

Mackinac Island: Tourists Want To Stretch Dollars



With the economy in the dumps across the U.S., gift and souvenir shop owners are seeing changes in their businesses, although perhaps not in the ways people might expect.

Patty Schoenborn of Birches on Market Street on Mackinac Island says her tea sets are still one of the store's most popular items. The store's china is all made in the United States. "We've seen a big increase in people trying to find things that are made in the United States that are economical," she said.

These days, Mrs. Schoenborn says people have a \$20 price point they will not exceed when buying sweatshirts, and a \$30 price point for American goods. "I don't know if it's just being able to find other things out there," she said, "like Walmart and K-mart carrying certain touristy products with logos of the area. They're starting to do that in some places. In Florida, they do it all the time. I've seen it in Walmart in Florida, all over near Disney World. It just depends, I think, on where the person's traveled to and from, the places that they've explored," whether they will buy a souvenir on the Island or look for a cheaper one in a discount chain store.



Lisa Winkelman, an employee of the Jaunting Cart on Market Street for four years, says her china sales are down slightly this year. The most popular things in the store now are Irish items, like heraldic (coat of arms) keychains based on the customer's last name, or Irish Tigers shirts and other items, which celebrate the Detroit Tigers with an Irish theme. Mrs. Winkelman says the Irish Tigers items may be popular because they are not common downstate.

The only change Mrs. Winkelman has seen in customer habits lately is that they are purchasing more items for themselves. "With a tighter budget," she said, "maybe they take that one person off the list of people they need to buy gifts for."

Dawn Metevia, the buyer for Great Turtle Toys and Flagship stores, says she's seeing a shift to more

practical purchases. "There are a lot of trends toward toys that have a dual purpose," she said, "where they're fun for the kids but they're also educational. The parents are willing to spend money on toys if [their children] are going to learn something while they're doing it. . . . When I did my ordering, I adjusted toward that because, you know, they've got to make their money go the furthest they can."

Her stores have also seen a shift toward "green" products that help protect the environment, like toys made out of recycled milk jugs, she said. The popular items that never change, she says, are stuffed animals and the joke and novelty products. "Plush toys always sell well," she said. "Any kind of stuffed animals sell well, and any kind of novelty stuff. If it makes a [funny] noise, it sells. No matter what age, kids will love that stuff."

Renee Amacher is also familiar with the popularity of novelty items. This is her second summer working for Doc's Magic Shop on Main Street. The most popular items they carry, she says, are sunglasses with plastic strips across the eyes instead of lenses, and aviator sunglasses, which the store began stocking this year. The most expensive items in the store, Miss Amacher says, are the magic tricks, with some costing up to \$30.

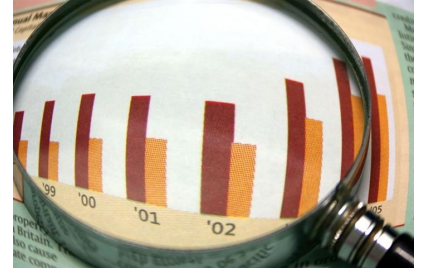


Despite new efforts to draw people in, like the sale section added to the store this year, Miss Amacher says there is a palpable decrease in business. "Last summer, I was packed from one end of the store to the other, from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. We were doing well, we were booked, and I was selling to everyone. This year it's just a few here and a few there."

An unexpected shopper demand this year reached the Michigan Peddler Gifts shop on Main Street. Eizabeth York, general manager of Michigan Peddler, Destination Mackinac, and Whimsey's, says many customers this year have inquired about Petoskey stones.

"Our supplier is telling us that Petoskey stones are getting harder and harder to find," she said. "Their theory, and I have a tendency to agree with them, is that the majority of the Petoskey stones are found on the west side of the state. We haven't had a lot of hard winters with that wave action, and you need that wave action to roll the stones up on the beach, so supply has cut back. People who used to have them as kids and have lost them over the years take their kids out to the beach and they can't find them like they used to, so they come in here, and we've got the polished ones and the polishing kits."

Another change is that customers are increasingly interested in clothing with subdued artwork. "Continually, what I've seen over a five-year period when people walk in this store is that a lot of the shops have glaring, 'Mackinac Island!' everywhere. A lot of people are coming in here and saying, 'Oh. This is small!'" she said. "They're not looking for it to be flash and gleam, at least not for our shop, maybe for other shops. Maybe it's because we cater to an older clientele. That's the only thing that I can think of. So the last few years we have gone smaller and smaller on the decals that we put on."



She believes she has the same number of people coming into her stores, but they are not spending as much as they used to. "They're buying one less sweatshirt," she said. "They used to come in and buy a jar of jelly and a sweatshirt. Now they're not buying that sweatshirt. What do they use it for? An extra tank of gas. Gas last year was really a factor. This year it's still too early in the season to see what the gas prices are doing, but I'm still finding that people are buying one bag instead of two. I'm still getting the same amount of people, still getting the same number of sales, my computers show that. Consistently, I can see I've got 60 sales this day, 60 sales last year, 57 the year before, but the dollar is down. "I think people are being more frugal."

By **Jane Alexander**

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