectively while **Mud Pie** (www.mud-pie.com) ranked third, up from fifth. **Enesco** (www.enesco.com) was new while **Nora Fleming** (www.norafleming.com) moved up from an honorable mention.

For Stocking Stuffers, **DM** (www.247dm.com) retained its first-place position while second-place winner **Ganz** (www.ganz.com) climbed up from fifth place. **Abdallah Candies** (www.abdallahcandies.com) also travelled up the chart from eighth place to third while **SCHYLLING** (www.schylling.com) and **FAHLO** (www.myfahlo.com) were new to the chart, not even honorable mentions in 2022.

SALESBEAT

The Holidays Did Not Deliver

By Erica Kirkland

After months of year-over-year sales declines, not surprisingly December did not offer up very much jolliness as far as sales were concerned. While the media was awash with reports on how well retailers fared after the holidays, our data shows that among independent gift retailers, the results weren't so spectacular. In fact, sales decreased year over year for 50 percent of our reporting stores.

Among the 35 percent of store owners who managed to come out on top, 13 percent recorded sales were up more than 10 percent. When reviewing the commentary among this elite group, there wasn't one single reason why they excelled. Some mentioned milder weather while another moved to a new location with a large Christmas festival two blocks away. Still others said that a healthy mix of shops in their downtowns along with festivals were good traffic drivers while others mentioned that advertising and a focus on add-on sales contributed to their store's increases.

Overwhelmingly, retailers whose sales were down noted that while their traffic levels in some cases were the same, customers weren't spending as much, leading to a decrease in average sale amounts.

"Customers were not spending as much per transaction," says a store owner from Ohio. "I've had a rough year. My purchases were not as strong as last year."

In South Carolina a retailer reports, "I had 232 less sales which means I had at least 232 fewer people come through the front door. And they weren't spending as much money as usual."

"Basically our customers are just spending less than they were a year ago," says a Colorado retailer. "We've noticed that trend all summer and fall also."

HOLIDAY 2023 VS. HOLIDAY 2022

Sales Were Up or Even for 53 Percent

For 40 percent of independent gift store owners' sales this holiday season were better than last while 47 percent reported decreased sales and 13 percent held steady.

Among those store owners who increased their sales was a Virginia retailer whose sales were up 35 percent. "In-store sales were up 11 percent while online sales were up 116 percent," he reports. "Our November was up quite more than December so that would point to people shopping earlier."

A Tennessee retailer recorded her best December ever and said that having a wonderful staff – all new hires since September – was integral to her success. "I've never been this lucky to have such a hard-working group and it makes a huge difference. My customers



love my ladies!"

An Ohio retailer with two locations reported her sales were up marginally but still up. "We started the year so strong and had our best first, second and third quarters ever." Being in a tourist town, these are the busiest times of the year for her business. "I'm very grateful for a successful year despite some big obstacles. We have had to deal with disruptive repairs on both sides of the store during most of the year and road construction since September

5. My team has risen to the challenges and maintained a positive outlook. We focused on what we could do to serve our customers rather than have pity parties because of the difficulties."

For comparison purposes, a slightly higher percentage (43 percent) of store owners reported year-over-year increases last year while the percentage recording declines was the same (47 percent). Ten percent held the line last year compared to 13 percent this year.

2023 SALES (vs. 2022)

↑ 10%+	12%
↑ 5-9%	11%
↑ 1-4%	17%
↔	13%
↓ 1-4%	21%
↓ 5-9%	6%
↓ 10%+	20%

DECEMBER 2023 SALES (vs. December 2022)

↑ 10%+	13%
↑ 5-9%	11%
↑ 1-4%	11%
↔	15%
↓ 1-4%	19%
↓ 5-9%	16%
↓ 10%+	15%

2023'S TOP-SELLING VENDORS

The Vendors Who Ranked Most Often

Over the course of the year, *Giftbeat* tracks the top-selling vendors in over 50 categories, giving you the straight goods on which vendors and what products have the best sell-through rates in each category - and each category is tracked at least twice during the most important selling periods for each category.

In December, we did a deep dive into the data from the past six months to unearth which vendors ranked most often. With this data in hand, we were able to compile a list of the 10 vendors who performed the best in independent gift stores during the past six months.

2023 TOP-SELLING VENDORS

- DM
- Mud Pie
- Primitives By Kathy
- Demdaco
- Ganz
- Brighton
- Michel Design Works
- Nora Fleming
- Vera Bradley
- The Naked Bee

SEASONAL HIGHLIGHTS AND STRUGGLES

Retailers Share Their Successes and Issues

By Erica Kirkland

For those who increased their sales or managed to hold steady, it comes with huge sighs of relief. For those who experienced declines, there was a lot of frustration and sadness.

Just 32 percent of store owners said that their holiday sales were better than expected. For 37 percent, sales were about the same while for 32 percent they fell below expectations.

Among the Hallmark store owners on the list, many shared that the company “had a lot of shipping issues” which led to late delivery of products.

“We experienced a new level of stress and time loss that we will never get back,” says a Hallmark owner from South Carolina.

“With that said, customers were supportive and spent their dollars with us.”

A New York store owner had her Facebook page hacked which meant she couldn’t run the promotions they normally do on the platform, resulting in the loss of “a lot of sales.”

Successes

Committing to having pop-ups at local markets proved a winning strategy for an Ohio retailer with two locations. “This year more than last year, the local holiday market pop-ups had a bigger impact on our foot traffic. In one location, the pop-ups were three weekends in a row and they drew huge crowds which impacted our foot traffic and sales. My goal is to have enough help next year to be able to have a pop-up at that market all three weekends.”

Slightly altering promotional price structures paid off nicely for a Montana store owner whose Q4 sales were up 10 percent. “We changed our holiday promotion

from \$10 off \$50 to \$20 off \$100 which improved profitability. We also chased higher margin items to boost the bottom line.”

A Minnesota store owner made the bold decision to cut ties with a marketing partner she’d worked with for six years. “I created the entire 16-page catalog myself, found a company to mail to my customer base and prospects. I did this all at half the cost.”

A California retailer with multiple locations also had success with catalog marketing. “We mailed thousands of catalogs to our best customers with really great product - 24 pages worth with coupons and special offers. Customers brought the catalog into the stores to shop specific items they saw.”

A variety of special events were good traffic drivers. Store owners reported hosting everything from pictures with Santa and trunk shows to a Grinch Day Event and 12 Days of Christmas promotions.

A New York retailer came upon a promotional idea that really drove media attention. As she explains, “We initiated an Adopt a Grandparent fundraiser for our local nursing home which garnered lots of media attention and local engagement.”

Struggles

Staffing continues to be a struggle for store owners. In South Dakota a reporting store writes, “It was stressful. At times we could have given better customer service, but there wasn’t enough staff to man the floor.”

In New York, a store owner says, “We were all working longer hours which frayed our nerves,” while a South Carolina retailer reports, “People were cancelling right and left, and then my right-hand girl and office manager had to leave for one week on the 15th.”

For a retailer in Ohio with seven locations, shoplifting was a real problem. “It was out of control,”

he says. “The sense of entitlement and lack of accountability is spreading like a virus, even in our nice midwestern cities!”

Not getting stock or their holiday marketing catalogs on time really hurt several reporting stores as did late shipments. An Ohio retailer shared that last Q4, one insulated drinkware brand made up eight percent of her sales. That dropped in half to four percent this year. “We just couldn’t get the stock. We didn’t get our special collegiate order, which we placed in October, until December 21. If it came one week earlier, we could have sold out. Very frustrating.”

Many store owners noted that the season got off to a slow start with shoppers only really gearing up to buy two weeks before the holiday, meaning they had no time to reorder topsellers. “We probably missed some business since by the time business opened up it was too late to reorder,” says an Illinois retailer. ☒



TIMING OF HOLIDAY MARK-DOWNS

Less Discounting Prior to December 25

Store owners rolled out the discounts later this year compared to last. In 2022, 56 percent discounted prior to December 25 while this year 45 percent rolled out the discounts prior to the big day with a slight majority, 47 percent, holding off until after December 25.

“People were buying up until the holiday at full retail and we were very, very low on seasonal specific items by Christmas so we discounted after,” reports a California retailer.

In South Dakota a store owner writes, “If we wanted to get rid of it, we discounted it in December prior to the last week before Christmas. People are so much more apt to buy it then than after Christmas and we don’t have to discount it as much. We can have horrible weather after Christmas

and no customers.”

A multi-store operator in Ohio said, “It was so slow leading up to that final weekend that we started discounting. We should have held the line. The calendar doesn’t lie, and sometimes you just have to stay patient. Discounts just sacrifice margin without really driving added sales.”

“My competition had all Christmas discounted 50 percent off by December 10!” an Arizona store owner reports. “We resisted the urge to try to compete with that, and instead remained focused on our high-quality, curated selections and we were still selling holiday at full price on December 23.”

In North Carolina a reporting store says, “I’ve started to discount before December 25 because things aren’t like they were. We used to have lines out the door

on December 26 for our after-Christmas sale but not anymore. There’s hardly anyone at all coming through our door on the first couple of days after Christmas.”

In Wisconsin a retailer reports the opposite situation: “There are so many people out and about the week after Christmas still buying Christmas gifts for late get-togethers that we don’t mark down our Christmas merchandise and people don’t even ask until after January 1.”

A Tennessee retailer recorded brisk business for her post-holiday sale. “I always have my seasonal sale on December 27th (50 percent off). We had 35 people in line at 9:45 a.m. (we opened at 10 a.m.).”

“We considered holiday markdowns the week prior,” reports a New Hampshire retailer. “But we were too busy to even worry

about taking line discounts on items when so many items were going through on each ticket. Too much room for error and making people angry by accidentally not taking the appropriate discount.”

Another Ohio store owner shares, “I put Christmas on sale the last four days before at 40 percent off. It sold very well because they could give it as a gift! After Christmas, it’s 50 percent, but it’s not as attractive to buyers as they can’t use it right away.”

HOLIDAY MARKDOWNS

47% After Dec. 25

45% Prior to Dec. 25

8% No discounts

BUYING TRENDS FOR 2024

Category & Procurement Trends

By Erica Kirkland

In December, we asked our 300 reporting stores across the country to provide us with insight into what categories they’ll be buying more of in 2024. Conversely, we also asked what they were planning to buy less of and which categories they planned to hold steady on.

When it comes to where independent gift retailers are putting their money, fashion is the name of the game. On the flip side stores are planning to buy less home decor, tabletop and insulated drinkware.

Buying More

36% are planning to buy more fashion accessories

36% are planning to buy more jewelry

34% are planning to buy more earrings

30% are planning to buy more purses and bags

Buying Less

56% are planning to purchase fewer pillows and cushions

52% are planning to purchase less insulated drinkware

52% are planning to purchase less home decor

51% are planning to purchase less wall decor

51% are planning to purchase less tabletop

Buying The Same

70% are planning to maintain inventory levels in candles

70% are planning to maintain inventory levels in personal care

69% are planning to maintain inventory levels in wellness

64% are planning to maintain inventory levels in greeting cards

EXPERT Q&A

SCENT MARKETING

Harnessing the Remarkable Power of Scent

By Natalie Hammer Noblitt

Retailers constantly judge the look and feel of the products they carry, along with the design of their stores. And while these elements are all aesthetically pleasing, the powerful tool of scent is often overlooked, says Caroline Fabrigas, CEO of Scent Marketing Inc. She advises retailers on how to maximize the benefits of scents in their stores.

Q. Why should retailers be intentional with scent in their business?

A. Scent is a growing category with regards to the products retailers are

selling in stores, including beauty products, home fragrances and candles. Scent is one of the oldest industries around. It provides sensory cues for shoppers and impacts their connection with your brand. It's a message that doesn't have to be read or heard to be understood. At its best, it can make shoppers feel at home, want to linger in your space and lift their moods overall. When it's wrong, it has the opposite effect. We can't guarantee the right scent will always generate sales, but it does improve the odds.

A famous study by a Chicago

neurologist involved Nike shoes, where consumers proved 80 percent more likely to buy the shoes while exposed to a positive scent. Shoppers perceived an escalation of value for the items, enhancing their perception of the brand overall. These results show consumers who have a positive scent interaction with a brand will strengthen their relationship with it and likely make a purchase.

Science shows humans react to scent based on our limbic system, the part of the brain controlling our behavior and emotional responses. Scents can make us feel

something rather than just think about it. When you smell smoke, you want to flee to find someplace safe. A newborn baby can't yet see clearly but is able to use smell to find nourishment from its mother. These are great examples of how our sense of smell works as a powerful motivator. For marketing purposes, I think of scent as an invisible influencer. It really is poetry in motion when it all comes together with other branding efforts.

Q. How does a retailer begin to choose the right scent?



A. Branding, personality and goals for your business all play into the scent you should choose. Creating a custom blend is a wonderful option but a store may also select from a library of existing scents to find a match.

When we work with a retailer, we do an intake session to learn about the business. We want to find out what differentiates them from others in their area and from any other competitors. We also want to know about the personal scent preferences of the store owner. Someone may already have something in mind, or experienced scent in their lives that will impact what they choose.

A store's scent should also be compatible with its brand philosophy, look and feel. Should the scent create a playful environment or one that is more traditional? Decor can also play into the choice of scent. Is the decor full of metal accents and neutral colors or is it colorful and accented with lots of wood? Creating a sense of

place with smell is a very real thing.

We have seen in our business how a pleasant scent when not right for a location can have an undesired impact. We've tested scents that were successful in one space and yet had negative responses in another. It's amazing to see people react in ways you wouldn't expect. But it also shows the power of getting a scent just right for a store. A scent can pull an environment together or throw everything out of alignment.

Q. What trends are you seeing in the scent category right now?

A. People are loving sandalwood right now. I'm not sure where this trend is coming from, but it could be because sandalwood has relaxing qualities that remind us of the sea or connects with nature and provides a sense of grounding. We've noticed several clients asking for elements of sandalwood in the scents they create.

Candles remain a huge product category for deploying scent. Some


people aren't as into burning them, for environmental reasons, so the ingredients in candles remain very important to many who choose to use them. We also see a lot of individuals using candles in combination with aroma diffusers because they love the ambiance of candlelight, and the diffusers ensure the scent is truly enjoyed.

Q. How do you advise retailers hesitant to make an investment in scent?

A. We understand independent stores don't have the same budgets as major hotels or entertainment venues, but there are ways to make it work. Adding scent doesn't take up additional counter space, yet can have an amazing overall impact on branding already in place. We find many retailers tell us the scent they employed feels like the icing on the cake for their store.

Added benefits of creating a custom scent include extra retail opportunities. If consumers love

your scent, it becomes a viable retail product as candles, diffusers or other products purchased for home or as gifts. We offer a private label component to our business to help retailers with this process. Once they see the ability to monetize a custom scent, stores are very pleased with the overall value of scent creation.

There are a wide variety of diffusers available to fit all kinds of spaces, both large and small. We use professional-grade cold-mist diffusion based on a nebulation process that is safe and controllable. Our technical team helps install and calibrate for different spaces based on size, and whether using HVAC, free-standing or battery-operated diffusers. Proper ambient diffusion helps to ensure the experience is seamless within a brand's vision. Seek out a reputable provider who will help your store establish a scent and provide support to make the investment worthwhile. 



Gift Shop Finds Success Adjacent to Hardware Store

By Jessica Harlan

Crowder's Gifts & Gadgets has been serving two Florida communities with a well-curated assortment of merchandise since opening in 1955. The store's unique adjacency to Ace Hardware stores, which they also own, gives them a built-in audience. Husbands grabbing some tools for a project can pick up a gift for their wives, or spouses can browse in one store while the other runs an errand next door. Senior buyer Allison Heaton shares what makes their gift shops, owned since 2019 by Sunshine Ace Hardware, unique.

What makes your stores special?

We're known for our obsessive, over-the-top customer service. We do a phenomenal job of welcoming customers in our pleasant environments. We want to exceed their expectations and send them off happy, so they tell their neighbors. We also love buying things that are locally made or relevant to our beach communities. We also give back to local causes like the Children's Miracle Network and fishing conservation organizations.

How would you describe the atmosphere of your stores?

Open, inviting and bright. We have a lot of natural light. When customers enter, they're greeted with a smile and the delicious aroma of fudge in the air. We keep displays open and airy by using hutches that you can see through.

To what do you attribute your success?

There's a blend of good old hometown neighborly kindness and helpfulness combined with offering the right products. When we source new products, we always

have our customers in mind, and aim for a variety of unique and special offerings they can't get at every other store. From its hardware store roots, Crowder's Gifts has a long heritage of knowing how to serve customers and a passion to be helpful and service oriented. But the store has adapted to what the market wants today as the marketplace changes.

How do you promote your stores?

We have a small and nimble team of marketers inside our organization. They utilize our





websites and social media. They'll map out social media posts with what's relevant and bring in any vendor promotions or specials. We also started a gift catalog last year. Created in-house, it was a trifold mailer featuring 50 of our best gift items, and it mailed to 30,000 of our best customers in mid-November to kick off the gift-giving season. We'll be doing another one this spring for moms, dads and grads.

What has been your most successful recent event?

For the last few years, our open house has been a local success.

It used to just be one evening but we've expanded it to be three days over a weekend in October or November. We'll partner with our vendors to have reps here helping sell their product lines. We'll offer giveaways, enter-to-win contests, gifts with purchase and other perks. It's been very successful.

Do you have a favorite new product line?

Aloha Bags is a new line we picked up at Surf Expo. They're made of this material that's super-strong, waterproof and easy to pack - they fold down small so you can take them on a trip. They're very

PROFILE

STORE: Crowder's Gifts & Gadgets

LOCATION: Bradenton and Lakewood Ranch, Florida.

SQUARE FOOTAGE: 3600 and 4400 respectively

EMPLOYEES: Eight full-time, 12 part-time

WEB: crowdersgifts.com

TOP LINES: Brighton, John Medeiros, Hobo, Spartina, Vera Bradley, Mud Pie, Michel Design Works

practical but also fun and functional - a winning combination.

What is your most successful retail strategy?

Caring about our associates. We strongly believe that you have to delight your employees and give them a place to work that's so great they are inspired to give customers an experience that exceeds their expectations. You must start with your employees, energizing and invigorating them towards the vision and making sure they feel

welcome and a part of the vision. For the past two years we've been recognized as one of the best local places to work. We're constantly solicit feedback, and do a team appreciation week where we give gifts and discounts. Take care of your associates so they can take care of your customers, and the business will take care of itself.

Do you offer any special services?

We offer free gift wrapping and personalization services, including P. Graham Dunn products that can be customized, and engraving on stainless drinkware.

Looking back, what's the biggest lesson you've learned?

You need to be in tune with your customer and what their needs are, and to look ahead at what their needs could be. We're always ready to take that next move and to take a risk. If you're too cautious, you might miss out. Also, you must put out the right balance of products, offering exactly what your customers expect, but also delighting them with something they didn't expect. It's striking that balance between function and necessity but also something unexpected. **EB**

FAVE FINDS from Atlanta Market

By Erica Kirkland

If you were following my social feeds during Atlanta market week, you're already aware that the market rocked! If you didn't catch all the excitement, head over to *Giftbeat's* Instagram or Facebook pages to see my top 10 Fave Finds from each of the four days I was on the floor. The Fave Finds which didn't make it into our socials, will be featured in upcoming editions. Below is just a snippet of the hundreds of amazing products, lines and business owners who launched at market.



Crumble and Core Earrings

Another great line from **Pavilion** is Crumble and Core which began its life in the UK with three friends and a cup of tea around the kitchen table. This line of tiny greeting cards includes a set of sterling silver earrings which are positioned just so on each image – not simply side by side. The card inside is blank, ready for a personal message. The line uses beautiful watercolor art on each sku with a simple sentiment. (www.paviliongift.com)



Wax Reveal Candles

While these innovative candles from **Pavilion** have been on the market for a year or so, they were new to us so worth a mention as many store owners we talked to at market were not familiar with them. Here's the story: As you watch, a unique message appears after 60 minutes of burning. When extinguished, the message is also extinguished, reappearing with each burn. Made from soy wax all the candles come in Tranquility Scent which is jasmine with a hint of vanilla. The other great thing about these candles is that they're available in so many different reusable vessel types with sentiments for every occasion and reason. (www.paviliongift.com)

Charming Chimes

There was a lot to discover in the **Woodstock** booth at market. So many new items caught our eye but the piece we loved the most was the new decor chime in Patina Green Marble. Tuned to an ancient pentatonic scale, this chime sounds and looks stunning. Plus, it includes a removable windcatcher for easy customization. \$53 retail. (www.chimes.com)



Color Block Pen Bar

This super sweet new pen bar from **Mary Square's** So Darling collection had buyers all a buzz. The colors were on point and we loved how stores could choose to mix and match the caps for a fun color-block twist. The pens are not only adorable, but they also boast a smooth and effortless ink flow. I'm picky about my pens and I loved these. The best part about this set is the margin. The pens cost \$2.75 and retail from \$9.99. Placed at the cash desk, this one small piece of real estate could be a big winner, as well as a great way to boost your average sale by \$10. (www.marysquare.com)

Do you have a
product you
would like us to
consider?

Email *Giftbeat* Editor
Erica Kirkland at
erica@giftbeat.com

FAVE FINDS

from *Atlanta Market*



Pops of Color

A new brand of vegan leather bags from **Vaan & Co.** simply shouted at us from the shelf to come in for a closer look. They were so attractive and such an eye-catcher. The collection is called **Foxie** and features trendy color-block styles with a bold and modern aesthetic. Credit card wallets start at \$5 cost while top-selling crossbody bags start at \$17.50. (www.vaanandco.com)



All About the Bows!

Bows are a big deal right now. We saw them on a ton of hair accessories, but not as much apparel which is why we stopped dead in our tracks when we saw these sweet wraps from **Top It Off Accessories**. By adding a trendy bow to their top-selling Katie Keyhole wraps, they created an irresistible fashion accessory with fantastic margins – \$22 cost and \$55 retail. (www.topitoffaccessories.com)



Fun New Bubble Bath Cans

Garb2Art is always developing sweet and unique personal care items. One of our favorite finds from market was their new bubble bath in cans. Handmade in the USA from all-natural ingredients, the bubble bath is packaged in a 12-ounce pop-top can. How fun is that! Three flavors are available: Strawberry Tart, Jelly Roll and Cupcake. \$6 cost. (www.garb2art.com)

Katy Did it Again

The styles and skus from **KatyDid** never fail to impress. Season after season, Katy Messersmith comes to market with fresh, on-trend products. By keeping an eye on social media, as well as just having a great eye, she pulls new and even more exciting tricks from her design bag. This season we were drawn to her delightful quilted bags. Not only are they stunning but they're also practical, featuring a zipper closure, a water-resistant inner lining, two interior pockets and two exterior side pockets. (katydid.com)

FAVE FINDS from Atlanta Market



Soap Sponges with Sentiments

Soap sponges have been a popular personal care item for a while now but we're loving these new styles from **Caren** which feature fun and inspirational messages. Besides the sassy and girly collection shown here, they also have soap sponges for teachers and nurses. Simply by adding a sentiment to the front of the sponge, it instantly becomes a more giftable item. (www.carenproducts.com)



There were so many wonderful artisan-driven collections at market, but one that stood out to me was Wanderer from **1 Brilliant Gifts**. Created by a husband, wife and daughter team, the graphics on this collection are reminiscent of the Starbucks cups some people (me included!) collect like crazy. The company will work with you to create whatever custom icons you want for your city or state. (www.1brilliantgift.com)



Earring Line to Watch

Center Court added earrings to its popular Mazie Mae necklace line designed to fit on the existing necklace display. The necklaces have been terrific sellers so we're expecting the earrings to be just as popular. Plus, the margins are great on this item: \$4.75 cost with a \$12.99 retail price. When speaking to company principal, Alex Guy, he reveals, "In March, we'll expand the line to include more earrings and Mazie Mae necklaces which are the same cost and retail as the earrings." He went on to explain that "There are some necklace styles that coordinate with the earrings, making it easy for retailers to merchandise on the same fixture or alongside by adding a second fixture." Originally targeted to the tween market, feedback from store owners indicates that the line appeals to all ages. "The branding is skewed a little younger, but the product itself is a good mix with something for everyone!" says Guy. (www.centercourtonline.com)

ALEX & ANI FOUNDER *Back In The Market*

Retailers Weigh in on Whether They'll Stock &Livy

By Erica Kirkland



ver the years, I've heard countless stories from retailers across the country about the rise and fall of the Alex &

Ani brand of message-driven bangles. The line was hot, until it was very uncool because of the business practices they pursued which hurt the independent retailers that built the brand. When Alex & Ani opened company stores in zip codes where their independent retailers had the best sales, it dramatically impacted the revenue streams of many stores, so we were a little floored when we heard that the founder of Alex & Ani, Carolyn Rafaelian, was back at the market with a new brand, &Livy. It didn't create a huge stir, and at press time their Instagram follower count was under 1000.

We asked reporting stores whether they would consider stocking this new line. Just 27 percent of our polling stores stocked Alex & Ani when it was hot, and among those retailers 50 percent said they would consider stocking &Livy. Only 28 percent were a firm 'No' with 22 percent a 'Maybe'.

The numbers skew much differently when all retailers are put into the mix, as illustrated by the chart above.

"We had a few phenomenal years selling Alex & Ani, but we saw it declining and got out quickly. We didn't attribute the decline to their entrance into retail, but to customer fatigue with the product," says a New York retailer.

A retailer in Illinois writes, "We already placed an order. Even though we



haven't carried Alex & Ani for several years, we still had customers asking for it this Christmas. We're happy to ride the wave again if it benefits us. Then we'll move on to something else."

A Massachusetts retailer who sold a lot of Alex & Ani before it become super popular says, "It was a fad. Fads don't really repeat themselves. I looked at the catalog and saw a lot of the same stuff - not much has changed."

"We were a very early adopter of A&A and became one of their very top sales volume accounts," shares a multi-store operator in Ohio. "Though grateful for the profits driven by A&A early on, their story is a case study in hubris, operational mismanagement and brand destruction. We also were a very early adopter of Pandora and saw many of the same kinds of growth pains with them over the years, but even 20 years later I would hold them up as one of the most well-run brands in the business despite personal disagreements on many matters over the years. If &Livy can capture even a smidgen of the magic of A&A, it could be worth looking at, but I'm a 'wait and see' at this point."

A South Dakota retailer who didn't stock Alex & Ani, says, "My first instinct

is to say 'No'. But it truly depends on what the line looks like. Cutting off my nose to spite my face isn't good! Zip code protection is almost a thing of the past. Company protection is long gone. I can't think of one wholesaler that doesn't sell online themselves. Pandora and Chamilia pretty much did the same thing with the email lists. Culled them from us and used them for direct sales."

A Florida boutique owner who stocked A&A said, "Pricing tiers are really important right now, along with unique product. If the price is right and the product is unique, we would consider." Meanwhile a South Dakota retailer says, "Already saw it in person and was not impressed."

Another retailer from New York writes, "We will not support someone who used independent retailers to grow and then abandoned them. I had retail friends who made a lot of money with the line but ended up bitter." Along the same vein a Mississippi store owner says, "Being in the business this long, I saw how they impacted small businesses around the country. Thankfully I wasn't involved, but I would be extremely hesitant to jump in knowing their past."

BUYING PLANS FOR 2024

Majority of Retailers Pursuing Conservative Approach

By Erica Kirkland



For the first half of this year, 85 percent of retailers are planning to buy conservatively – 17 percent very and 68 percent somewhat.

“We still need new merchandise, but I’m being selective as to what I’m bringing in,” says an Ohio retailer while a South Dakota reporting store says, “We’re low on inventory and anxious to bring in some new product! But we’re starting out small. It’s easier to reorder now than in previous years.”

“Even though we were up for the year in both sales and margin, there were too many cyclical swings to make us confident we’ll do as well next year, so we’ll keep inventories tight,” says an Illinois retailer.

“I’m going to look harder at every item I buy and really think about how useful and practical

the things are,” writes a South Carolina store owner while in Maryland a retailer says, “We’ve worked really hard getting our inventory inline, so our goal this year is to be more strategic with our buying. We’ve been working with Management One for a year now and it’s great to see the payoff.”

Another Ohio retailer shares, “I used to do the bulk of my purchasing in January and July at show. I’m going to Atlanta, but not planning on purchasing very much. I’m going more to collect ideas, information, etc. This year, I’m only purchasing inventory for what I anticipate I will be needing for the next month out.”

A Tennessee retailer says, “I’m going to restock the store (it’s empty) and then start spacing out my shipments more through the summer. Usually, I have everything

delivered from January market all at once, but this year, I’m going to space them out just in case I need to make adjustments.”

BUYING PLANS FOR 2024

VERY CONSERVATIVE	17%
SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE	68%
SOMEWHAT PESSIMISTIC	14%
VERY PESSIMISTIC	1%

ARTICLES OF NOTE:

- Complete Holiday Recap
- Top-Selling Vendors of 2023
- Buying Trends for 2024

CATEGORIES TRACKED

- Candles
- Fashion Accessories
- Functional Holiday
- Holiday Decor
- Jewelry
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