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IN THE NEWS: GIFT BASKETS

Gift basket industry veterans see plenty of market potential

By Joanne Friedrich

Even in tough economic times, the gift basket business - whether as part of a larger retail concept or operating as a stand-alone concept - has held its own.

Shirley Frazier, founder and president of Sweet Survival, a gift basket business consulting company based in Paterson, N.J., said despite a slowing economy, the gift basket industry has seen about a 3 percent increase in total sales in the past year.

Retailers, she noted, have found gift baskets work in a variety of price points and for different occasions. "Stores have added gift baskets because it's easy to offer it in a theme," she added.

Frazier, who began as a retailer in 1990 before moving into business consulting, said while gift baskets are an attractive impulse purchase for key events such as birthdays, get well, thank you and holidays, retailers have to help those customers along with a dozen or more in-store selections.

"The customer is a visual person," she explained. "They want to see what you have to offer." To aid this, Frazier suggested retailers place gift baskets at the front counter, in a window display or throughout the store as part of a cross-merchandising effort.

She also encourages retailers to sample in store those items found in the gift baskets. This way, she said, "they (the purchasers) can enjoy it themselves and know that the recipient will like it, too."



Themed gift baskets help purveyors tap into various markets, from thank you to sympathy to new home ownership.

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As a gift basket purveyor without a storefront, Elissa GoldbergBelle, owner of It's A Wrap in Springfield, Ill., said gift basket sellers need to go beyond the creative end of the business and look at themselves as salespeople.

GoldbergBelle, who has been in business nine years, said while the traditional themes have worked well for the industry, knowing what's happening in your area can signal potential sales.

Early retirement programs may spawn business for retirement gifts, while the current activity in the real estate market offers opportunities for new home-related gifts.

There's even a market, GoldbergBelle said, for realtors and builders "to thank hard-working mortgage lenders who have pushed through the paperwork."

Hitting the streets to market your gift baskets is also critical for an operator, she said. "A lot of gift basket people have the naïve notion that if I make a pretty package, they'll call me," GoldbergBelle said.

She said it's important to think about the business as other sales professionals do - which involves making cold and "warmed" calls and targeting potential customers.

Gift baskets are natural offerings for hotels, event planners and conference organizers, she said. And even if you've contacted them in the past, personnel changes may bring new opportunities.

"The gift basket professional needs to work on developing leads every day," GoldbergBelle said.

Keeping current with trends in packaging and design is important as well, Frazier and GoldbergBelle noted.

Both emphasized the movement away from traditional containers and into more useful items, such as tea cups and mugs or even wagons and hat boxes.

Frazier suggested flower pots or a coiled garden hose could serve as the base for a garden-related gift basket. GoldbergBelle noted she's been successful with gifts that offer "comfort foods" such as salty and sweet snacks, candies and soda. Sometimes the items are stacked together, other times they are offered in a popcorn bucket.

These snack-oriented offerings fill the niche of the reasonably priced gift, she said, which is being sought more often these days.



Julie Gainey, president of Gift Basket Supplies Inc., Brockton, Mass., has also witnessed the move away from traditional baskets and related supplies at her 30-year-old company.

Chelsea Market Baskets uses a variety of containers, including stacked boxes.

The growth, Gainey said, came during the 1980s and 1990s, as the industry moved away from traditional fruit baskets into more gourmet items. "Food is a wonderful gift," she said. "And it's not a frivolous thing."

By the 2000s, she said, "we were seeing any type of container," ranging from bags and tins to wire baskets, crates and hampers. Stackable boxes, Gainey said, have appeal because "every box is a surprise. They're not sure what it will contain."

Also popular, Gainey said, are the additions that dress up a gift, such as flowers or Mylar sheets, along with the usual bows and ribbon.

And with the war in Iraq still under way at press time, Gainey said items with a patriotic theme have become more in demand.

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