



## APPEALING TO THE SENSES

The Museum Store at Children's Museum of Pittsburgh extends an unconventional invitation for children to come in and touch the merchandise.

The phrase “don't touch” is commonly uttered to a child upon entering a gift shop full of fragile mementos and glass souvenirs. But at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh where interaction with the exhibits is encouraged, the same goes for the gift shop.

So it's no wonder that one of the top-selling items are name trains that are comprised of individual letters on train cars that link together with magnets to spell a child's name. A train engine bearing the name of the museum is far and away the collection's most popular item. Couple the trains with tracks that a kid can send their “name” around, and it's an instant winner for learning how to spell and making it fun.

“We try to feature products that foster development and hands-on play,” says Matthew Simmonds, retail co-

ordinator for the Museum Store. “We provide a lot of arts and crafts and items that allow them to bring the museum home with them.”

To encourage visitors to dive in and play with the merchandise, Simmonds says a display known simply as “The Bin” near the middle of the store houses rubber duckies, squishy toys, Neato! brand toys, puzzles, kaleidoscopes and other treasures — all priced under \$5.

“I love seeing the look on a kid's face when they're actually able to buy something,” Simmonds notes.

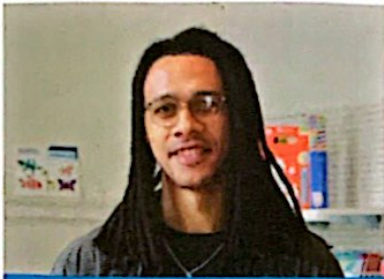
And getting parents through the door is no small feat. Simmonds says he attempts to put items in the front of the shop that catch the attention of his five- to six-year-old demographic that relate to the museum's current temporary exhibit. In July, merchandise included Wild Kratts-related



motif and Daniel Tiger stuffed animals.

"I have to catch the eye of kids walking past the store and make parents want to come in, even though they may not want to," he adds.

Once inside, Mister Rogers and Mo Willems books are displayed up front to attract parents. They tend to congregate there to act as goalkeeper in containing their kids to the store and making sure they behave, according to Simmonds.



**"One of the best parts about being in the store is being able to talk with our guests and getting to know them."**

— Matthew Simmonds

But it's not just children Simmonds is looking to attract to the gift shop. Out-of-town guests who visit the museum also stop in for name-branded postcards, magnets, and apparel. Out-of-print titles from Mister Rogers such as "A Piece of Red Paper" and "Josephine the Short Neck Giraffe" and the Mo Willems collection Elephant & Piggie have also proven to be popular with travelers.

And one souvenir reigns supreme no matter the visitor's age; the Penny Press Machine emblazons change with fish

statues that grace the museum's parking lot or a herring — another well-known image at the establishment.

"I'm constantly getting change for people to be able to do that," notes 24-year-old Simmonds.

#### A SENSORY EXPERIENCE

As the employee charged with purchasing for the gift shop, Simmonds says products hail from Green Toys, Warmies, Keycraft, Toysmith, Maple Landmark for the name trains, Open the Joy for sensory kits, Commonwealth Press for screen printing on clothing, and Love Pittsburgh for youth and newborn apparel and souvenir items.

As a store dedicated to sensory and early-learning products, it is a treasure trove for parents looking to stimulate children's minds.

In addition to the Open the Joy activity kits designed to teach life skills and emotional intelligence, puzzles designed to teach the alphabet, counting and memorization to children under 5 years old uphold the message to learn through play. Plus-Plus kits carry a similar message, as they are designed to inspire children to use their imagination to create a masterpiece using puzzle pieces.

Meanwhile, Warmies offer a different type of sensory experience. The soft, weighted stuffed

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For example, water exhibits in the museum encourage visitors to “pump, move, channel and dam its flow and try activities with rain, spray and ice.” However, a cautionary note warns parents to “Be prepared to get a little wet.” Since some do not heed this advice, dry apparel with the phrase “I got soaked at Waterplay” is waiting in the gift shop to change into for the drive home.

Meanwhile, in the Kindness Gallery, children are invited to “try different forms of communication to send message of kindness, drawing from the work of Fred Rogers and lessons from ‘Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood.’” In the gift shop, T-shirts spread positive vibes with “#bethekindkid” messages, while others pay tribute to Mister Rogers by bidding “Hi, Neighbor.”

And even more important, says Simmonds, is connecting with the locals and those with museum memberships. “I think being able to connect our brand to Pittsburgh as a location is important,” says Simmonds, who has worked in the industry for four years.

For the local clientele, apparel with the phrase “Nebby” on T-shirts and coffee mugs prompts a smile and a connection to Pittsburgh that only they know. “Nebby is an idiom for the term ‘nosey,’” he explains.



Curious kids and nostalgic adults have plenty to explore at The Museum Store.

And for those who aren’t familiar, he notes, the product is a conversation starter and a way to connect with customers.

For Simmonds, that connection with locals and visitors is what makes the Museum Store such a rewarding place to work.

“One of the best parts about being in the store is being able to talk with our guests and getting to know them,” he says. “Especially over the summer, you get a lot of out-of-town visitors, so hearing about where they’re from, their backgrounds, and what they liked most about the museum and their experience here is probably the best part.” SGN



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animals can be heated in the microwave or chilled in the freezer "to enjoy the therapeutic benefits and the calming scent of real French lavender," according to the company's website.

**MORPHING INTO ITS MODERN EXISTENCE**

Originally opened in 1985, The Museum Store has grown right alongside its counterpart, changing its name, location within the museum, and most recently undergoing a renovation in 2021 to freshen up the 500-square-foot space.

Name changes saw the store originate as Surprises before becoming The Little Orange Store. Eventually evolved into just The Museum Store only a few years ago. Simmonds notes that while the store has always been on the first floor, it was originally closer to the entrance, In 2004 it was relocated into an expanded portion of the museum next to what is affectionately known as the arts department where kids can do crafts and paint and generally get messy.

The renovation brought in changes to the back end of the inventory process, new displays and

a fresh coat of paint.

Simmonds and one other employee are involved in the day-to-day operations of running the gift shop while two other managers under the guest-services umbrella within the museum assist in operations.

**PRODUCT PLACEMENT**

While products are mainly grouped by category, the one wall that rotates regularly is the one dedicated to the most recent temporary exhibit, Simmonds says. "Right now that being Wild Kratts, so we have some of our puzzles and board games that are branded in that way," he points out.

With souvenirs, books, and museum-branded postcards, magnets and apparel beckoning at the front door, one will pass the exhibit merchandise as well as The Bin near the middle of the store before discovering the Warmies and other stuffed animals near the back of the store.

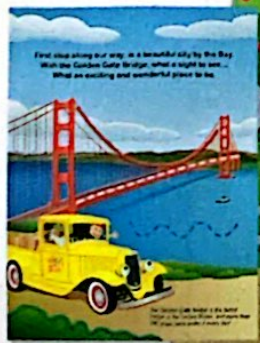
**KITSCHY CATCHPHRASES**

While a central theme of any museum is to engage and inform its visitors, the Pittsburgh Children's Museum amplifies its message by tying catchphrases to their experiences on T-shirts, onesies and other apparel.

The museum's selection of apparel features fun catch phrases that tie into the experience.



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