

## A CALM PRAGMATISM

Downtown Victoria retailers are being smart about the recession

**T**he global economy is still in flux but business owners in downtown Victoria are weathering the ups and downs with smart marketing, good service, and healthy doses of optimism. The prevailing attitude is one of calm pragmatism — work hard, work smart, and wait it out.

It seems the waiting game might well be over.

“The weather from December through February had more of a negative effect on shopping than the global recession,” says Janet MacLean, marketing and property management assistant for Market Square. “We’re seeing a lot more people walking through the square and a positive increase in shoppers and sales in general.”

Life as a retailer hasn’t been easy over the last year. The economic downturn has impacted consumer confidence and buying trends. Dale Olsen, owner of Outlooks for Men on Yates, certainly noticed. “It was a rugged winter in terms of sales, and anybody who tells you differently is lying,” he says.

Olsen had a bigger challenge than most. A store expansion and move, two years in the planning stage, took place last September just before the market crashed. “It was pretty bad timing,” he admits, “but I didn’t see the need to panic then and I still don’t. I’m in this for the long haul.” Olsen adds that store traffic is up and things are starting to feel normal again. “People might show restraint for a while,” he says, “but, eventually, they need some retail therapy.”

Lately, that retail therapy is taking a slightly different form. Consumers are taking more time with purchases and being far more selective.



Gail Robinson, Robinson's Outdoor Store

They are buying a little less but they aren't compromising on quality.

Gayle Robinson, owner of Robinson's Outdoor Store on Broad, agrees. “People are looking for good value, good service, and attentive staff,” she says. “Our staff treat this store like their own. They take a personal interest in every one of our customers.”

Those customers have been coming back for decades. Robinson's grandfather opened the store in 1929, a few days after the famous crash of “Black Tuesday.” He kept Robinson's open during the Depression and World War II, and, this year, the store celebrates 80 years in Victoria.

They are having a banner year, says Robinson. Camping gear, tents, sleeping bags, and fishing

equipment are all flying out the door, partly because people are holidaying closer to home, but it's also because Robinson has stayed true to her grandfather's original intent.

“Decide what you're going to do and do it well,” says Robinson. “That was his philosophy.”

It's a philosophy that has been adopted by many of the retailers in downtown Victoria, and it's one that appears to be paying off. Muffet Billyard-Leake, owner of Muffet and Louisa on Store Street, says her sales are up this spring over last, in part, she believes, because their products emphasize quality and performance and their service is personal. “People are feeling a little battered in the world and they come to us to be looked after,” she says. “We do what we

can to make life easier for them.”

Retailers are also doing what they can to ride out the economic ups and downs without compromising sales or the integrity of their product.

According to Robinson, during the Depression, fifty per cent of businesses survived and thrived for a couple of key reasons — they increased advertising and they didn't discount. She has followed suit. “Discounting devalues your product,” she says, “and it makes the customer wonder why they paid full price in the first place.” Olsen agrees, adding that it creates a downward spiral that goes nowhere.

MacLean says seasoned retailers look at the big picture. They stick with marketing plans and ride out any fluctuations. Businesses new to the market step it up a bit. “They open their doors a little earlier and stay open a little later,” MacLean says. “They are trying harder, looking at their window displays, at new ways of displaying product and presenting merchandise.”

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A case in point is Angelica Reid, partner and creative director of Floating Gold Iceberg, a new boutique on Pandora. Reid and her partners have been handcrafting their product — clothing, scarves, jewellery, and small leather items — in a Fernwood studio for about fifteen months. They released their first collection in boutiques across Canada and Victoria just before the economy dipped. “That was nerve racking because no one knew how bad things would get,” Reid says. Response to their product was “tremendous” so they opened a store (something they'd wanted to do from the beginning) in May.

“Without being flippant about it, we decided as a company to think around the recession and out-smart it,” Reid says.

Their way of doing that is to stay small (their store is a compact 450 square feet), focus on product and service, and partner with others in the community. “There is a real community of designers in old town Victoria and we help each other out,” Reid says.