Commentary

A New Year to Focus on Customers



Scott C. Borowsky

Quotable

"Retail is a customer business. You're trying to take care of the customer—solve something for the customer. And there's no way to learn that in the classroom or in the corner office, or away from the customer. You've got to be in front of the customer."

- Erik Nordstrom, President, Nordstrom Direct

The New Year comes on the heels of two extraordinarily difficult years worldwide. We hope our readership and advertisers will stay safe and healthy in the New Year.

This issue is full of interesting stories to inspire you to make your store the best it can be in 2022. There is an expanded Special Gifts Section that covers gift trends at sports fan and Minor League stores, country stores, pet boutiques, museum stores, gift shops and boutiques, and others.

We also cover trends in wearables at resort, college, baby and apparel stores. And, for the first time in two years, we resume our hospital store coverage with the story on jewelry sales that includes interviews with hospital store employees in Illinois, Minnesota and Montana.

Also part of our jewelry coverage in this issue is a story on jewelry selling at boutique and jewelry stores, and jewelry sales trends at caves and caverns.

We also offer a story on sales trends in stationery, Hallmark and floral stores for Mother's Day, Father's Day and Nurse's Day, and a home décor article that contains interviews with botanical garden retail officials in Arizona, New Mexico, Ohio, the Bronx New York and Virginia.

The issue additionally offers articles on home décor merchandise at botanical garden gift stores, souvenirs at public lands, edible gifts at candy stores, Halloween goods at party and hardware stores, and toy best-sellers at toy stores,

I hope you enjoy the issue. Please email me with your comments, questions or suggestions at editorsgnmag@kanec.com. You can also get in touch by visiting SGN on Facebook. And don't miss additional ads and a selection of print articles on the SGN website, www.sgnmag.com.

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America's National Parks™ store staff members, from left to right, Nashalie Agosto, Angel Rosa and Ana de Jesús, at San Juan National Historic Site in San Juan, Puerto Rico. See the Public Lands Stores story for an interview with Eastern National Merchandise Manager Julianna Haviv. Eastern National handles the site's store and many other public lands retail outlets, focusing on merchandise that promotes education.



Best-Selling Souvenirs at Public Lands Retailers

By Sara Karnish

Education and conservation are the two overarching missions of public lands. The souvenirs and books available in their gift shops reflect this mission, with an assortment of merchandise representing many aspects of these areas.

David Blacker, executive director of Death Valley Natural History Association, managing partner of Death Valley National Park (DVNP) in Death Valley, Calif., said their best-selling souvenir remains the classic tee. "It's one thing that everybody is predisposed to buying. It's the fact of being able to brag—you're bragging about places you've been. We've also seen things like stickers really take off over the last year. Anywhere from the regular size to 3-inch stickers. People are putting them on water bottles, laptops. I've doubled the number of stickers I'm carrying." As a national park, Blacker said any souvenirs he wants to sell must be approved by the U.S. Park Service for their educational value. This oversight is a positive for their retail operation: "It makes us look for items that are better quality, better fits for our location." Their merchandise strives for authenticity and accurate representation of different elements of the park. For instance, Blacker said, "We do plush toys, but they are realistic-looking desert animals." Death Valley is well-known for its extremely hot, dry climate, the result of its below-sea-level basin, steady drought, and record summer heat, according to the DVNP website.



An America's National Parks™ store at Faneuil Hall, Boston National Historical Park. This and other Eastern National stores creates new products by adapting museum artifacts and images into something a visitor can take home. New merchandise is also sometimes found at trade shows with products being tested at multiple locations.

Basic tees are also a standout seller at The Rookery Nature Store at Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR) in Oak Harbor, Ohio, according to Nature Store Clerk **Julia Hinca**. "Our best-sellers have been adult apparel items, specifically T-shirts. Tees have been selling consistently online and in person. We added some 'unique to our location' and custom designs which have been a hit! We also made a custom photo calendar which has sold well. Customizing our items has drawn attention and sales," she said. According to the refuge's website, the organization manages over 6,500 acres of wetland, grassland, and wooded habitat. It provides valuable habitat for a diversity of waterfowl and other migratory birds, resident wildlife, and endangered and threatened species.

Debby Crain, retail operations director of Sequoia Parks Conservancy, oversees the Visitor Center stores in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks and Lake Kaweah in California. Stores range in size from 2,500 to 200 square feet. Overall, "I would say apparel, pins, patches, stickers, plush and puzzles have been the best-selling items for us in the past year. Apparel probably because people want to buy something useful that doesn't just sit there and collect dust. Pins, patches, and stickers are small and travel well and people like collecting them. Stickers are used a lot on people's

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reusable water bottles. It shows off where they have been, what they believe in, et cetera. Plush is always a strong item for kids and even adults, especially if they have just seen them in the parks or they are just one of their favorites. Puzzles have done really well since COVID hit and people are looking for things to do that all members of the family can take part in," she said.

Julianna Haviv is the Merchandise Manager for Eastern National, a nonprofit cooperating association, supporting the interpretive, educational, and scientific programs and services of the National Park Service and other public trust partners. "We operate at over 175 of the nation's most significant cultural, historical, and recreational destinations in 33 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and US Virgin Islands," Haviv explained. As a public land partner, Eastern National focuses largely on merchandise that promotes education. "Among our best-selling interpretive products across all of our locations is our Passport To Your National Parks® program," Haviv said. "This program consists of books, an annual series of commemorative stamps, collectibles, apparel, and accessories. The books allow visitors to collect those famous ink cancellations at nearly every park in the National Park Service system." Additionally, "each individual location always does well with custom apparel, reproductions, paper products like postcards and wall prints, drinkware, ornaments, and small collectibles like pins, patches, and hiking stick medallions. Because we are an educational and interpretive retailer, each location's exclusive and custom assortment is unique and tells the story of the themes and history of each individual site," she said. Haviv has a somewhat different selection process for new souvenirs than other retailers. She explained "All the products America's National Parks™ stores sell must meet our educational product requirements and be approved by the National Park Service at the location where they are sold. We meet internally and with our National Park Service partners annually to review



A Passport To Your National Parks® display at the America's National Parks™ store at Mammoth Cave National Park. Eastern National operates the store, and the organization's focus is on education.

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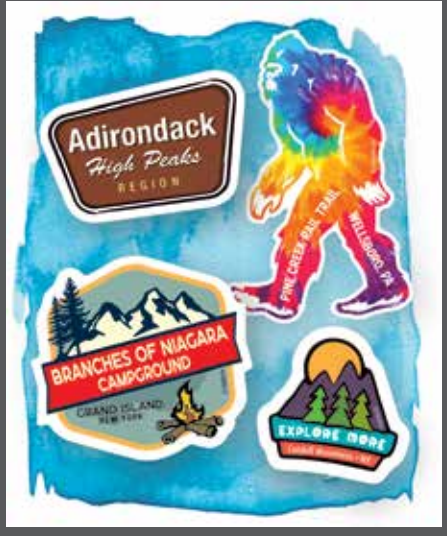
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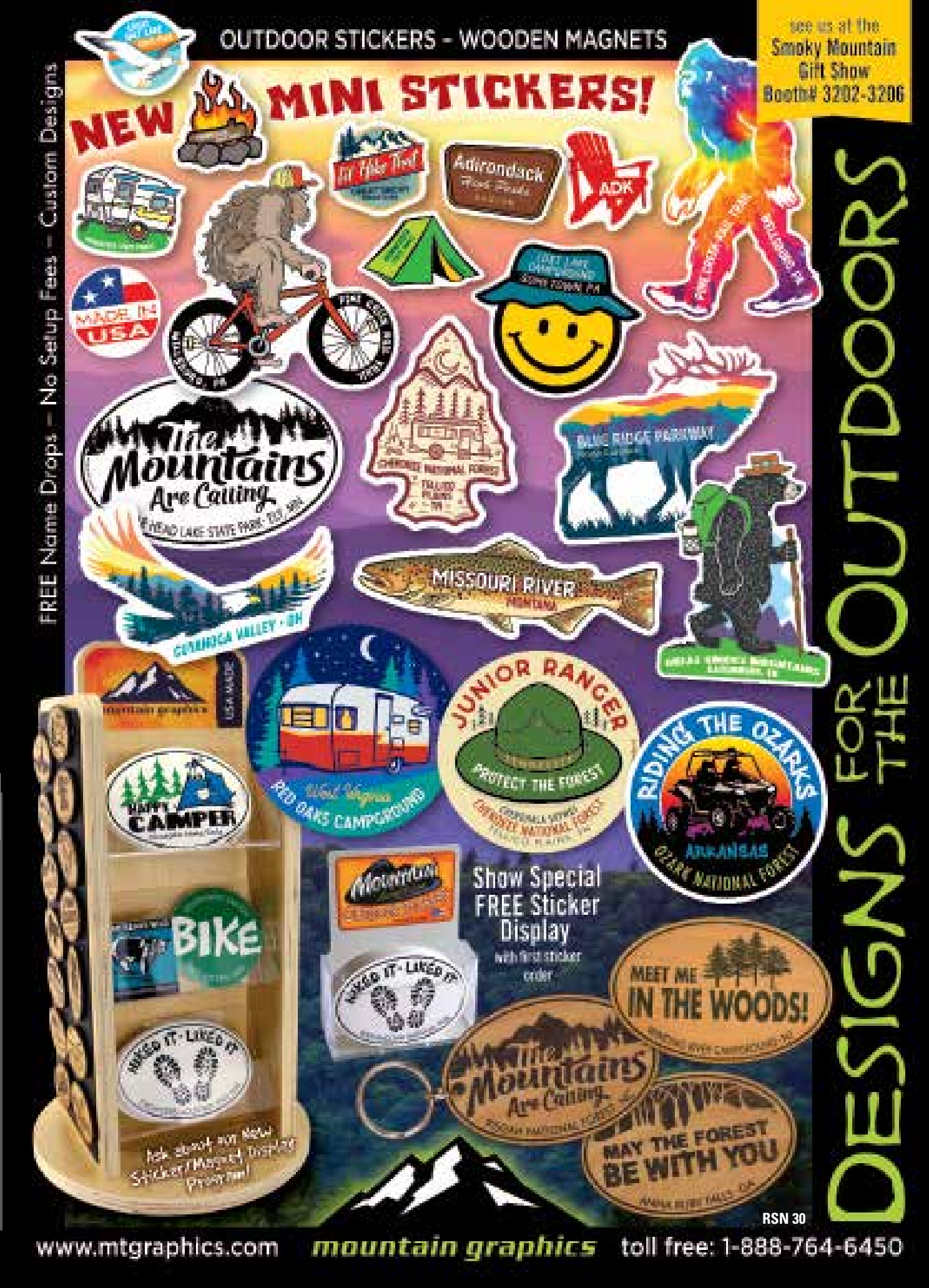
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Julianna Haviv, merchandise manager for Eastern National, a nonprofit cooperating association, supporting the interpretive, educational, and scientific programs and services of the National Park Service and other public trust partners.

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upcoming events, interpretive programming, or assortment needs in each location. This becomes our guide for custom product development for the following year. We like to align our products with the educational programs and exhibits at each location so our retail stores are an extension of a visitor's experience at the park. New products for us are usually created by adapting museum artifacts and images into something a visitor can take home with them to remember their experience. We also will sometimes find a new vendor or product type at trade shows that meets our educational product requirements, and we may test those products in multiple locations."

Crain explained some of the criteria she follows when selecting new souvenirs: "We have a Scope of Sales—guidelines if you will—that help to inform us what types of goods we are allowed to sell within the National Parks. It includes categories such as hiking, history, maps, items with some type of education value or an emotional value. We also look for American-made products. Our newest category that we are starting to work on is telling the story of our local indigenous people. We also look

Top Staff Training Tips

Trained, knowledgeable staff members round out the visitor experience at public lands, both in and out of the gift shops. Operators utilize several methods for training staff, with a strong focus on engaging with visitors.

"Make sure they know the basics," said **David Blacker**, executive director of Death Valley Natural History Association, managing partner of Death Valley National Park (DVNP) in Death Valley, Calif. "We have books and reading material they can borrow so they can study and read up ahead of time. We allow staff to take home the books and read them. As the staff builds knowledge, you can see how it leads to upselling and other related material."

Debby Crain, retail operations director of Sequoia Parks Conservancy, is a strong advocate for educating staff about the products in the gift shop. "I have done some trainings that I call 'Did You Know…?' I will pick a product we sell and tell them how it was made, why we picked that product, the benefit of selling the product, et cetera," she explains. "It's always a good idea to train staff on customer service. How to speak to a customer who is upset. Greet people with a smile no matter what kind of day you are having," she said.

Getting to know the visitors, many of whom are likely from out of the area, is another effective way to build a connection with customers. "My best advice is to engage with your visitors. Ask them about their experience and what they enjoyed most about their visit," said Nature Store Clerk **Julia Hinca** of The Rookery Nature Store at Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR) in Oak Harbor, Ohio. "It's always interesting to learn what makes our refuge special to different people. During that conversation, you make personal connections and that can help you find the right souvenir for them."

Staff can also be empowered to contribute ideas for products. This has been the experience of Eastern National Merchandise Manager **Julianna Haviv**. "Our store staff is part of the product brainstorming process. They often get suggestions from customers and park partners and can bubble those up during product planning for the following year. Having staff as part of the brainstorming process, even if you don't develop every single idea, has been a great way for them to connect with the assortment and become passionate about what they are selling," she said. "If we are delivering product that is new to them, we will sometimes partner with our creative team to create product info sheets. They are a one pager that gives a description of all the product features. If your staff feels like they know their products well and believes in your mission, they will have a much easier time approaching customers and speaking with them about product," she said. ❖

at companies that are trying to make difference. We have shopping bags which are made of paper and washable, T-shirts made of recycled water bottles, and vendors who believe in what we do and donate a percentage back to us for specific causes."

Visitors want souvenirs because they are tangible reminders of a special moment they can keep forever. "With the national parks in particular…any location that tourists are drawn to—there's an experience you have, and they want a touchstone of that experience. If you've watched sunrise at Dante's View or sunset …it's something that makes an impression. It's not surprising people want a touchstone of that experience," Blacker said.

Crain shares a similar perspective: "They want to take home a



The Eastern National America's National Parks™ store at Acadia National Park. Eastern National operates at over 175 of the nation's most significant cultural, historical, and recreational destinations in 33 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands.

lasting remembrance of where they have been and what they have seen for themselves or to share with others. After being in these parks and being around giant sequoia trees people realize what a wonder they are and want to take something home to remind them of their time or of seeing the wildlife here in the parks." Trends, an important element of retail, typically co-exist with the classic souvenirs most public land gift shops carry. But younger visitors, with a growing social consciousness, are among the most informed consumer groups and consider a product carefully before purchasing. "In the past year it has been hard to pin down trends because we were closed during COVID and we have had a couple of wildfires in the parks that have shut the parks down. T-shirts, hats, Plush (stuffed animals), stickers, patches, and pins always seem to do really well. We are also trying to have products that will appeal to the different generations. The younger ones have definite ideas of what they want to purchase which

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include recyclable, items that help a cause. We are doing more products that help raise awareness and funds for programs that the Park Service are doing within our parks," Crain said.

Haviv explained how she and her team combine trendy and timeless merchandise: "We typically don't buy into a lot of trendy or fad items because they don't usually meet our mission or educational criteria. We like to marry trend with timeless by taking popular apparel colors, artwork styles, or base items like stickers and use them as a vehicle for museum adaptations. We may take a wallpaper pattern in a historic home and turn it into a scarf or take a historic graphic and make a sticker out of it." Blacker said his team makes a "concerted effort to keep track of what the trends are. For years we would be a few years behind in every trend. Now, being so close to Las Vegas, we can go to some of the souvenir shows. The challenge is seeing what the trends are and how we can adapt them to fit our mission."

When merchandising, sometimes an open-minded approach to try something new can be successful. Blacker suggests finding a method that works best for a particular attraction or clientele. "We try to arrange our displays thematically. If we're highlighting a geology book, we put geology-related stuff with it. We deal with large crowds in small spaces. We'll steal ideas from big box retailers. We'll have T-shirts folded on a table. People can dig through stuff. We want something that looks nice but fits the way customers want to find things. Our T-shirts, for example, we hang them on our back wall. Wherever you are in the visitors center, you can see them. [I would also say] don't overthink it."

Merchandising is an important part of the product lifecycle. "You can have an amazing product idea, but if it isn't displayed properly, it will never reach its full potential. For new products or programs, we like to have corresponding merchandising plans. Sometimes we will even order special fixtures to ensure it is featured. I will also sometimes send out direction on which product themes or other product friends an item should be merchandised with," Haviv said. "If something isn't selling well, one of the first questions to ask is where is it merchandised? Moving things around can drastically affect the sales. Signage is also important. If there is a local artisan collection or a product with a unique story that isn't conveyed on the item packaging, we will often put that near the product on a little 5-by-7 sign. When products have a story, I think it's important for the customers to learn about it. It may be the difference between someone making a purchase or not."

Blending conservation and education, with an eye on style and consumers' buying habits, public land retailers stock an interesting mix of merchandise to enhance visitors' experience and provide unique take-home mementos. ❖

Souvenir Product News Brief

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Reusable Stainless Steel Camp Mugs Are Available from Mountain Graphics

Stainless steel camp mugs, water bottles and pint glasses are available from Mountain Graphics. Choose from many eye-catching designs or add one of your own. Reusable, these items are dishwasher safe and BPA-free. Many designs for the outdoor retail market are available. Name-drops are free, low minimums.

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