

Popular gifts for the last minute shopper

By BROOKE BALL
Staff Reporter

When it comes to last-minute Christmas shopping, it's usually men who are roaming store aisles trying to find just the right gift in just the nick of time.

Betty Quick, who's managed Belmont's Belk store for 11 years, smilingly declared: "Most customers we see at the last minute are men. They don't plan ahead like women do and they're usually buying for (the) wife or girlfriend."

A gift some men might consider during the holiday season is the gift of flowers. Marie Gantt, who manages Holly Florist in downtown Mount Holly, says the shop offers flower arrangements with at least three different holiday themes.

The "Candy Cane Christmas Bouquet," for instance, is a burst of color that includes red carnations, balsam and candy canes.

A "Season of Joy" arrangement boasts white roses, snapdragons and freesia and the holiday arrangements can be sent "anywhere in the world," the manager related.

Additionally, holiday wreaths and all sorts of seasonal arrangements have already been marked down to half price at Holly Florist.

In nearby Belmont, BMX and freestyle (trick) bikes are big this year. Paul Bame, who owns and operates Paul's Belmont Bicycle Center, said 75 to 100 bicycles are on layaway at his shop. While bike repairs keep business good throughout the year, Bame said, "as far as sales, (Christmas) is the biggest time."

Over at Eckerd's in Mount Holly, small items are the big sellers.

Eckerd's manager Andy Pagoota said trinkets, jewelry and cosmetic gift sets are popular with customers. And yes, he added, "most people come in at the last minute."

Jim Fuller, who co-owns Mount Holly Furniture with his brother, Leo Fuller, also shared some Christmastime shopping stories recently.

Mount Holly Furniture has

been open since 1941 and Fuller said shopping has changed over the years.

In the past, he explained, the Main Street store did big business in items like bicycles, television sets and small appliances that included irons and mixers.

Small appliances and bikes are gone from the Mount Holly business now, since big stores "can sell cheaper than we can buy."

But Fuller remembers a time when things were different, when bikes and such that weren't bought by customers were given away by the Fullers' dad on Christmas Eve.

"What didn't sell," Jim recalled, "we took to poor sections (of town) and gave away..."

Although such traditions fell away, the Mount Holly store still does a brisk business all year 'round.

At Christmastime, popular items include glider-rockers, recliners, brass lamps, pictures and curio cabinets.

Curio cabinets were very popular last Christmas, Jim Fuller said, but things might change this year. "You can't predict what the public is going to want," he remarked.

One thing the public always wants is good prices, according to George Dixon, an 11-year employee of Belmont's Belk who has spent some 50 years in the retail business.

"Shoppers wait for sales more than they used to," Dixon commented. "It used to be we had sales once or twice a year. Now, (we have sales) about every week."

Dixon also observed that "you don't have the store loyalty you used to have." Because shoppers have malls and many choices of where to shop, that's exactly what they do, the retailer indicated.

Another change in retailing, Dixon commented, is that almost all "soft goods" are imported from overseas now.

Still, some things remain the same. While shoppers may branch out to malls and other

shops, rather than stick with one store, some still have a certain frame of mind.

"Shoppers haven't changed that much," Dixon noted. "(We) still have the bargain hunters and last-minute shoppers."

Mrs. Quick, the Belmont Belk manager, said Belk associates do their best to help all customers, including the last-minute shoppers.

For the last-minute male customer, she said, "We try to help with colors and sizes...usually, they don't know what they want. We ask them questions about the person and guide them to a good purchase."

Men often buy handbags and slippers for the ladies in their lives, the manager noted. Also popular, at least for now, is fleece. "Fleece tops are very popular this year," Mrs. Quick said. "We have fleece for the (entire) family."

While men often wait until the last days before Christmas to make purchases, Ms. Quick said, "We see more women shoppers the day after Thanksgiving. They're the bargain shoppers after those Thanksgiving deals."

And yet, there are deals all the way through the holiday season.

At Belmont's Belk, for instance, "Super-Christmas" and "Santa Surprise" sales have been planned.

But good prices aren't the only advantage to shopping at Belmont's Belk, Mrs. Quick pointed out.

"Being a downtown store," she said, "we're less hectic than a mall. We still have busy days and lines at the register on weekends, but the lines aren't as long and (it's) more relaxed...and parking is a big plus. Here, you can park close and there's plenty of parking space. That's a big advantage."

Another advantage, according to long-time retailer George Dixon, is a sales associate who has a good attitude. "Treat customers nice," Dixon declared. "That comes with it. They have other places to go."



CHRISTMAS COLORS—Mrs. Betty Quick, manager of Belmont's Belk store, and George Dixon, Belk sales associate, display a holiday vest in red, green and gold Christmas colors. Besides apparel, Belk offers dolls, candy, nativity scenes, needlepoint stockings, fragrance baskets and even musical aromatic candles during the holiday gift-giving season.



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