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Souvenir Savvy



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EVERY SUMMER, MILLIONS of people “hit the trail” for vacations to any number of tourist destinations the world over. The call of the open road is particularly embedded in the all-American summer road trip—and shopping for souvenirs is synonymous with the experience. From national parks, zoos, museums and monuments to amusement parks, airports and sports arenas, it is difficult to visit most tourist destinations and not have to walk by—if not through—a souvenir shop.

In the United States alone, mass-produced souvenir sales account for a significant portion of the more than \$20 billion annual sales in the Souvenir-Gift-Novelty retail sector—selling in more than 30,000 locations, each averaging less than 1,500 sq. ft., with nearly 75 percent operated by four or less employees.

The benefits of souvenir sales include improving the local economy, providing mementos for visitors, marketing the local attraction via branded product and providing valuable revenue streams for the local organization. Be it a pair of Mickey Mouse ears or a Grand Canyon T-shirt, souvenirs are part of the material culture of travel.

Frankly, this is nothing new, as the souvenir industry with its long and illustrious history proves. It has been noted that roaming Egyptians brought home mementos from their travels, and during the Middle Ages, arts and crafts were brought back by European explorers, crusaders and conquering armies from faraway lands. The 1400s experienced a rising demand for religious relics as a result of pilgrimages to Holy Roman Empire sites, including gathered bits of stone, wood and cloth, as well as soil, bone and water from venerated sites. Such was the demand that Medieval caretakers, concerned with looting and



vandalism, produced tokens—mementos that symbolized the sacred nature of the locations—thereby starting the manufacturing and trade in souvenirs particular for travelers.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, colonialists waved the flames of desire for exotic cultures and products from the Caribbean, Africa and the Americas, and Italian antiquities were all the rage amongst wealthy aristocratic travelers as part of the popular European Grand Tour circuit.

The expansion of National Parks and large public events, such as the Chicago World's Fair in 1883, all helped to fuel a demand for souvenirs for a more mobile, curious and growing population.

Political campaign souvenirs were early popular mass-produced items, and by 1903, it was reported that more than 30 souvenir shops lined Pennsylvania Avenue between the Capitol and the White House. Cheaper airfare and the expansion of airport retailing fueled further growth in the


late '70s and '80s, and online sales, “retail-tainment” destination malls and theme parks added even more growth in the 1990s to present day.

Souvenir shops represent a unique role in the retail landscape. The range of what constitutes a souvenir shop is wide—as is the product and clientele base. From the fine art gallery stores for serious collectors to the slat-wall shops crammed with shot glasses, every tourist's taste and whim seems to be covered.

And, while the challenges for effective souvenir store design and merchandising are similar to other retail sectors, there are a few exceptions given the transient nature of the customer base, including generous shop entrances, extra aisle room for strollers and luggage-wielding shoppers and flexible limited space for a disparate range of both high- and low-end priced product.

For some souvenir shops, it also is important that the store environment speaks to the integrity of the featured institution or organization's aesthetic and mission. And as always: location, location, location.

Being attentive and responsive to souvenir trends is equally important with new generations of travelers interested in both mass- and non-mass product, with an emphasis on unique, locally made, environmentally friendly products.

So, the next time you find yourself in a souvenir store, perhaps both dazed and dazzled by all the products, remember that you are participating in one of the greatest ongoing chapters in retail. 

BASED IN NEW YORK, PETER-TOLIN BAKER IS ACTIVELY INVOLVED WITH RETAIL DESIGN AND VISUAL MERCHANDISING VIA P-T B DESIGN SERVICES (OWNER), THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (ADJUNCT PROFESSOR), RETAIL DESIGN INSTITUTE NY CHAPTER (BOARD PRESIDENT), AND AS A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO DESIGN+RETAIL.