



FOR THE THRILL OF IT

AMUSEMENT PARKS USE THEMED GIFT SHOPS TO DAZZLE AND DELIGHT VISITORS.

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If variety is the spice of life as it is said, then gift shops could be considered the cayenne pepper of amusement parks. Consider that the majority of theme parks have multiple shops sprinkled throughout their sprawling compounds; couple that with the fact that the shops generally focus on a certain ride, attraction or theme, and it's an explosion of souvenirs that vary almost as much as one's threshold for thrills.

TEMPTING TRAVELERS TO SPEND

"We have a tremendous amount of choices [for gift shops at the park]," says Buddy Knoebel, owner of the family-owned Knoebels Amusement Resort in Elysburg, Pennsylvania. "I love them all."

With 10 brick-and-mortar shops and four walk-up, outdoor shops, each carries a unique theme and its own selection of T-shirts, hoodies, keychains, magnets, plush, stickers, hats, water bottles and keepsakes that won't be found in any other shop at the park. For instance, "Airport" features inflatable toys and balloons, the "Brass Ring" focuses on all things horses, the "Twister Shop" is dedicated to the roller coaster of the same name, and the list goes on and on.

And the park has a rather unique twist — it's the largest free-admission park in the U.S.

"Here, the gift shops are actually maybe more of a dominant segment of our business than it is in some parks,"

Knoebel points out. "You pay nothing to get in; it's free admission, free parking, free entertainment, free picnic facilities ... but we're going to find something to tempt you to spend a little money."

And with merchandise from over 300 vendors and more than 5,000 SKUs, there's a lot to choose from, including gems and jewels at the Mine Shop, collectibles and memorabilia at the Heroes Shop, and old fashioned candy and treats in the General Store.

Among the most popular souvenirs are gemstone mining bags from Sandy Creek Mining Co., Pucker Powder candies and squid hats — googly-eyed plush hats with tentacles that hang to one's shoulders.

"This year, we are celebrating our 50th anniversary for the haunted house, and we've done a lot of souvenirs for it. A lot of T-shirts, sweatshirts, hoodies and so on," Knoebel notes. "And they're just blowing out of the stores."

Knoebel says one of the reasons the theme park's shops do so well is because people are coming to vacation at the park and they're "looking for merchandise that is a memory of their trip."

Silver Dollar City Amusement Park in Branson, Missouri, relies on a variety of wholesalers to supply 43 gift shops throughout the park.



MEMORIES FOR A LIFETIME

And for adrenaline junkies, the connection to a favorite ride or roller coaster is the incentive to buy a keepsake that helps to preserve their memories like a time capsule.

At Silver Dollar City Amusement Park in Branson, Missouri, fans are bidding farewell to Fire in the Hole, a historic indoor roller coaster that has hosted more than 25 million guests in its lifetime, according to the theme park's website.

“Know who your guest or your customer is. Know what your park stands for, and then put those two things together and offer product that fits both of those key pillars.” — RHONDA RUZZO, SILVER DOLLAR CITY AMUSEMENT PARK

Director of Merchandise Rhonda Ruzzo says before the announcement that 2023 would be the final season for the ride, the decision was made to launch an entire product line for the final send-off.

“We knew that we had to do something. We couldn't just close it and not do anything because we knew how much we were going to disappoint our long-term [fans],” she explains. “People just love that ride.”

Before the park opened for the season, an exclusive T-shirt commemorating the ride's lifetime and its place in fans' hearts was made available that could only be purchased on the park's online store.

“We had a lot of people that wanted that shirt,” she says. “It was a lot of fun just to see the excitement around it.”

Eventually, an entire line of T-shirts, sweatshirts, magnets, lanyards and keychains followed, but Ruzzo notes the sentimentality that a simple souvenir can have on loyal guests.

“It's just memories that you make, those connections throughout generations that as a family, you're never going to forget those times,” she explains. “That's what it's all about. That's what Silver Dollar City is all about.”

The 1880s-themed amusement park is also known for its craft shops, which are designed to

give generations a taste of what life was like on the frontier. More than 100 artists are on hand daily as visitors pass through the knife shop, leather shop, lye soap shop, glass-blowing shop, candle-making shop, blacksmith, pottery shop and numerous other “working” stores.

“That's really what we started with was all of our craft shops. We are known

as a home of American craftsmanship, so we employ year-round artisans,” Ruzzo notes, adding that the park tries to bring those artisans back every year to continue to interest the next generation.

And while Ruzzo says the shops can never have enough handcrafted items, they also still rely on wholesalers to supply the apparel, home decor, plush, figurines, drinkware, hats, magnets, stickers, keychains, toys and jewelry to help fill the 43 gift shops throughout the site.

Vendors like RMR Designs in Tampa, Florida, supplies souvenir apparel, Life is Good stocks items in the exit shop, and Cardinal Design International in Rogersville, Missouri, provides ceramics like coffee mugs, headwear, shot glasses and magnets. Another noteworthy supplier, Ruzzo says, is Lazy One, which sells matching pajama sets for the whole family, including the dog.

“They have all ages all the way down to the little bitty,” she says with a laugh. “Everyone can get their Christmas photo and all be in matching pajamas so it's just a fun line to carry.”

And while the theme park is known for its attention to detail of the Gilded Age, it does not ignore the trends of today.

“Guests seem to want more than a basic T-shirt anymore. They want that fashion garment, too,” Ruzzo explains. “They want something that feels soft. They want something that's not going to shrink or twist when they wash it, so we found that doing a little bit better garment is what our guests really like. They don't mind paying a little bit more for it.”

Another particularly fun trend for T-shirts and headwear when it comes to the art are saturated colors. “A lot of colors, not necessarily bright, but lots of different colors on the shirt, which makes for a great graphic,” she says. “That's something that we've really seen take off for us.”

A STORIED HISTORY

While most amusement parks have a lot of ground to cover in the way of themes, Storybook Land in Egg Harbor Township, New Jersey, has one focus — bringing books to life for young children through age-appropriate attractions. Opened in 1955, the family-owned theme park sets the tone at the entrance where visitors pass through a castle flanked with toy soldiers standing at attention.

Once inside, children's classic nursery rhymes and fairy tales like “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” and “Jack and the Beanstalk” come to life in interactive exhibits and pint-sized roller coasters for the smallest thrill-seekers.

So, what would one guess is the most popular souvenir from such a magical place?

“We're Storybook Land, so we sell a lot of books here,” notes Jessica Panetta, operations manager.

Storybook Land stocks a lot of eye-catching kids' souvenirs.





Storybook Land carries Aurora and Soft Stuff Distributors for name-drop plush.

"A lot of the Little Golden Books. You don't really see them much anymore."

She says the "classics" are among the best sellers as well as the Disney collections, which are secured through Random House and Dover Publications.

And with children being at the top of the guest list, it's no wonder that the gift shop is geared toward catching their slightly lower gaze with plush, toys and other eye-catching kid's items.

"For kids who are on a [field] trip and they have spending money, we try to keep it so they're able to enjoy the store," says Panetta, whose grandparents opened the roadside attraction.

When it comes to plush, Panetta says the retailers turn to Aurora and Soft Stuff Distributors for name-drop items. Of particular note and a best-seller is a plush castle that comes with additional mini plush pieces.

For souvenir drinkware like refillable souvenir cups, the outfit relies on Charles Products Inc., while Impulse Souvenirs provides pins, stickers, hats and other apparel.

Panetta notes that Spirit Jerseys, a line of long-sleeve unisex shirts offered by Disney, are showing a lot of promise as a souvenir offering.

No matter the size of the item, Panetta says there are certain traits of a good, solid souvenir.

"Get your name on products as much as possible because it's advertising for you as well," she says. "And definitely make sure you buy good, quality products. Get stuff that's unique to your business and stuff that people aren't just going to go by elsewhere."

Meanwhile at Knoebels, the rule of thumb is to let guests get up close and personal with items instead of keeping them shielded under glass and behind counters.

"We have things where people can reach them and handle them," Knoebel says. "The invitation to hold it in your hand and try it makes an increase in sales and makes the item more interesting to purchase."

When done right, Ruzzo says, guests will buy the merchandise that supports their best memories of their favorite attractions. She offers the secret ingredients in finding success when it comes to amusement park products: "Know who your guest or your customer is. Know what your park stands for, and then put those two things together and offer product that fits both of those key pillars." SGN

THE WETTER SIDE

If there's one thing that goes together like peanut butter and jelly with an amusement park, it's a water park. Typically neighbors owned by the same company, water parks pack in the same type of clientele — those looking for adventure and seeking thrills, but in a wetter atmosphere. The gifts and souvenir offering have to reflect a more aquatic environment.

Jessie Hayes, retail manager and group sales manager for Port of Call, Raging Rivers WaterPark gift shop in Grafton, Illinois, says everything from flip flops and swimsuits to stuffed animals and jewelry are up for grabs in the waterside shop.

"The most popular that I've had to order multiple times would be flip flops and water shoes," she says. "We did have water squirters for kids and those sold out every time. Jewelry as well."

Plush supplied by First & Main is also a shoo-in as a top-tier souvenir for water-related stuffed animals, like dolphins, sting rays, sharks, whales and jellyfish,

according to Hayes. "The stuffed animals are very popular. I know they can't take them in the water, but they buy them on their way out every time," she stresses. "They don't actually say anything about Raging Rivers on them, they're just regular stuffed animals."

Name-drop products from Logo-It Apparel include T-shirts, swimsuit cover-ups, tumblers and magnets, while jewelry from Cruz Accessories, sunglasses from Cliff Weil Eyewear, Norty footwear, Sun Bum sunscreen and Pepsi products round out the list of must-haves.

A new brand added this year was Del Sol, which includes hair accessories, nail polish and shirts that change color in the sun. Also new to the lineup which no outdoor water-park gift shop could be without — a Hershey's ice cream case; additional sweets include cotton candy and jelly beans.

Parents appreciate the "puddle jumpers" available for toddlers as well, notes Hayes.



Raging Rivers' gift shop offerings include beach accessories, soaps and lotions.

Although practical for hiding a drain in the floor, Hayes says a big rack in the middle of the store that people have to walk around to get into the park has proven successful, as children clamor to find their favorite stuffed animal.

And another profit-ringer — routing traffic through the gift shop to get to the water park. "It's something they did right before I started here and it's really helped us out a lot," she notes.

So if you're looking for the perfect souvenirs on the wetter side of theme parks, think poolside comfort and beachfront-relaxation add-ons — things that are going to make customers want to stay a little longer.