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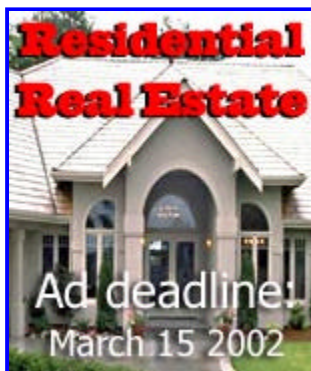
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For Christmas retailers, ability to keep cash registers jingling all year is a gift

December 27, 1999

By: Omar Perez

When the crowds are gone and the local-mall Santa Claus returns to his 9-to-5 job, the only remnants of Christmas shopping in most stores are post-holiday sales and empty boxes.

But for a handful of South Florida entrepreneurs — owners of The Christmas Shoppe, The Christmas Store, and The Christmas Palace — Christmas is a year-round season. So how do they survive the rest of the year?

Some are doing so by not confining themselves solely to Christmas decorations and are selling gifts geared to other holidays. Others stay open by selling holiday-style decorations, such as festive lights, throughout the year. And still others do well from the year-long supply of tourists from abroad.

At The Christmas Shoppe in South Miami-Dade, which in its early years made 90 percent of its revenues from September to December, the key to surviving past the Christmas holidays was promoting the other holidays. Now, by including items related to St. Valentine's Day and other occasions, the small store has reduced to 60 percent of annual sales the money it gets from the pre-Christmas run-up, says owner Joey Mettley. She says she'd like to see that number at 50 percent.

"Having the last four months of the year for the most sales puts too many eggs in one basket," she says.

Most of her customers are locals that are already established customers, Mettley says. She also sends mailings.

She puts aside a lot of the money she makes during the high-sale season to pay expenses during the rest of the year.

Says Scott Krugman, a spokesman for the National Retail Federation: "It seems like a business that is feast or famine. I would imagine there are some sour times for these stores." But he adds that selling high-end products helps offset losses during the rest of the year.

"The kind of stuff they're selling is keepsake and high-end, and people will turn those to heirlooms."

Indeed, whether it's Easter or Mother's Day, Mettley has learned never to stock products that larger stores offer, since larger stores usually can offer the same items at lower prices.

For example, Mettley dropped items like ribbons when larger retailers such as Michael's Arts & Crafts moved into town and offered ribbons at much lower prices, not making it cost-effective for Mettley to continue offering them.

Instead Mettley's store, like most other Christmas stores, sells high-end items such as Department 56 miniature lighted ceramic villages, Boyds Bears and porcelain dolls. Mettley says those products sell year-round, with miniature villages topping the list at about \$400,000 in sales a year.

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Not all Christmas store owners, however, believe in diversifying. Some prefer to stay with their namesake holiday every day.

"We're strictly Christmas all year long," says Betty Weber, assistant to the owner of Fort Lauderdale's A Christmas Place. "People expect that when they walk in."

Naturally, Weber says, most of their sales are in November and December. But the store, which she says has been in business for 29 years, tried St. Valentine's Day and Halloween themes several years ago, but that didn't work.

Among the items they sell most during the nonholiday period are strands of lights, which they sell to bars and restaurants and stores.

One group that helps flatten the seasonal spikes at Christmas stores are Latin American tourists. The Christmas Palace, with locations in Hialeah Gardens and near Sawgrass Mills in Sunrise, is doing year-round business with visitors from abroad.

"South Americans are our big push," says Jimmy Knips, who owns The Christmas Palace and 'Tis the Season, a Miami-based company that exports Christmas goods to about 500 stores, many of them in South America. "[Tourists] buy things here because they are cheaper than in other countries."

Some of the hot items at Christmas Palace are collectibles such as Lladró porcelain figurines and Christopher Radko glass ornaments, says Guillermo Valle, manager of the Hialeah Christmas Palace.

The stores' locations, one near a large mall and another right off the Palmetto Expressway, help draw tourists, Valle says. Tourists make up about 75 percent of his customers during the off-season. During the holidays the ratio of tourists to locals is 50-50, Knips estimates.

Tourists notwithstanding, he says his best sales are September to December.

One major means to stay afloat is to be consistent in pricing.

Christmas Shoppe owner Mettley recommends resisting the temptation of discounts or blowouts. "We stick with our prices because we don't get big returns," she says.

"We'll reduce our inventory, but we don't put everything on sale. Because wherever you go, something will be worth \$10 on the 24th, and \$5 on the 26th."

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