

Busy days ahead for holiday merchants

By MITCH STACY

CLEARWATER, Fla.

Bob Frank sells Christmas, even when the Florida summer sun is blazing and tourists are whizzing by his store in rented convertibles on the way to the beach.

Doesn't matter the time of year, stepping into Robert's Christmas Wonderland is like parachuting into Santa's workshop on Christmas Eve. The "wow" factor is off the charts.

The 63-year-old Frank, his wife, Rita, and son Josh plan and work year-round to prepare for the frenzied couple of months before Christmas during which the landmark shop -- one of the largest of its kind in the country -- will do about 80 percent of its annual business.

For them and other purveyors of Christmas-specific goods and services, including the nation's Christmas tree growers and a growing number of home decorating services, this is show time. Their livelihoods depend on people decking the halls during the next few weeks.

While retailers expect the slowest holiday spending season on five years due to the weak economy, the holiday merchants are cautiously counting on what history has shown: Even when times are tough, people still decorate. Nearly three-quarters of people surveyed in October say they plan to buy holiday decorations this year, spending an average of \$70 each -- about \$4 more than last year, according to the marketing research firm BIGresearch.

Nick Schriver runs a St. Petersburg business called Decorating Elves that caters to a growing number of homeowners who don't want to climb the roof and hang their own Christmas lights. The industry has seen explosive growth in the past six years, with several companies around the country -- including Schriver's -- now selling franchises.

His crew did 140 homes and businesses last year, and he expects to top 200 jobs this season -- at an average of \$1,200 each, including lights.

The 12-to-14-hour days began for him and his staff around the beginning of November. They'll have everything up and glowing by mid-December, then start up again in early January taking it all down. There are other lighting jobs scattered throughout the year, but it's the Christmastime clamor to light up the neighborhood that pays the bills.

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Schraver, 28, says a successful year depends on the planning and organizing he does while his customers are shopping for Fourth of July fireworks and planning their Labor Day picnics.

"I look at it just like you would a sports season," says Schraver, who started the business in 2002 to make some extra cash while he was earning his architecture degree from Ohio State University. "If a football team wants to have a successful year, they need to have a good training camp and good practice and come out ready."

November is crunch time for the folks at the Hudler Carolina Tree Farm, which blankets 800 acres in the mountains of western North Carolina. That's when 100,000 or so Fraser firs are being cut and trucked to retail lots all over the East.

"We employ about 20 people year-round," Hudler says. "But at this time of year we have 100 people in here. They're cutting, bailing trees, loading them, getting them to our distribution points and loading trucks. It's a huge job."

Out in Sherwood, Ore., Sleighbells Farm and Gift Shop is a venerable year-round tourist destination for big-time Christmas fans but is famous for its trees and the old-fashioned bells-and-whistles experience that comes with choosing and cutting them.

General manager Rob Vastine says Sleighbells will take in 90 percent of its annual revenue in the next three weekends (including the weekend after Thanksgiving) as people come for their trees and trimmings from the shop. He expects to sell around 3,000 trees this year.

"In February, we might have three people working per day," he says. "The day after Thanksgiving, we've probably got about 65."

Michael Barnett, a business professor at the University of South Florida, says Christmas specialty enterprises operate on a cycle not unlike a lot of other businesses.

"You can make parallels with a lot of the classic industries like farming and fishing where there are seasons," he said. "And once that season is over, you can't do that anymore."

Vastine and the others say the business of selling Christmas trees and trimmings is much less affected by the slumping economy than the merchants pushing Christmas gifts.

Back at Robert's Christmas Wonderland in Florida, Frank is presiding over his store's 35th holiday season. He says advertising, customer service and anticipating what products people will want affects his bottom line more than the fluctuating economy.

"People aren't going to stop having Christmas," he says. "They're going to give up some of the other things, and maybe they'll cut down on some of the extra frills, but Christmas isn't going away."