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Lamorinda Retail Wards Off the Pessimists

By Sophie Braccini



Venture Quality Goods owners Tom and Rosylyn Stenzel

from all over the Bay Area - other retailers got creative. "We thought we'd do something crazy," said Venture Quality Goods' co-owner Tom Stenzel, who sent a Black Friday email blast to Venture customers offering a free sale item with the purchase of any regular item. It was a real door buster for the Mount Diablo Boulevard store. "We did twice as well as last year; the store was bustling all day," said co-owner Rosylyn Stenzel.

"We provide an alternative to the usual craziness of holiday shopping," added Tom Stenzel, "and because we offer unique quality clothing that people can't find somewhere else in the East Bay, they come here."

The Stenzels noted that customers like shopping in a store where the atmosphere is relaxed and it's easy to find a parking space - a sentiment shared by customers at Across the Way in Moraga. Manager Susan Marconi has been selling top-of-the-line accessories for the home and garden for seven years in the Moraga Shopping Center, 'across the way' from Moraga Hardware and Lumber, and is very happy with the beginning of the season. This year the store ordered a conservative number of the LED ornaments, but by Dec. 7, it had already sold half of them, "and there is no way to re-order," Marconi said. She, too, believes that shoppers understand that buying locally benefits the community, and when they can find the quality they seek at a good price, they will frequent local businesses. "Le Creuset cookware is a good example (of my competitiveness), the sale price of big chain retail is my regular price," she said.

Sweet Dreams Candy and Toys in Orinda's Theatre Square is also looking for ways to keep shoppers away from the Walnut Creek chain stores and manager Connie King says that the holiday celebration for families, offered by the Square's owner, was the right idea. "So many people came for the Holiday Winter Wonderland and tree lighting ceremony with a lot of activities for the kids," she said, adding that it was a great way to keep people in town and out of Walnut Creek. GLL Real Estate Partners offered a series of events for the community (see related story on page A1) that translated for some into purchasing.

Creating an experience and a community feel is the recipe that seems to be working for these local retailers. J. Colleen Boutique owner Julie Rubio agreed. "People like coming here away from massive shopping to find something unique. They are getting the concept of sophisticated boutiques where they get a whole experience," she said. Customers came to her Lafayette Circle store Dec. 7 as part of Small Business Saturday for the sophisticated women's fashions - along with chocolate and champagne. Then a large crowd arrived for a first reading of the book "Trap The Elf" by local author Susan Oppelt, and afterward mothers and their children happily explored the many areas of the store. "Since the beginning of the month we've been doing very well," said Rubio. "Creating a whole artistic experience for our shoppers as well as showcasing unique designers is what we are about."

More good fun and bargains are yet to come in Lamorinda. For example, the big end-of-the-year sale is still on the horizon at Orchard. "We start by discounting 20 percent on Dec. 22, all the way to 50 percent on Dec. 27," said Martinez about the popular year-end event. "It is so funny; people come in advance, spot what they want - some even try to hide some items to be sure to be able to purchase them on the 27th!"

Lamorinda retail is not short on fun and cheer.

While some analysts say retailers didn't get what they wanted from Black Friday and they will need to make it up in the next few weeks, several Lamorinda retailers are saying sales have been strong thanks to some creative thinking that has pulled the community into the smaller stores and away from big box retail.

Orchard Nursery, which has been in Lafayette since 1946, has seen ups and downs, and felt the sting of the recession over the past four years, but has seen a change in 2013. "We've sold in one weekend (Dec. 6 and 7) as many Christmas trees as we did since 2011," said Chris Martinez, an Orchard manager who's been working at the nursery for more than 30 years. "What we sell is discretionary, so when the economy is down, we suffer, and we've had a rough patch since 2008. But this year people feel more confident. They are buying more, earlier; we even sold 11-foot Christmas trees last Saturday." Owner Tom Courtright added that sales of Christmas trees and ornaments started earlier this year, with 20 percent of last year's total sales sold during the month of November. "I'm happy!" he said.

While Orchard didn't do any special promotions for Black Friday - they rely on their reputation and their Christmas boutique that attracts generations of shoppers



Across the Way Business Manager Susan Marconi



Andrew Wylie, Connie King, and Kent Rothfuss at Sweet Dreams

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