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> **business** HOSPITAL GIFT SHOPS

Reading Hospital Gift Shop in Reading, Pa.

Hospital Gift Shops: An OASIS?

Just as a desert oasis is a place of calm and tranquility, hospital gift shops can provide a respite in an otherwise difficult environment. Here's how.

BY CARRIE FLEISHMAN

As a team, we at Purchasing Power Plus (PPP) spend a lot of time exploring product trends and industry data and sharing them with our retail membership of more than 750 hospital gift shops. We share their passion for retail and strive to increase the profitability of each of our retail members, and today that role is more important than ever.

There have been shifts in the retail industry, as Amazon dominates, the threat of outsourcing hospital gift shop space looms, and Millenni-

als have become the largest generation in the United States. These are the trends really being buzzed about in our retail community. It has been inspiring to speak with our hospital gift shops and the vendors that partner with them, as we all share a vision to empower and advocate for this retail niche.

A Hospital Gift Shop's Value Comes from Within

Susan Krassow is the Guest Services Manager at Inspira Medical Center, and among her responsibilities

is managing two hospital gift shops. Krassow is a PPP retail member and contributor who champions the value of an internally managed hospital gift shop.

"Our stores offer an oasis away from the stress and sterile surroundings of the health care setting," she said. "Families who are visiting loved ones appreciate a cheerful diversion, and employees value a welcome escape from their daily tasks. Internally managed gift shops are uniquely positioned to deal with a repetitive and predictable customer base, which is

made up primarily of (hospital) employees.”

Eric Wininger, the gift shop manager for Reading Hospital Gift Shop in Reading, Pa., was interviewed by our team this fall for our annual publication, *PULSE*. The synergy between Krassow’s and Wininger’s messaging was clear, as Wininger shared his mission statement—OASIS (Optimistic Attitude and Service with an Inviting Smile.) “Just as a desert oasis is a place of calm and tranquility...we too wish to be an oasis in the hospital environment,” he said. “Hospitals are not fun. Family members and staff alike are stressed out. If we can provide them with even a few moments of peace and calm, in an attractive environment, that in itself is an invaluable service.”

Merchandising to Millennials...and Why it Matters

Hospital gift shop managers are indeed uniquely positioned to know who their customers are. This knowledge is key to the success and profitability of internally managed hospital gift shops. Millennials now fill employee roles throughout all of our hospitals. Michelle Huie, the president and founder of Vim & Vigr, is a key PPP vendor partner and active advocate for our retail members.

Huie’s insight includes a few things to consider when merchandising for this generation. “Millennials have a high amount of disposable income—mainly due to the fact that many are choosing to live at home in their adulthood and waiting longer to marry and start families. They value the shopping experience and quality over quantity. Millennials also grew up with social media and are highly influenced by ‘word of mouth.’ And last but not least, they want to support local or social causes.”

Hospital gift shops are focusing on a fresh approach to attracting this

demographic. Unlike most big box or Internet giants, hospital gift shops tell a story and invite their customers to engage. They understand effective, attractive product presentation works like a magnet. It allows them to create drama, invite discovery and communicate an image—a

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story, their customer’s story. And it works every time.

Part of that story is creating your brand. Hospital gift shops can differentiate themselves with their merchandise mix, sourcing brands that give back, superb customer service (educating volunteers and staff remains a focus) and with a diverse mix of price points. Bringing in new business and encouraging return customers is what all independent retailers strive for. Wininger brings home the importance of excellent customer service: “We sell stuff. Everyone sells stuff, and customers can go anywhere. It amazes me how much just saying hello can brighten someone’s day.”

An equally strong part of this branding and storytelling is sharing what a hospital gift shop does. When Wininger considered his new position, he did research and found that Reading Hospital Gift Shop raised funds for the hospital and the healthcare needs of its region. It was a cause he wanted to get behind, and it is wonderful to know that his efforts, as a manager and buyer, are contributing to the greater good.

Hospital gift shops should be proud of that contribution and share it with

their customers. Millennials care, and they want to know their purchase is of benefit. Proceeds from a hospital gift shop support the Hospital Auxiliary or Foundation and that money is put to good use. Participating in community events, hosting events at the store, sharing their message on social media and supporting local business are all ways hospital gift shops are making a difference.

Krassow encourages other hospital gift shop managers to remember: “Self-promotion does not have to be self-serving. The ability to inform others of your accomplishments and your value proposition can highlight that you and your gift shop are assets to the greater organization.”

Customers have choices and lots of them, but hospital gift shops have the opportunity to be a destination worth visiting. So next time a big-box store invites customers in, they will be able to kindly share—they’re already taken!•



Carrie Fleishman is the vice president of Purchasing Power Plus, a premier buying group for Hospital Gift Shops serving more than 750 stores. To learn more, visit purchasingpowerplus.com.