

Independents' Day

Mom-and-pop stores duke it out with giant chains and recession

Pasadena Weekly, Posted: 07/03/2008

When Dave Brisbois realized his dream of opening a toy store three years ago, he never expected that something so fun could also turn out to be so difficult.

Surrounded by floor-to-ceiling displays of classic board games like Operation and old-school favorites such as Tinker Toys and Lincoln Logs, Brisbois still loves opening the doors of his East Colorado Boulevard Toy Dept. store each day, but he has also had to face some grim realities — including the closure of his other location in Valencia.

Somewhat rocked by the recession and also hit by the public's over-the-top fears of lead content in Chinese-made toys, Brisbois is just now seeing some hope after months of slow sales. Yet he's just one of thousands of independent business owners throughout Pasadena and the San Gabriel Valley who have had to battle tough times and the ever-encroaching growth of big chains and mega-malls like Glendale's Americana at Brand. Some have managed to survive, while others have seen the doors shut on their dreams.

"We just felt there needed to be a low-tech toy store that the parents liked coming to as much as the kids," says Brisbois. "The Chinese lead-paint scare was devastating to the business. Something like 90 percent of toys are manufactured in China. Even name brands you think are from here are not. We did not carry any of the recalled products but it still made our sales drop by double digits, put our other store out of business and could still put this one out of business."

Brisbois credits his store's slow but steady recuperation to a loyal customer base and his ability to special-order items that big chains are rarely flexible enough to carry.

"People seem to understand what we're doing with our store and a lot of customers come in with suggestions, and because we're so small they can find things a big store would make impossible if it's what they decided not to carry," says Brisbois. "Or if someone comes in with an idea for a toy or soda we should carry we have the ability to research and carry it within a couple weeks, and that's just not something a big store can do."

As the CEO/President of the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce, Paul Little is charged with leading the way to shore for drowning businesses. He notes that the chamber is retooling its Web site and directory "to make it easier for customers to find stores and stores more able to network."

The chamber is also considering launching a "Buy Local" campaign in the fall to encourage people to spend money with Pasadena businesses, particularly in the crucial and rapidly approaching holiday season. One big advantage of encouraging local shopping is that the city reaps the benefits of the sales taxes.

"I think everyone's a bit tentative in their spending and their projections. There's a lot of watchfulness on the part of retailers and a lot of concern anyway about how the local people are faring in the face of the economy, as well as in the challenges and pressures of chains and alternative sales methods like the Internet," says Little. "Some of it depends on the industry you're in or the niche you fill. You call someone at an antique store and they'll say a lot of our business is people with discretionary income and they're being more careful about that. Or on the other hand, someone who'd spend \$25,000 on something in the first place might do it anyway."

While Old Pasadena and the Playhouse District have managed to maintain their usual booming customer traffic, the South Lake Business District has been hit particularly hard by the temporary closure of its historic Macy's building at the corner of Del Mar Boulevard. While the 1947 structure undergoes retrofitting and other cosmetic care until October, sales have been down throughout the district because the retail giant's customer base has migrated elsewhere.

But according to Gina Tleel, executive director of the South Lake Business District, the area is poised for a major rebound on Macy's return. In the meantime, she's thinking up creative ways like the recent Make Music Pasadena festival to draw people in and is conducting an extensive personal outreach to the surrounding businesses to encourage them to ride out the summer.

"We're going to have a fantastic fall. The first \$1.1 million phase of our new \$2.6 million landscaping, electrical and irrigation systems starts in August," explains Tleel. "I'll be able to have a fantastic holiday season with new holiday lights due to extensive power. Fall 2008 will feature something never seen before, and now's the quiet before the storm. All the redesigns will make this whole area hipper and more marketable."

Glendale City Councilman Bob Yousefian is one person who's seen the positive impact a new retail effort can have on a local economy, due to the May debut of the gargantuan Americana at Brand. He doesn't believe that the behemoth collection of national chain stores and restaurants is hurting his city's mom-and-pop stores, but rather provide an important complement to them.

"It's the economy, period, that's hurting people. Look, even at Costco ... people aren't buying high-end products and the parking spots are open more. There's not the hustle and bustle anywhere," says Yousefian. "Rising prices and fuel costs are having impact on a lot of stores due to causing a reduction in discretionary income. I don't know what a city can do, because the city itself has challenges because we buy a million gallons of gas at a time and that's causing us to consider our budgets."

According to Kent Hitts, Glendale's economic development manager, that city has a mere 2 percent vacancy rate. He and his staff went to the recent International Conference of Shopping Centers in Las Vegas to tout what Glendale has to offer and maintain a particular focus on keeping storefronts open along Brand Boulevard, the city's main thoroughfare.

Ultimately, a sense of positive forward thinking may be the key to winning out over hard times. Marci Toombs of the Pasadena boutique Lula Mae says that a good attitude and flexibility will win out in any situation.

"People are going towards small businesses right now and pulling away from big malls because they know they can find unique things for a small price. We're seeing an increase in sales and customer base now," says Toombs. "Our price range starts at 10 cents and goes up, so I don't know if it applies to everyone or just us in a special situation. Actually, I find myself going a little more independently too in my shopping, including with my coffee. We tend to do a lot of promotions like free shipping online to help people save money when they're already trying to save on gas and parking. Everyone's going through a hard time and small businesses have the ability to care for them more flexibly."