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## Independent Stores Pump Up the Perks to Lure Shoppers

In these tough economic times, what's a store to do to make sure it's still in business a year from now?

"Get a tarot card reader," said Emese Boone, owner of Box Turtle in Little Rock, Ark.

And she's not kidding -- Boone hired a local tarot card reader to give free readings during a recent jewelry trunk show in her clothing, jewelry and housewares shop.

Retailers like Boone are hoping special events, classes, blood pressure screenings and even career counseling will inspire shoppers to keep on shopping during the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

Boone has also hosted a cocktail party and a book signing and started a rewards program that gives customers a 20 percent discount every time they spend \$500 in her store.

"The place is like a party," says Tanya Fitzgerald, a customer who discovered the shop through its special events. "It's more fun and personal."

Do these perks translate into dollars? Not necessarily. And it costs money to pay for entertainment and refreshments. Still, shop owners think it's worth a try.

Tamara Lee, owner of Brooklyn Mercantile in New York, is teaming up with a local nurse practitioner who will conduct free breast cancer and blood pressure screenings, as well as free nutrition workshops at Lee's store.

In addition to her usual sewing and craft workshops, Lee plans to enlist a career coach who will offer guidance to customers. Her shop had already become a local gathering place for those interested in do-it-yourself activities, but even those have suffered.

"Because of the economic climate, people are worried about their work lives, they're cutting back on extraneous spending and looking inward," said Lee. "They want to do things to fix up their homes without spending money."

Still, independent businesses are managing to hold on during the downturn.

Holiday sales declined an average of 5 percent at independent stores last year, according to research by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. Overall December retail sales were down 9.8 percent from the previous year, according to the Commerce Department.

The picture was bleaker for Sasha Wingate, who saw sales decline 40 percent over the holidays at her San Francisco store BellJar, which sells an eclectic mix of soap, candles, jewelry, clothing and updated vintage furniture.

"The economy has drastically affected my business," she said.

She's taken to throwing evening parties with specialty cocktails, live entertainment and an "eccentric Victorian photographer" to entice customers. She's also offering exhibits by local artists and free workshops in knitting, leather crafting and building a shadow box.

A neighborhood walk sponsored by local businesses also helped. "It helped bring people in. There was so much publicity and so many people came out," she said.

When 200 customers crowded into Longfellow Books in Portland, Maine, for a local author's book launch party, co-owner Chris Bowe was thrilled that it produced 100 sales; that more than made up for all the hot dogs he gave away.

Bowe believes that developing a personal connection with his customers is good for business. That's why the shop sends out personalized birthday cards, which include a 25 percent discount certificate, and offer Longfellow Dollars, a rewards program that gives 6 percent back on every five items bought.



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Ellen Murphy, a retired lawyer who recently moved to Portland from New York, said that even in a tough economy she was willing to skip discounts at big chain stores in favor of local shops like Bowe's.

"I don't want to live in a Wal-Mart world and I want to preserve neighborhood identity," she said.

Bowe's worried about that, too, but more pressingly he wants to be sure he can give health insurance to his employees.

"There's a sense of community here, a sense that we're in this recession together," Bowe said.

(Source: Associated Press, 03/26/09)

**What's In It For You:** Recently we reported restaurants using these kind of unique promotional techniques to entice diners through their doors. Now retailers kick in. The promotions can work if they are relevant to the shoppers being targeted. When conducting your client needs analysis, listen to what your retailer really wants to achieve, get a feel for their customers (beyond the "50 percent men, 50 percent women, upscale, college grad..." cliches). Ask about them rather than talk about your station. Then use your well-honed networking skills to create partnerships that work for everyone involved. Many retail promotional strategies can be combined with sponsorship opportunities for other clients.

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