



STORY BY
CHRISTINE SCHAFFRAN

**MOUNTAIN AND
ANIMAL THEMES NEVER
GO OUT OF STYLE.**

THE **BEAR** ESSENTIALS

From the Great Smoky Mountains to the Poconos to the San Bernardino Mountains, whether sitting, standing, drinking, sleeping, walking or climbing, the bears have it.

That is to say they have the attention of the customers who visit gift shops in mountain regions across the country.

Although the Mountain Brothers General Store in Sevierville, Tennessee, is known most for its gourmet Vienna Coffee selection, its location can't help but show love and appreciation for the landscape and the wildlife that surrounds it.

"Oh yeah we have all sorts of Smoky Mountain bear-themed coffee mugs,

shot glasses, a big souvenir section — all mountain-themed," notes Tyson Maples, who owns the 12,000-square-foot gift shop with his wife, Kristi.

Sayings like "The mountains are calling and I must go" grace signs, home decor, figurines, T-shirts, keychains, magnets and other souvenirs that visitors flock to for a reminder of their time in the Great Smoky Mountains.

But the playful nature of the bears doesn't stop at the doors to the store. Outside, giant bears made of hay bales tower above the establishment and welcome guests to snap selfies with them, each appropriately dressed for the nearest season or holiday.

Among the vendors who provide products for the store is a local wood carver whose work is displayed both within the showroom and outside with bears holding welcome signs, climbing trees, and simply standing at attention.

"We have a big, huge wood carver he's nationally known that does all these wood carvings so we have bear wood carvings, and we have the little bear figurines, you know 5-inch-tall ones up to these great big figurines," Maples notes. "We have paintings from local artists, and we also have your normal wood signs with the bears on it. There's a lot of handmade stuff from local artisans with bears and the great Smoky Mountains."



Mountain Brothers General Store pays homage to the Smoky Mountains and the bears who call them home.

Maples estimates 25% of the shop's offerings come from local artists. And when it comes to wholesale items, he says his wife looks to the Park Hill Collection, Audrey's - Your Hearts Delight, Mud Pie and similar popular brands.

"Basically, my wife is on the computer all the time at night and then when we go to markets, we always find different furniture; we have a lot of antique pieces. Everything is usually displayed on an antique or something."

And when it comes to drawing customers to mountain-themed merchandise and the bears that

people desire, Maples says it's the displays that really bring the products to life.

"The main thing is I think is just the way my wife displays it and we take it back to the old peddler days, too. We have an old wagon and it's all kind of family-themed," he notes.

"She always decorates it in a

different mountain theme with different plants that she buys from Ragon House."

But nothing speaks to customers more than the picture-perfect backdrop of the Great Smoky Mountains located just outside the doors of the general store.

"There's a huge field behind us that's all ours and then all behind that is just mountains," Maples says. "So, everybody sits out in our fields and we're right at the entrance of the Smokies. We're closer than any other store."

A CONNECTION TO THE LANDSCAPE

So just what is it that compels customers to buy bear and mountain-themed apparel and gifts?

Tara Martinell, general manager of the Alpine Ski & Gift Shop in Tannersville, Pennsylvania, believes people want to feel a connection to the area they are visiting.



"It's the area because we have bears in the area and the mountains, so when people come here, that's what they want," Martinell says. "They want a souvenir of what they see, even if they haven't seen a bear — probably because if they've seen it, they would be running the other way — but they definitely want something of what is offered in this area."

Sandwiched in the Pocono Mountains just minutes away from the Camelback Ski Resort, Martinell is the third generation to operate the gift and rental shop and says after 50 years, the family has it dialed in on what visitors are going to buy.

"A lot with Pocono mountains and the mountain theme. Obviously being in a mountain range, people tend to gravitate towards those kinds of things," says Martinell, whose brother, Dan Martinell, now owns the establishment. "They want something with a bear or a deer on it actually, but bears are way more popular this year."

Among the T-shirts, mugs, hoodies, shot glasses, keychains, magnets, cut-out signs, hand towels, stuffed animals, beach items, ski apparel and accessories, crystals, gems, incense, candles, toys, candy, jewelry, flip flops, water shoes, sunglasses, sunscreen, beach towels and everything else Alpine has to offer, Martinell notes mountains, lakes, and waterfalls are among the motifs in high demand.

To find these items, Martinell relies on a sales rep that she says has been assisting her for more than

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— TYSON MAPLES, MOUNTAIN BROTHERS GENERAL STORE

The Mountain Brothers General Store sits at the entrance to the Smokies.





Bear-themed merchandise sells well at Alpine Ski & Gift Shop because the Pennsylvania locale is known for them.



15 years with apparel, mugs, shot glasses and similar items. More recently, she says, she has turned to some smaller local events and also Faire, an online wholesale marketplace for retailers and brands.

As for displaying products, Martinell says it doesn't take much to showcase it because customers are already attracted to it.

"I think it's more the merchandise itself that makes it stand out," she says. "And then we move it around constantly to see which area sells fast.

There's obviously particular areas of the store that sell fast. If we put something there, it moves."

She adds given the locale, carrying mountain and bear merchandise is a no-brainer.

"It's always just been what we've sold because of where we are being the mountains," she points out. "Besides adding in the jewelry and the crystals lately, we've always kind of had that theme. It's just what works for the area."

A CENTRAL THEME

And when you're in a location like Big Bear Lake, California, the name of the game — and the souvenir — is bears. Such is the case for the Brown Bear Gift Shop, which is located in the thick of the resort town known for "excellent fishing, snowboarding and skiing, hiking, mountain biking," according to Big Bear's official travel and tourism website, www.bigbear.com.

With an outdoor facade reminiscent of the Old West, the shop showcases everything-bears to appeal to the crowds who come for their love of the town.

"So mostly all of our apparel is Big Bear and California themed," says Nick Stebbins, the store's

THE WHOLESALERS' TAKE

Wondering what types of animal and wilderness gifts and souvenirs to feature at your cozy lodge or mountain gift shop?

Kip Zsupnik, CEO of A&F Souvenir in St. Jacobs, Ontario, says to take a look around before you decide. It all depends on the nearby wildlife.

"It does vary according to region, but only based on the animals," notes Zsupnik, whose company has been in the business since 1962. "Animal-themed product is very popular ... so if you're in the Smokies, it's a black bear of course, if you're in the Rockies, it might be an elk, a moose or a grizzly bear, or let's say you're in the Badlands, the bison would be huge up there. The animal-themed goods are very popular in those areas."

To find products that hit all the right notes, A&F Souvenir uses custom artwork to build a collection for a client instead of just focusing on one item.

"Something that has really been curated for the customer has been very popular for us and so we try to build on a collection," he explains. "Let's say it's a collection for a Rocky Mountain National Park-type place, we'll do a lot of elk-

themed products, but tie the artwork in with multiple items, so it might be the drinkware, the T-shirts, hats, whatever it might be — it will all just tie together."

Among the popular items, he notes, are mugs that are 17 ounces or larger, stainless steel bottles, anything that makes an eco-statement, and mugs and shot glasses with "multiple elements to them."

"So, a glaze with cork, or a glaze with terra cotta, or a glaze with stone, something like that," he adds. "We're seeing a lot of elevated souvenirs in that category, not your run-of-the-mill cheap souvenirs."

For Mountain Graphics in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, the name says it all. In fact, their entire line of bags, T-shirts, bandanas, water bottles, hats, patches, stickers, sweats, magnets and wooden products are branded with outdoor messages. The family-owned company has been "providing printed apparel to people who love the outdoors" since 1986, according to the company's website.

Owner Mark Newruck says the simplicity of their product line is their "bread and butter." However, he notes

that there are certain themes that are naturally better sellers.

"Bears always do well," he says. "And hiking-related items. Anything to do with mountains, hiking, camping, campfires, those are icons we migrate to with our wildlife and outdoor apparel."

And as far as which one is the most popular, it's a toss-up.

"They're all pretty equal," he says. "I guess it just depends on the area."

In other words, know the region and what it's known for, and buy accordingly. Customers won't be able to resist.



Mountain, hiking and camping icons sell well no matter the region.



At the Brown Bear Gift Shop, bears leave a footprint on apparel, candles, stickers and anything else it can get its paws on.

assistant manager. “That can range from scenic art of the mountains or bears, but everything is generally themed around Big Bear and bears; but then again there’s a handful of other things like raccoons or mountain life.”

While most anything goes — and most everything does go — among the staple souvenirs such as magnets, shot glasses, keychains, sweatshirts, shirts, hats, coffee mugs, sunglasses, seasonal gear, toys, jewelry, signs, incense, backpacks, hats, picture frames and stuffed animals, Stebbins says it is the figurines that are most popular.

“We have a little bit for everybody, so that way everyone can have an easy time finding a souvenir.” — NICK STEBBINS, BROWN BEAR GIFT SHOP

“Typically, our resin-molded figurines, or wooden figurines, our wood-carved items, we have tons of different little statuettes or lamps that are like two bears holding the lamp,” Stebbins says of the variety of figurines offered. “But a lot of it’s just kind of that knick-knack to put up on your shelf. Those sell the most outside of our T-shirts which are very popular year-round.”

In addition to the wall space for apparel and spinners for smaller items, glass shelves display various themes or groups to appeal to different demographics.

“We’ll have knick-knacks and things that are like more for couples or older customers, but then we have cap guns or different little toys or we have a little bit of jewelry too, so that’s what the younger crowd typically gets, or the keychains,” Stebbins says. “We even have bear-themed stuffed animals, too, for the younger kids. We have a little bit for everybody, so that way everyone can have an easy

time finding a souvenir.”

Additionally, Stebbins notes, displaying or grouping bears by type seems to streamline exactly what guests are looking for. For instance, for couples, there are bears holding flowers, kissing and holding hands while families appreciate the bears with cubs and holding signs that pledge their love to the “Beary Best Mom” grouped together.

To find just the right sayings and slogans, Stebbins says products by Slifka and Wilcor strike a chord with customers.

“I feel like people just gravitate toward more cutesy bears. I don’t know if this is just our town specifically, I feel like it is because we definitely draw a certain crowd to Big Bear, it’s almost like a time capsule if you will,” he explains. “We get tourists from all over from different groups. A lot of our guests are very patriotic between 50 and 60 years old, and they like a lot of the ‘Get off my lawn’ bears or things like that. But that’s why I think Big Bear is more of a time capsule, it’s a place for older souls and that kind of demographic.”

No matter the location, retailers agree the mountain and animal themes are good sellers; while none could point to a specific trend they see emerging, all agreed it’s because bears and mountains never go out of style or lose popularity. If anything, Stebbins notes, the allure of bears goes in waves.

“It’s actually kind of weird how it works. We might go a week or two without selling almost any let’s say magnets and then out of nowhere we’ll sell 100 magnets in a day,” he notes. “So they’re not really long-term trends, it’s just kind of flash like maybe one thing is popular that day because one person sees one guy buying it and then they buy it.”

And just like that, he can bear-ly keep it on the shelves. **SGN**