

# giftBEAT™

Tracking the Pulse of the Gift Industry



**Say hi to  
DK Designs**



NORA FLEMING:  
GROWING  
WITH GRACE

JANUARY  
SALES DOWN  
FOR 63%

GIFTBEAT'S DATA IS  
BASED ON ACTUAL  
STORE SALES FROM 300  
REPORTING RETAILERS  
FROM COAST TO COAST





Beautifully fragrant soaps from **European Soaps** are selling well for stores bumping the company up from an honorable mention to 10th place. ([www.europeansoaps.com](http://www.europeansoaps.com))



## ECO-FRIENDLY

Last ran in October 2023

- =====
- #1 **THE NAKED BEE:** lotion, lip balm
- #2 **CORKCICLE:** insulated drinkware
- #3 **BRUMATE:** insulated drinkware
- #4 **FAHLO:** animal-tracking bracelets, plush
- #5 **SWAN CREEK:** drizzle melts, jar candles
- #6 **TYLER CANDLE:** Diva, Glam Wash, various
- #7 **SWIG:** insulated drinkware
- #8 **E-CLOTH:** window-cleaning cloths
- #9 **VERA BRADLEY:** various\*
- #10 **WET-IT!:** reusable dish cloths

**HONORABLE MENTIONS:** Pura Vida, Myra Bags, Organic Tagua, Two's Company

### \*OF NOTE!

Since this chart last ran **VERA BRADLEY** ([www.verabradley.com](http://www.verabradley.com)) moved from an honorable mention onto the chart.

# Topping the Charts

## PERSONAL CARE

Last ran in March 2023

- =====
- #1 **INIS:** lotion, body wash, perfume, various
- #2 **THE NAKED BEE:** lotions, lip balm
- #3 **MICHEL DESIGN WORKS:** foaming soap, various
- #4 **DM:** hair wraps, neck wraps, various
- #5 **BEEKMAN:** lotions, creams
- #6 **SPONGELLE:** soap sponges
- #7 **CAPRI BLUE:** body oil, hand cream, lotion\*
- #8 **CAMILLE BECKMAN:** Hand Therapy, various
- #9 **THYMES:** lotions, various
- #10 **EUROPEAN SOAPS:** soaps\*

**HONORABLE MENTIONS:** Greenwich Bay, Farmhouse Fresh, Finchberry

### \*OF NOTE!

**CAPRI BLUE** ([www.capri-blue.com](http://www.capri-blue.com)) did not rank when this chart last ran, while **EUROPEAN SOAPS** ([www.europeansoaps.com](http://www.europeansoaps.com)) moved from an honorable mention onto the chart.

## EARRINGS

Last ran in September 2023

- =====
- #1 **SILVER FOREST:** various
- #2 **BRIGHTON:** hoops
- #3 **RAIN:** basics, various
- #4 **CENTER COURT:** Layers, Mazie Mae
- #5 **PERIWINKLE BY BARLOW:** various
- #6 **KENDRA SCOTT:** various\*
- #7 **ENEWTON:** hoops, colored hoops,
- #8 **GOLDEN STELLA:** hoops, pearls, various
- #9 **SCOUT CURATED WEARS:** hoops, various
- #10 **JUDSON & COMPANY:** beaded, seasonal, various

**HONORABLE MENTIONS:** Pandora, Ink & Alloy, Laura Janelle, Meghan Brown

### \*OF NOTE!

**KENDRA SCOTT** ([www.kendrascott.com](http://www.kendrascott.com)) did not rank when this chart last ran.

## HOME FRAGRANCE Last ran in December 2023

- \*\*\*\*\*
- #1 SWAN CREEK:** Drizzle melts, jar candles
- #2 INIS:** cologne, diffusers, various
- #3 MICHEL DESIGN WORKS:** soap, diffusers
- #4 CAPRI BLUE:** Volcano
- #5 TYLER CANDLE:** Diva, various
- #6 AROMATIQUE:** potpourri, various
- #7 WOODWICK:** large jar candles
- #8 BRIDGEWATER:** Sweet Grace
- #9 YANKEE:** various\*
- #10 MAISON BERGER:** refill oils\*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Candleberry, Milk Reclamation Barn, Voluspa

### \*OF NOTE!

YANKEE ([www.yankeecandle.com](http://www.yankeecandle.com)) did not rank when this chart last ran, while MAISON BERGER ([www.maison-berger.com](http://www.maison-berger.com)) moved from an honorable mention onto the chart.

## PURSES & BAGS Last ran in March 2023

- \*\*\*\*\*
- #1 JEN & CO.:** crossbodies, small bags
- #2 MYRA BAG:** crossbodies, various
- #3 HOBO:** handbags, wallets, backpacks
- #4 VERA BRADLEY:** crossbodies, small bags
- #5 DM:** Kedzie
- #6 JOY SUSAN:** crossbodies, hobo, various
- #7 BAGGALLINI:** crossbodies, various
- #8 CHALA:** animal designs, crossbodies
- #9 BOGG BAG:** Bogg Bags
- #10 CONSUELA:** purses, wristlets, pouches\*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: K. Carroll, Brighton, Scout Bags

### \*OF NOTE!

Since this chart last ran, **CONSUELA** ([www.consuelastyle.com](http://www.consuelastyle.com)) moved from an honorable mention onto the chart.



Popping up onto the chart from an honorable mention in the spring, **Consuela's** various bags are selling well for store owners. ([www.consuelastyle.com](http://www.consuelastyle.com))

## SOCKS Last ran in December 2023

- \*\*\*\*\*
- #1 WORLD'S SOFTEST SOCKS:** crew, various
- #2 BLUE Q:** humorous
- #3 SNOOZIES:** slippers
- #4 BAREFOOT DREAMS:** cozy socks
- #5 OPPORTUNITIES:** Sherpa
- #6 E&S:** dog-related
- #7 HOT SOX:** men's, various
- #8 SOCKSMITH:** men's, women's
- #9 SIMPLY SOUTHERN:** various\*
- #10 PRIMITIVES BY KATHY:** various\*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Gold Medal, Natural Life, DM

### \*OF NOTE!

SIMPLY SOUTHERN ([www.simplysouthern.com](http://www.simplysouthern.com)) did not rank when this chart last ran, while PRIMITIVES BY KATHY ([www.primitivesbykathy.com](http://www.primitivesbykathy.com)) moved from an honorable mention onto the chart.



Comfy new crew socks in fun designs from **Simply Southern** earned the company a new spot on the socks chart. ([www.simplysouthern.com](http://www.simplysouthern.com))

## PILLOWS & THROWS Last ran in March 2023

- \*\*\*\*\*
- #1 VERA BRADLEY:** fleece blankets
- #2 MANUAL WOODWORKERS:** throws, pillows
- #3 MUD PIE:** pillows
- #4 LITTLE BIRDIE:** custom pillows
- #5 DEMDACO:** blankets
- #6 BAREFOOT DREAMS:** throws
- #7 TWO'S COMPANY:** throws, pillows\*
- #8 DUKE IMPORTS:** hooded throws\*
- #9 CARSTENS:** sherpa throws, various
- #10 RAZ:** discounted pillows\*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Peking Handicrafts, Opportunities

### \*OF NOTE!

TWO'S COMPANY ([www.twoscompany.com](http://www.twoscompany.com)) and RAZ ([www.razimports.com](http://www.razimports.com)) did not rank when this chart last ran, while DUKE IMPORTS ([www.dukeimports.com](http://www.dukeimports.com)) moved from an honorable mention onto the chart.



The lush faux fur throws from **Two's Company** sold so well they earned the company a new spot on the pillows and throws chart. ([www.twoscompany.com](http://www.twoscompany.com))

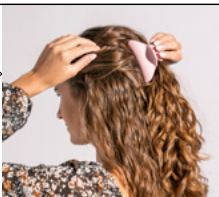
## TEENS & TWEENS Last ran in March 2023

- \*\*\*\*\*
- #1 DM:** hair accessories, Hello Mello, Kedzie
- #2 ENEWTON:** Hope Unwritten bracelets
- #3 FAHLO:** animal-tracking bracelets, plush\*
- #4 TELETIES:** hair ties
- #5 SIMPLY SOUTHERN:** various\*
- #6 VERA BRADLEY:** blankets, lanyards, various
- #7 PURA VIDA:** bracelets
- #8 CENTER COURT:** Layers, Stacks\*
- #9 SCOUT:** bracelets, make-up cases\*
- #10 KENDRA SCOTT:** earrings, various\*

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Natural Life

### \*OF NOTE!

CENTER COURT ([www.centercourtonline.com](http://www.centercourtonline.com)), SIMPLY SOUTHERN ([www.simplysouthern.com](http://www.simplysouthern.com)) and FAHLO ([www.myfahlo.com](http://www.myfahlo.com)) did not rank when this chart last ran, while SCOUT ([www.scoutcuratedwears.com](http://www.scoutcuratedwears.com)) and KENDRA SCOTT ([www.kendrascott.com](http://www.kendrascott.com)) moved from honorable mentions onto the chart.



The new top-selling supplier of Teens & Tweens products is **DM**. Hair accessories are selling strong among this age group in addition to Hello Mello loungewear and bags from Kedzie. ([www.247dm.com](http://www.247dm.com))

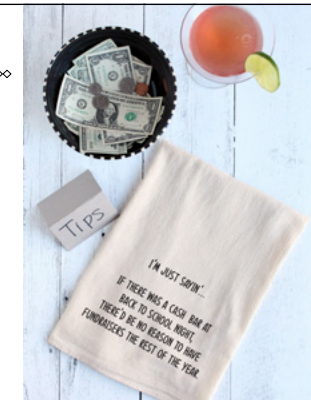
## TEA TOWELS Last ran in September 2023

- \*\*\*\*\*
- #1 KAY DEE DESIGNS:** various
- #2 PRIMITIVES BY KATHY:** humor, pet
- #3 MARIASCH STUDIOS:** custom
- #4 C&F HOME:** seasonal, beach
- #5 MUD PIE:** seasonal, humor
- #6 WILD HARE:** humor, various
- #7 ELLEMBEE:** humor
- #8 GEOMETRY:** seasonal, bar towels\*
- #9 MICHEL DESIGNS WORKS:** various
- #10 DANICA:** various

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Blue Q, French Graffiti

### \*OF NOTE!

GEOMETRY ([www.geometry.house](http://www.geometry.house)) did not rank when this chart last ran.



Top-selling tea towel supplier **Ellembee** is known for their simple flour-sack towels made in Michigan and embellished with laugh-out-loud sayings. ([www.ellembeegift.com](http://www.ellembeegift.com))

# ChartBeat

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

## Earrings

**Silver Forest** ([www.silverforest.com](http://www.silverforest.com)) reigns supreme as the number-one selling line of earrings, followed by **Rain** ([www.rainjewelry.com](http://www.rainjewelry.com)). Of note was **Kendra Scott's** ([www.kendrascott.com](http://www.kendrascott.com)) appearance on the chart at number six. Also of interest was **Howard's** ([www.wholesale.howardsinc.com](http://www.wholesale.howardsinc.com)) which placed ninth in September but didn't make the top 10 this time around. While **Center Court** ([www.centercourtonline.com](http://www.centercourtonline.com)) usually ranks on this chart, this is the first time their Mazie Mae earring line geared toward teens but selling well among adults, charted. On the flip side, Center Court charted for Teens & Tweens, but the Mazie Mae line was not listed as a top seller, rather Stacks and Layers were the winners among this age group.

## Home Fragrance

**Swan Creek** ([www.swancreekcandle.com](http://www.swancreekcandle.com)) held onto its pole position followed in second place by **Inis** ([www.inisfragrance.com](http://www.inisfragrance.com)) who bumped **Tyler Candle** ([www.tylercandles.com](http://www.tylercandles.com)) from this perch landing it in fifth place. **Capri Blue** ([www.capri-blue.com](http://www.capri-blue.com)) made a three-step climb from seventh to fourth place while **Maison Berger** ([www.maison-berger.com](http://www.maison-berger.com)) rose from an honorable mention to 10th.

## Personal Care

**Inis** ([www.inisfragrance.com](http://www.inisfragrance.com)) bumped **The Naked Bee** ([www.nakedbee.com](http://www.nakedbee.com)) from the top spot to number two, dropping **Michel Design Works** ([www.stonewallkitchen.com](http://www.stonewallkitchen.com)) to third. **DM** ([www.247dm.com](http://www.247dm.com)) held onto its fourth-place ranking while **Beekman** ([www.beekman1802.com](http://www.beekman1802.com)) rose from number eight to five. New to the chart is **Capri Blue** ([www.capri-blue.com](http://www.capri-blue.com)), coming in at number seven.

## Pillows & Throws



There were two significant changes in this chart since we ran it a full year ago. While **Vera Bradley** ([www.verabradley.com](http://www.verabradley.com)) remains at the tippy top, the number two supplier a year ago, **Creative Co-op** ([www.creativecoop.com](http://www.creativecoop.com)), is nowhere to be seen, not even an honorable mention. On the flip side, now in second place is **Manual Woodworkers** ([www.manualww.com](http://www.manualww.com)) who didn't rank last time at all, not even an honorable mention, making this a **LINE TO WATCH\***.

## Purses & Bags

**Jen & Co.** ([jencohandbag.com](http://jencohandbag.com)) remained at the top followed by **Myra Bag** ([www.myrabag.com](http://www.myrabag.com)) which climbed from fourth place. The only other shifts of note are that **Chala** ([www.chalagroup.com](http://www.chalagroup.com)) dropped a few spots back from fifth to eighth while **Consuela** ([www.consuelastyle.com](http://www.consuelastyle.com)) moved up to 10th place from an honorable mention. Overall, it appears consumers are gravitating towards smaller sizes with nary a mention of a tote or large bag on the list. The most popular style of the moment is the crossbody.

## Socks

The top four suppliers have remained unchanged since we charted socks last in our December issue based on October sales. Of note is that **Socksmith** ([www.socksmith.com](http://www.socksmith.com)) dropped back a few places from fifth to eighth while **DM** ([www.247dm.com](http://www.247dm.com)) went from eighth place to an honorable mention. **Hot Sox** ([www.hotsox.com](http://www.hotsox.com)) climbed from last place to seventh while **Simply Southern** ([www.simplysouthern.com](http://www.simplysouthern.com)) made a chart debut at number nine. **Primitives by Kathy** ([www.primitivesbykathy.com](http://www.primitivesbykathy.com)) ramped up to 10th place from an honorable mention.

## Tea Towels

After we last charted this category in September based on July sales, **Kay Dee Designs** ([www.kaydeedesigns.com](http://www.kaydeedesigns.com)) and **Primitives by Kathy** ([www.primitivesbykathy.com](http://www.primitivesbykathy.com)) remain at number one and two respectively indicating no matter the season these are the two lines to beat. For this month, **Mud Pie** ([www.mud-pie.com](http://www.mud-pie.com)) slipped, dropping from third to fifth while the chart welcomed **Geometry** ([www.geometry.house](http://www.geometry.house)), a line that's been all over social media recently.

## Teens & Tweens

Moving up from second place, **DM** ([www.247dm.com](http://www.247dm.com)) knocked **Pura Vida** ([www.puravidabrachelets.com](http://www.puravidabrachelets.com)) from its top spot - it tumbled all the way down to number seven - while **Enewton** ([www.enewtondesign.com](http://www.enewtondesign.com)) climbed from 10th to number two. Not surprisingly, **Fahlo** ([www.myfahlo.com](http://www.myfahlo.com)) has appeared on this chart, coming in strong at number three. The animal-tracking bracelets and animals are a popular purchase for tweens. If you can't open an account with Fahlo, your second-best option are the turtle-tracking bracelets from **Simply Southern** ([www.simplysouthern.com](http://www.simplysouthern.com)). The company is back on the chart at number five, after a brief absence, with stores reporting strong sales of their tracking bracelets. **Center Court** ([www.centercourtonline.com](http://www.centercourtonline.com)) is brand new to the list, although surprisingly their line for teens and tweens, Mazie Mae, wasn't listed as a top seller.

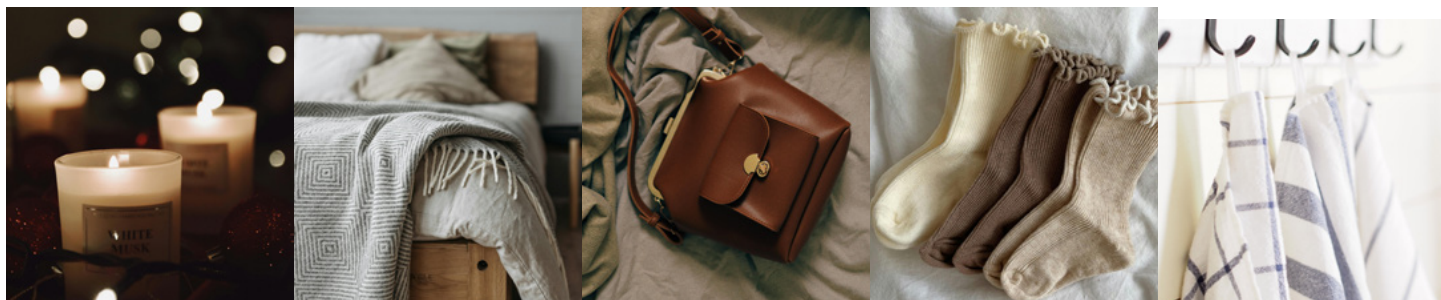
## Eco Friendly

**The Naked Bee** ([www.nakedbee.com](http://www.nakedbee.com)) held onto its top spot on the eco-friendly chart, followed by **Corkcicle** ([www.corkcicle.com](http://www.corkcicle.com)) climbing from fifth place to second. Missing from the chart is **Myra Bags** ([www.myrabag.com](http://www.myrabag.com)) which placed second in the October 2023 issue based on August 2023 sales but ranks as an honorable mention this month based on January sales. **Brumate** ([www.brumate-wholesale.com](http://www.brumate-wholesale.com)) and **Fahlo** ([www.myfahlo.com](http://www.myfahlo.com)) also made impressive climbs from seventh to third and eight to fourth place respectively. **Wet-It** ([www.wetcloths.com](http://www.wetcloths.com)) dropped from third to last place. Overall, insulated drinkware climbed the charts in this category which is somewhat surprising as retailers indicated in December they planned to scale back inventory of insulated drinkware in 2024. 🍹



# RegionalBeat

Breaking down the top-selling lines by region



## HOME FRAGRANCE

### NORTHEAST

1. Inis
2. Swan Creek
3. Michel Design Works

### SOUTH

1. Capri Blue
2. Tyler Candle
3. Inis

### MIDWEST

1. Inis
2. Michel Design Works
3. Swan Creek

### WEST

1. Swan Creek
2. Michel Design Works
3. Voluspa

## PILLOWS & THROWS

### NORTHEAST

1. Manual Woodworkers
2. Little Birdie
3. Two's Company

### SOUTH

1. Mud Pie
2. Vera Bradley
3. Manual Woodworkers

### MIDWEST

1. Vera Bradley
2. Mud Pie
3. Manual Woodworkers

### WEST

1. Carstens
2. Demdaco
3. Duke Imports

## PURSES & BAGS

### NORTHEAST

1. Hobo
2. Myra Bag
3. Vera Bradley

### SOUTH

1. Hobo
2. Jen & Co.
3. Joy Susan

### MIDWEST

1. Jen & Co.
2. DM
3. Myra Bag

### WEST

1. Myra Bag
2. Baggallini
3. Chala

## SOCKS

### NORTHEAST

1. World's Softest Socks
2. Blue Q
3. Barefoot Dreams

### SOUTH

1. World's Softest Socks
2. Blue Q
3. Barefoot Dreams

### MIDWEST

1. World's Softest Socks
2. Snoozies
3. E&S

### WEST

1. World's Softest Socks
2. Hot Sox
3. Opportunities

## TEA TOWELS

### NORTHEAST

1. Blue Q
2. Geometry House
3. Mariasch Studios

### SOUTH

1. Kay Dee Designs
2. Primitives By Kathy
3. Mud Pie

### MIDWEST

1. Kay Dee Designs
2. Mud Pie
3. Ellembee

### WEST

1. Kay Dee Designs
2. Primitives By Kathy
3. Danica

# Despite Headwinds, Store Owners are Staying Upbeat



## Retailers Cautiously Optimistic

Coming off a dismal January and months of year-over-year sales declines in the last half of 2023, the majority (60 percent) of store owners remain cautiously optimistic.

"I'm always the optimist, but I have been down the last three months, was down last year and January was down but I'm going to hope this year will be better!" says a retailer from South Carolina.

In Ohio a retailer writes, "I believe we'll end up 'ok', but I feel like the business is not as strong as before."

In Vermont, a store owner tells us, "January and February are always tricky months. We have our worst weather, it's post holiday and everything seems blah, but brighter days are ahead, I'm sure."

"We've been seeing a decline since October 2022," says a store owner from Wisconsin. "I'm really hoping Valentine's Day is huge and our economy turns around big time!"

There are, of course, retailers that aren't as hopeful, including a store owner from Colorado who writes, "I'm concerned for the state of the economy in general and also a bit worried that online buying from the big guys is impacting sales at the mom-and-pop local level even more than previously."

Another retailer from Ohio says, "I'm a very optimistic person, but I'm approaching 2024 with a sense of concern. 2023 did not end as we had hoped."

"Customers are still cautious about spending, opting for smaller gifts and looking for sale items," says a Massachusetts retailer. They're already starting to gripe about the elections and the choices they have. We could be in for a tough year."

"Before I ran January's numbers, I would have said 'optimistic'," says a Virginia retailer. "Now I'm a bit concerned." 📉

### JANUARY 2024 SALES (vs. Jan 2023)

|           |     |
|-----------|-----|
| Up 10%+   | 13% |
| Up 5-9%   | 4%  |
| Up 1-4%   | 11% |
| Even      | 9%  |
| Down 1-4% | 14% |
| Down 5-9% | 12% |
| Down 10%+ | 37% |



### CURRENT MOOD

|     |                       |
|-----|-----------------------|
| 5%  | Very optimistic       |
| 60% | Cautiously optimistic |
| 28% | A bit concerned       |
| 7%  | Very concerned        |



# Top Causes for Concern

## The Increasing Costs of Doing Business

There is a litany of issues that keep store owners tossing and turning at night, but the one currently topping the list are the increasing costs of doing business. A full 80 percent of store owners ranked rising expenses as an issue of concern.

Coming in second was foot traffic at 68 percent, followed by competition from online retailers at 66 percent, and competition from vendors selling directly to consumers at 60 percent.

"More and more wholesalers are selling on third-party platforms and forbidding retailers to do the same," writes a store owner from South Dakota. "The ones that have their own websites aren't a problem if they don't offer discounts and free shipping. It's a very competitive world out there."

When it comes to big-box stores,

a store owner from South Carolina writes, "We have a population of about 12,000 residents and we're getting Home Goods. We already have a TJ Maxx, so in a small town like ours I think it will have an impact on our small downtown, but we'll see."

In Montana, a retailer is worried about keeping up with trends. "We are tourist-based so are mostly immune to competition, but trends change faster than ever and I worry about missing the mark one year or worse, slowly becoming irrelevant."

While reps didn't make the list, they are a cause of significant concern for a Tennessee store owner. "The reps in my area have no problem selling whatever brands I carry to a local Ace Hardware that is only three miles down the road. It's almost like they give them copies of my orders!" 📄

# The Marketing Mediums That Matter

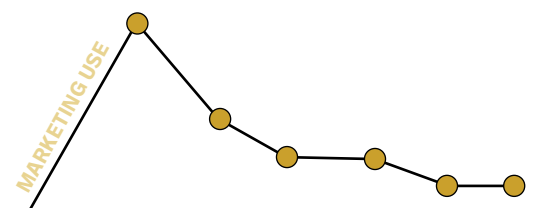
## Social Media Tops the List, Again

Social media has without a doubt taken over our lives, and retailers are onboard with 75 percent planning to invest marketing dollars on platforms this year.

The second most-used marketing medium will be direct mail, yet it's only being utilized by just over one-third (36 percent) of stores. Billboards and radio adverts are the least used while 29 percent of stores still invest in print advertising, whether in local magazines or newspapers. 📄

## MARKETING MEDIUMS STORES USE

- 75%** Social Media \*\*\*
- 36%** Direct Mail
- 29%** Print Advertising
- 25%** Online Advertising
- 11%** Radio Advertising
- 11%** Billboards





# January Froze Out Sales

## Disappointing Start to the First Quarter

By Erica Kirkland

**W**hile the mood at the January markets was buoyant, that didn't translate into sales at the tills as nearly two-thirds of our reporting store owners from coast-to-coast recorded year-over-year sales declines in January. Most boutique owners have been experiencing year-over-year monthly declines for the past six or so months, but never has the number been as high as 63 percent. Rather than a lack of traffic, it was horrible weather that was to blame for the decrease in sales.

"The weather was brutal!" says an Illinois store owner. "We closed our store for three days, and there was another week when it was so cold that people tried not to venture outside. I'm surprised we did as much business as we did under the circumstances and I'm glad that the weather hit in January and not December!"

In South Carolina a store owner writes, "We had a very cold week in January, colder than usual and people just didn't come out. I had 215 less sales this January over last. My average sale and unit were up by \$2 but with 215 less people it didn't matter!"

"Although we've not had much in the way of inclement weather, we've had more gray days than sunny days and it absolutely is affecting customers' (everyone's!) moods," reports a store owner



from Massachusetts.

There were some store owners, of course, that had good weather but not great sales.

"It was the worst January I remember having in a very long time," says a Virginia store owner. "The weather wasn't awful. It wasn't good, but it's January. I talked to a friend about a mile away and she said the same thing. 'What happened?'"

What happened is right. This is not the start to the quarter most of us were hoping for. 🙄

**"The weather was brutal!" says an Illinois store owner. "We closed our store for three days, and there was another week when it was so cold that people tried not to venture outside. I'm surprised we did as much business as we did under the circumstances and I'm glad that the weather hit in January and not December!"**





# Nora Fleming

## Growth through Grace

By Erica Kirkland

**T**he Nora Fleming brand is a case study in thoughtfully and strategically building a company with goodness at its core, characteristics which instantly resonated with independent retailers. As the company celebrates 20 years, an incredible feat in a fad-obsessed industry, founder Nora Napientek and president Janice Christensen share how the company was founded alongside the choices they made which led them to becoming one of the best-selling and most distinguished lines on the market today.

Collectibles, crystal and tabletop were becoming practically obsolete categories for gift store owners at the turn of the century. Consumers didn't want figurines in their living rooms or floral china plates on their tables. But all of this was unknown to a young artistic entrepreneur in Illinois at the precipice of creating a line that would come to dominate our industry by combining two declining categories – tabletop and collectibles.

Back then, Nora Napientek, (Fleming is a nod to a great grandmother), was living in Downers Grove, Ill. The new University of Michigan graduate was recently married and looking forward to starting a family. She was also keen to pursue a creative career which would afford her the flexibility to stay home with her children once they arrived. She settled

on opening a pottery studio in Naperville, Ill., Pottery Bayou, where she grew a dedicated fan base of customers who would come in to paint platters for different seasons. She also freelanced as a creative writer at Maddock Douglas in Elmhurst, Ill., a company she credits with much of her success. "They really developed me into a creative thinker and expanded her to pursue a career that combined her creative talents. After a few years running the pottery studio, Nora had an aha moment when she realized that rather than painting a platter for every season, she could mold a decorative miniature figurine and insert it into a platter by drilling a hole. The first decorative mini was a little bird, and the rest, as they say, is history.



Nora Fleming co-founders and siblings Jon Neidlinger and Nora Napientek with copies of *Mini Celebrations, A Collection of Celebrations* by Nora Fleming

### THE BEGINNINGS

The first incarnation of the mini was basic. Crafted from clay with a clay stem, it made for a somewhat wobbly concoction, but customers loved the concept which was to streamline the entertaining process by bringing simplicity to tablescape and cabinets. Rather than creating a platter for every season, the customer could simply sub out a mini.

About four years in, while at a mom-to-mom market, she met current company president Janice Christensen, a stay-at-home mom selling handmade stationery. The two connected instantly. Christensen, a former high-school teacher and mom to three boys, had an affinity for a crisp spreadsheet and an

innate love of buying beautiful yet practical products. She was the perfect co-pilot for the artsy and whimsical Nora, and became the company's first employee in 2008, ultimately becoming president in 2022.

By 2004, the mini concept was a going concern, but Nora had more pressing issues on her mind. Her second child, Lila, was born with severe yet undiagnosed medical complications requiring multiple surgeries. "For two years, I was a full-time mom to Lila and Henry. People kept asking me to make more minis and go to more markets, but I felt like I couldn't commit to anything because my daughter required so much of my time."

Enter Nora's brother Jon



“

That was the heyday of the temps,” recalls Nora. “We loved the experience we got to have with our customers and fellow exhibitors. It’s not the experience you get in a showroom, but the booth was getting so big. Once we were sending two crates to Atlanta for a 10 by 30-foot booth, we gave in and got our own showroom.”

Neidlinger, an integral part of the company’s formation and success. “My brother had just graduated from college, and we soon realized that we were on to something with my concept,” says Nora. “Jon really had the business end of things down.” Motivated to make something of his sister’s artful creations, he connected with a family friend who manufactured finials for the furniture industry and tagged along on a buying trip to China. With 12 minis in his pocket, 24-year-old Jon visited a factory to find a partner to mass produce their minis, which the same factory does to this day.

While at the factory, Jon came up with the concept of replacing the ceramic stem with a silicone one, so it

stayed in place. A great idea which he never let anyone forget. There was just one problem. Factory minimums. They hadn’t bargained on having to commit to producing 144 of each mini and base, a production run that totalled \$30,000, money neither of them had. They trotted from bank to bank only to be turned down before approaching their grandmother, a retired Michigan school teacher, who traded in some investments and loaned the pair the money they needed to launch Nora Fleming.

Their first order from China arrived at their parent’s garage, and the company’s first trade show was in 2005 at the Chicago Gift Mart. “I still vividly remember writing my very first order with

Alison from A. Dodson’s on a Walgreens’ receipt pad we had grabbed. I was so excited about my first order - \$1000! – that I went behind the curtain of the booth to call my mom. I found out later that Alison heard every word!”

During the show, the company signed up five independent retail accounts, and were over the moon.

Looking back, her entrance into the market illustrates that, “Entrepreneurs don’t always need a huge cash investment to start. You don’t need a warehouse full of products to start wholesaling. Come to market and start something.”

And come to market and start something they did. For 10 years, the Nora Fleming



Nora at a store signing.



booth and company were “the” main draw at the Atlanta temps, so much so that when they’d outgrown their spot, they were reluctant to leave behind the vendors surrounding them who’d come to rely on the traffic their crazy insane booth attracted. Plus, they were having so much fun in the temporaries. Customers from back in the day may recall the various antics, including Nora walking up and down the aisles seeing how long she could balance a platter on her head.

“That was the heyday of the temps,” recalls Nora. “We loved the experience we got to have with our customers and fellow exhibitors. It’s not the experience you get in a showroom, but the booth was getting so big. Once we were sending two crates to Atlanta for a 10 by 30-foot booth, we gave in and got our own showroom.”

It’s almost impossible to imagine a brand as popular as Nora Fleming spending 10 whole years in the temporary market in Atlanta. These days, most hot new lines spend a year or so, if that, in the temps before signing with a showroom, but the Nora Fleming crew has always gone against the grain. They’re not motivated by fast growth and pushing the line into stores where it isn’t a fit, which is why they’ve been selective and deliberate with their sales structure. They’re with two smaller rep groups, Patrick & Company covering TOLA and the Harper Group covering the Northwest and mid-Atlantic. The remainder of their sales force are independent reps. “The independent reps are invaluable to us in regard to finding new stores who are the

right fit,” says Janice. “They understand the brand, what we’re looking for and what we’re not looking for. We don’t hound them to open new accounts, rather, they get good commissions from repeat orders. We count them as a super important part of our team.”

“They are an extension of our team,” adds Nora. “One of the things that is so important to us is our relationship with partners. The guys that do our website, the people that do our IT, we end phone conversations with them by saying, ‘I love you.’ Everybody can win with a positive relationship.”

#### **SLOW & DELIBERATE GROWTH**

“Very early on we started getting POs from Bed, Bath and Beyond and Target but we didn’t fill those orders. I followed my intuition which is how I run this business,” says Nora.

“Nora has always said that it’s more important what we say no to than what we say yes to,” says Janice. “Whenever we have a decision to make, we are very deliberate and thoughtful. We ask ourselves, ‘Will there be a repercussion for our customers? Does this feel right or fair?’ For example, our prices are higher on our website, and we control the Amazon channel for brand integrity and prices on Amazon are even higher. No one will ever go into a retailer and showroom them. They’re going to buy the minis and bases right there in the store which is exactly what we want them to do.”

Why did Nora decide to only sell through independent retailers? She lives by a high



Janice Christensen



They understand the brand, what we’re looking for and what we’re not looking for. We don’t hound them to open new accounts, rather, they get good commissions from repeat orders. We count them as a super important part of our team.”

moral code. “I appreciated that these small retailers took a chance on me, and I felt it was the right thing to do to support the people that first supported me.”

#### **LOYAL CUSTOMERS**

Besides not being interested in chasing fast profits, Nora realised that the line lent itself to an independent store environment vs. a

big-box merchant. The minis aren’t packaged like they would be in a big-box store to prevent theft, and it takes knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff members who are present on the floor to demonstrate the line to customers.

To ensure their retail partners are successful, an opening order with Nora Fleming is \$1400 and includes



everything a store needs to make a statement.

"How we set up our buy-in ensures we're working with stores who want to commit," says Nora. They have to buy all the seasons at once. If we get too much push back from a store owner, we say, 'If you don't have the breadth of the product, you won't be successful.' It's helped weed out people who don't understand the program or its collectability."

The basic kit includes their popular spinner display, an assortment of bases (wood, stoneware and melamine) and 20 minis. Janice says, "Our sales rep Kyle

Bergsbaken likes to tell prospective new stores, 'We've chosen the best minis and bases. This is our opening kit. You can't take away, but you can add to it.' None of the minis in the basic kit are super specific like a palm tree which won't work for all stores. We've chosen ones like the heart and double pumpkin which are going to appeal to everybody. Inevitably, stores are successful with the kit and most end up carrying 80, 90, 100 different minis."

"We want the Nora Fleming experience in a store to be special, so we choose to only sell it in so many stores (1800) and we territory protect," says Nora. "They've committed to us, and we've committed to

them. We aren't going to open accounts with every store. That's not fair to loyal customers or the new retailer interested."

"We could be twice or three times as big as we are but maybe that would have caused us to fizzle out," surmises Janice. "The way we chose to grow meant that we could manage the growth. We could manage the team and grow it at a good pace by making thoughtful, deliberate choices."



## THE SECRET SAUCE

The products themselves are simple and unassuming, yet each mini represents one of life's precious moments: a birthday, the holidays, a new baby, a girls' night out or a favorite team, and as such, the minis take on a significance for the owner, so much so that customers come out in droves whenever Nora appears at a store for a signing which she does frequently.

"I was very much pushed by my brother to go out and meet customers," says Nora of how the signings started. "He would say, 'They really like your art,' and I never understood why anyone would stand in line to have me sign something. Nine out of 10 people are there because the mini has a special meaning to them and they want to express their gratitude for something that means so much to their family. Most people have stories they are dying to share. Really the line is a legacy of celebrating the good and the bad times. There's so much bonding and sisterhood that happens during the signing sessions. It's been beyond my wildest dreams. This is my life's calling."





Nora with a customer during a store signing

## OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

In addition to the inherent stresses that come with running a business alongside parenting two children, never mind a medically complex child, in late 2019 Nora was hit with a double blow losing her brother to a tragic car accident and her partner a few months later.

As co-founder and president, Jon was involved in all facets of the business from product development and factory sourcing to licensing and collaborations, giving the company the balance of creativity and business development needed for success. After Jon's death, his wife became co-owner but a silent partner. Nora was in turmoil and Christensen quickly jumped into action, working to ensure production continued to run smoothly, maintaining the company's culture and being a much-needed shoulder for the Nora Fleming team to lean on."

"We could not be more grateful to have such a hardworking and graceful president," says Nora. "Losing Jon as my partner was devastating personally. He was the yin to my creative yang. Janice brings that business savvy and

reigns in my wildest ideas to make them marketable. I'm eternally grateful to have such visionary talent combined with realism by my side."

Surrounded by a team of people, Nora took the time she needed to grieve. "Grief can come with grace," she says. "I remember the day Jon died, I was standing in his front yard, and I made a commitment to him, his wife and children to make beauty come from this."

That doesn't mean she doesn't have dark days. "Mornings are very hard. Still, every morning, it takes me a good hour or two to get out of the resistance phase. I've surrounded myself with amazing people and I'm very verbal about my feelings. I've done a lot of introspection and a lot of spirit work, turning my grief into something good."


## THE GIFT OF GIVING

On the topic of doing good, in 2018 Nora Fleming partnered with St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, launching a limited-collection series of minis with proceeds benefitting the hospital. The first mini, the bear hug, was inspired by the red wagons that patients ride in at

the hospital. Over the years, other minis were added, and the series has raised \$1.3 million dollars to date, money which supports patients and families who never receive a bill from St. Jude for treatment, travel, housing or food because as Nora says, "All a family should worry about is helping their child live."

"We would donate to everybody and anybody before," says Nora of their decision to partner with one charity. "We sat down one day and made a concerted effort to do something amazing. We were able to make such a huge impact over five to six years."

Speaking of doing amazing things, this past year, Nora cut her signings back so she could travel the country visiting various retreats with the aim of opening her own retreat, named the Nora Fleming Foundation, on a small farm in Wisconsin.

"I'm going to build a barn for intimate gatherings of young entrepreneurs, top retailers, grief retreats and for parents with medically complex children. This is an extension of my creativity which I'm applying to a philanthropic endeavour. When you put good out there, it comes back around." 

## JUST THE FACTS

**HEAD QUARTERS & WAREHOUSE:**  
Addison, Illinois

**WAREHOUSE:**  
20,000 square feet

**ESTABLISHED:** 2004

**TOTAL MINIS CREATED:**  
300 plus 30 collegiate helmets

**FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES:** 20

**BESTSELLING SKU:**  
A02 Pumpkin

**WEBSITE:**  
[www.norafleming.com](http://www.norafleming.com)



# Chattanooga Shop Evolves from Americana Roots

By Jessica Harlan

In 1976, Susan and Rodney Bass founded Colony 13, selling American primitive furniture and accessories. As furniture became more expensive to stock, the couple decided to phase out the furniture and reposition the store as a fashion, gift and home accessories boutique. Located within a mall, the store has developed a reputation for stocking the industry's finest brands.



## JUST THE FACTS

### STORE:

Colony 13 Gifts

### LOCATION:

Chattanooga, Tenn.

**SQUARE FOOTAGE:** 3000

### EMPLOYEES:

Three full-time,  
six part-time

**WEB:** [www.colony13.com](http://www.colony13.com)

**TOP LINES:** Pandora,  
Vera Bradley, Brighton,  
Swarovski, Kendra Scott





## What makes your store special?

Our customers like the fact that our store is locally owned and family owned. Our adult son, Jeff, works alongside us in the store and will take it over when we retire.

## How would you describe the atmosphere of your store?

People describe our atmosphere as pleasant. We carry a lot of scent products, so the store smells good when you walk in. There's always music playing – country, smooth adult or oldies depending on who's working. We like to use the high-quality branded displays from our vendors; they always look good and product sells better in them. For instance, in our Brighton area

we have their big cabinet for the purses as well as their table and spinning fixture, and we also have Kendra Scott's and Beekman's displays.

## To what do you attribute your success?

I think each of our employees offers something different to the store. One likes to create our displays, so she'll change out the Pandora cabinet displays and dress the mannequin out front. Other employees are very neat and help us keep the store clean and orderly. My husband has a business degree and I have a math degree, so we're focused on the business and finance side of things. Our son oversees social media, and he's great at promoting new products and keeping things entertaining. We rely on Jeff and some of our younger employees to inform us about the latest trends.







**Our customers like the fact that our store is locally owned and family owned.**



## How do you promote your store?

We do some TV advertising for which we use a well-known Chattanooga personality who has a local show. A couple of times a year, she'll come here to film a commercial for us. We've done billboards and we advertise in little local magazines and other publications.

## What has been your most successful recent event?

Last year we did a breast cancer fundraising event through Vera Bradley, collecting donations for the company's cancer foundation. We had door prizes for the first 10 people who arrived and had other giveaways throughout the event. Our customers really enjoyed it.

## Do you have a favorite new product line?

Because we're so close to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, we've recently gotten in some Dolly shirts, purses, earrings and bracelets from Jane Marie that have done well for us.

## What is your most successful retail strategy?

Treating people the way we want to be treated. If someone comes in with something they bought that broke, we'll take care of them since many of the companies we work with have warranties. If they receive a gift they didn't like, we'll let them exchange it. We want our customers to be pleased with what they get from us. And we always try to be kind, even if someone comes in and isn't kind to us.

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

Be cash conscious and fairly conservative. When you order, you have to think, "What is the retail price going to be, and will the customer be willing to pay that price?"

## What is the one thing you want people to know about your store?

I once had a customer come into the store needing six different gifts for six different people. She was able to find something for each person on her list. It thrilled me that we had such a good variety that a customer could find something for everyone. And we have gift bags and greeting cards, so it's really a one-stop shopping experience for gifts. 📸





# Perfectly Imperfect Artwork

Welcome to the bold, bright, but perfectly imperfect world of Drew and Kim, the husband-and-wife duo behind Georgia-based DK Designs. The line was accidentally founded in February 2020 when the couple hit up their local hardware store with \$30 in hand and an itch to create something. With a sheet of plywood and some paint, Drew used a jigsaw to cut a door hanger while Kim picked up paint brushes for the very first time and discovered an innate artistic ability. The result is an unusual and intriguing line that

buyers gravitated to at market.

The wholesale line launched this past January and included door hangers to fit any occasion in various sizes (23 inches, 24 and 30). If whimsical is one of the style aesthetics your clients gravitate to, you'd be hard pressed not to find a hanger or two you love. In addition to hangers for each season and reason, there are also blank hangers and wreaths sold with mini-interchangeable signs, along with double-sided, UV-resistant garden flags. ([www.dkdesignsgeorgia.com](http://www.dkdesignsgeorgia.com))

## Get Cozy

Comfy slippers, robes and loungewear are all the rage and Kozie has us dreaming of snuggling up on the couch with a comfy book, so we're betting your customers will feel exactly the same way. The textures and designs are not only trendy but also made of super luxurious materials with beautiful artwork available to help you sell the line via instore signage and social media posts. The line includes a wide variety of one-size-fits-most socks, slippers, robes and throws. ([www.roadrunnersllc.com](http://www.roadrunnersllc.com))





# On the Rocks

Every season Mad Men comes up to market with creative new gift ideas for men which is not an easy task. By remaining focused on creating gifts, gadgets, and gear for guys, the company manages to pull out all the stops year after year, introducing new items and creating new trends. They didn't disappoint at the January markets, bringing out numerous new skus. The ones we love the most were the shaped whisky cubes designed to resemble bullets, basketballs, footballs and more things that guys love. ([www.nicolebrayden.com](http://www.nicolebrayden.com))

## Man Cans

Finally, another fantastic gift item for guys, The Man Can, from Thousand Oaks Barrel, are paint cans filled with everything needed to make a variety of concoctions including moonshine, whisky, spiced rum, martinis and more. Complete with a can opener, the kits wholesale between \$40 and \$45.

This is just the latest innovation from Thousand Oaks Barrel which sells fantastic entertaining gifts and gadgets including smokers and smoking kits for food and cocktails, wood chips for cocktail smokers, drinking games, infusion kits and flavored glitter mix which can be added to alcohol in place of a juice or soda to make drinks sparkle and shine. ([www.1000oaksbarrel.com](http://www.1000oaksbarrel.com))



## Get Slushing

With cocktail mixes all the rage, now is the time to get into the drink mix game. At market in January, we loved this new slushy drink mix line from D'Marie. The all-natural mixes are like magic, transforming wine or spirits into a frozen cocktail without ice or a blender. D'Marie is owned by Dianna Dunlevy, who runs the small business from Chagrin, Ohio where all the mixes are made in small batches. After many years in the food industry, catering and listening to what people had a taste for, in 2006 Dunlevy developed an all-natural mix that turned spirits into a slush. She had been focusing on restaurant sales before entering the wholesale gift market this year. The way the wholesale program works is that the consumer pours wine or alcohol into the pouch, shakes it thoroughly and then places it in the freezer for three to five hours until slushed. From Mimosas and Frozen Jack and Cokes to Sangria the line offers that and much more. ([www.dmarieinc.com](http://www.dmarieinc.com))



## Spreading Happiness

After years of owning a home decor business, Rachel Walker finally reignited with her first passion, designing and creating, and launched Happy By Rachel in 2022. The desire was to get back to her true love and create products that bring joy and happiness to the smallest of situations, and they were certainly creating a lot of excitement at market. From tea towels, party cups and notepads to pillows, hats and stickers, Rachel's unique artwork adorns each item, lending them warmth and grace. The artist has also partnered with Swig on a line of football tailgate tumblers. ([www.happybyrachel.com](http://www.happybyrachel.com))



## Making Spirits Bright

The Southern Spirit is another line that made their market debut this past winter. The handcrafted cocktail infusion kits are assembled in Bellville, Texas by a team of mothers, daughters and friends who roll up their sleeves, slice, dice and dehydrate fresh produce and bake flavor-infused organic sugar to create unique artisanal cocktail flavors.

"We believe gatherings with family and friends should be full of intent," says company founder Micah. "We pour time, energy and joy into our cocktail infusions to create connection. With every purchase, five percent of proceeds are donated to a featured charity, always, because that is The Southern Spirit. Being a woman-owned business from the South, the southern spirit embodies all things hospitality and that is what I want our brand to represent. If you enter a home in the South, you are greeted with a warm smile, a giant embrace, and big glass of . . . well, you decide!" ([www.thesouthernspirit.com](http://www.thesouthernspirit.com))



## All in the Details

Tea towels can be found in almost every gift collection on the market but what drew us to these towels from Wildwood Landing were the dainty pom-pom and fringe detail company founder Lori added this year. The towels are available in a variety of styles for different seasons and reasons, including state-themed and custom. The tea towels complement other soft and hard goods in the line including mugs, coasters, wine bags, wall art, pillows, apparel, pet products and more. Lori's goal for Wildwood Landing is simple: to bring laughter and kind words into your day. Why? "Because we all need laughter, and we all need a kind word." ([www.wildwoodlanding.com](http://www.wildwoodlanding.com))



## Plush Supporting Barbara Knight Foundation

A portion of sales from Giffa's new Barbara Knight Foundation (BKF) plush collection will be donated back to the foundation in honor of Barbara Knight who passed away earlier this year. She was the owner of Just Got 2 Have It! sales agency as well as a well-loved colleague and friend to many in the industry.

Giffa, which is a division of Goffa USA, stands for "Gifts from the Heart" and all animals in the BKF line are named after Barbara, her daughter and husband.

The foundation provides financial assistance to Acute Myeloid Leukemia patients, contributes to AML research and brings awareness to the need for bone marrow donors. ([www.goffausa.com](http://www.goffausa.com))



## Junk Magicians



The creative trio behind the brand Junk Gypsy have seen their unique aesthetic grow from a store in Texas to multiple HGTV TV shows. Now, after creating lines for other companies like QVC and Pottery Lane, this women-owned and women-run brand is turning their hand toward a wholesale collection for the independent gift market, guided by industry veterans George and Sue Kacic from Margins USA.

The line launched in January with much fanfare and includes everything from apparel, fashion accessories and jewelry to seasonal decorations, tumblers and home decor. The items are priced to sell thanks to the deft hands of the Kacics and their knowledge of the market. ([www.darrahreps.com](http://www.darrahreps.com))

# Kick Start Your Sales

## The Promos and Events Currently Driving Sales

By Erica Kirkland

**We asked our reporting store owners to dish the goods on the events and promotions they're using which draw the most traffic – and sales!**

### Food for Thought

Gourmet food has taken the gift industry by storm in the last few years, along with cocktail mixes. For years, store owners were hesitant to add food to the mix. Many store owners needed convincing that sampling was the right technique to deploy in a boutique. Today, so many store owners are tapped into the selling potential of sampling and their sales of food are skyrocketing. As a store owner in Illinois says, "Active food and wine sampling gets us immediate returns."

Adding new consumable lines which excite customers and bring them back in for more time and again are great ways to maintain foot traffic throughout the year. Priced right, and sampled, gourmet food is also an impulse buy which helps to increase your average sale price.

### For a Good Cause

Partnering with charities is a great way to show your customers that you're a business that likes to give back. These types of events are always a win-win-win for the charity, store and customer.

A store owner from Ohio shares, "A couple times a year I plan a cause-marketing event where we help a group in the community. When our customers donate to the cause, they receive 30 percent off one regular-priced item. People love to see us helping the community. It brings people in, creates good mojo for the cause and for us because we've brought it to light."

### Store Switch-Up

Sometimes all that's required to kick start your sales is elbow grease. Remerchandise your feature displays, including your window, one by one, so all areas of your store are fresh and exciting for customers when they walk in.

Another store owner from Ohio told us, "Every time I redo my main displays and flip some areas of the store, sales increase. Every single time. It's a ton of work, but so worth it to add a bit of new to the old so it all looks new! We try and do this at least every six weeks."

### Cater to the Canine Companions

Our four-legged friends are the pride of many of our customers, and throwing an event for them is a great way to connect with customers and their cuddly friends.

In New York, a store owner shares, "We're working on a birthday 'pawty' for our canine friends and their people

during our local Chowderfest weekend. We're also planning to create a 'souper' window display."

### Rise Together

We are stronger when we work together. Store owners that cultivate relationships with other local businesses to create and promote events, report these initiatives are always worthwhile. Being an independent store owner is hard enough. Why not band together with other like-minded store owners?

The last retailer we quoted from Ohio urges others to: "Form relationships with other local businesses! Partner up and do promos. We're doing a Bingo event with five other retailers this March, and we always partner with a local florist for a Mother's Day giveaway. I think it's going to be a rough year - get all the support you can from people who can help." 🐾

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#### ABOUT

*Giftbeat* tracks the top 10 vendors in 50+ product categories, garnering this vital information from a stable of 300 reporting stores across the country. *Giftbeat* makes no warranty or guarantee, express or implied, regarding potential sales of any products referred to in the publication. *Giftbeat* is owned and operated by *Instore Magazine Inc.*

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