



365 Days of Christmas

By Abby Kleckler

Situated more than 100 miles from the nearest population center — Detroit — in a city with less than 5,000 residents — Frankenmuth — Bronner's Christmas Wonderland has made its store a destination.

Three million visitors enjoy the 320,000-square-foot "World's Largest Christmas Store" year-round. But with 50,000 items, making customers purchase decorations long before December 25 has its challenges.

"There is nothing out of the 50,000 items in our store that people actually need, but there's a lot of things that people might want," says Wayne Bronner, president and CEO. "It's a different category than going somewhere like the grocery store and buying things you need."

A threefold approach draws in new customers and keeps seasoned shoppers coming back year after year: relevant merchandise, intelligent displays and family pride.

Relevant Merchandise

"About 1/3 of our products change every year," Bronner says. "Trends change, tastes change, merchandise comes in and goes out, so we have about a dozen people involved in our buying who are very much in tune with what's in demand."

Maintaining approximately 2/3 of the merchandise throughout the year means customers are sure to find some of their favorites. The most popular of these is not a single item, according to Bronner, but a growing trend: personalization.

"Some people love volleyball or soccer or whatever their passion may be, and we've got 8,000 different styles of ornaments to choose

from that they can have personalized," he says. "We have a team of 40 people that stay busy personalizing ornaments to fit the needs and the interests of our customers."

Bronner's also has a design team that works on producing exclusive designs. People often ask for these ornaments that can't be purchased anywhere else, according to Bronner.

Intelligent Displays

With a plethora of ornaments and Christmas merchandise, organization and customer service are key. Visitors are greeted by one of Bronner's 350 year-round or 750 seasonal employees and provided a map of the store.

"Our store is so large that people can actually get lost in it," Bronner says. "We recognize the constraints of our customers' time and want to make shopping as friendly and efficient as possible."

Displays give shoppers a direct target to find what they're looking to purchase. All decorations are arranged by category. For example, one room might feature outdoor sports while another has religious items.

Each section is marked clearly on the map and within the store. Section 10c is where shoppers can pick up spun glass ornaments, while section 14 houses trees and wreaths.

Family Pride

Bronner is the second generation of the family owned business, which his father Wally Bronner opened in 1945. Two of Bronner's sisters and his son also hold pivotal roles in the company, and their love of the store and Christmas goes beyond

the merchandise inside.

"The customers realize the family has a high-degree of pride," Bronner says. "We do a nice job maintaining our landscaping around our store, on our premise and in our parking lot so family ownership shows through."

Approximately 100,000 Christmas lights illuminate the path to the Bronner's entrance every night.

Family ownership translates to training the staff and actively participating in the small, Bavarian-themed Frankenmuth community, according to Bronner.

"We all work together. Everybody cooperates," Bronner says. "And we're all in it and know that we sink or swim together."

For retail outlets much smaller than the 7 acres of Christmas shopping in Frankenmuth, this threefold approach can generate yearlong buzz.

Can you rotate merchandise more often or add personalization to stay relevant with trends? Is your store layout easily accessible and visually appealing? Do you have as high a regard for the surrounding areas — what visitors first encounter — as you do for inside the store?

"It is all about associating your store with all kinds of positive and warm feelings," Bronner says. "It's a novelty to shop for Christmas items in say July, but people enjoy coming through, looking at our offerings and talking to us, so they end up doing some shopping early." **LGR**

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