

KATHERINE VASQUEZ'S PERSPECTIVE ON

Coastal Souvenirs

Customizing gifts to a specific location can set a store apart from larger neighboring cities, and vendor relationships are important.



STORY BY
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PHOTOS: JESSICA MILITELLO

PICTURESQUE AS A POSTCARD

The Santa Monica Pier's roots run deep. Known as the "end of the trail" for the iconic Route 66, the pier has been dutifully serving the public in many different capacities since it was built in 1909 to serve the city's sanitation needs.

Today, the infamous concrete pier serves as an entertainment destination for those seeking thrills at Pacific Park amusement park, which is known for its solar-powered Ferris wheel and the West Coaster steel roller coaster. For those who prefer to keep their feet on the ground, tasty treats and carnival games are waiting to tempt visitors while they take in the sights and sounds of one of the most photographed places in the world.

With more than 5 million visitors flocking to the famed arch and other historic landmarks that overlook the Pacific Ocean, the Pier Gear Gift Shop stands in the thick of the action — waiting to catch the eyes of visitors as they stroll the 1,600-foot pier.

"A lot of the merchandise that we use

outside of the store is definitely eye-catching," says Katherine Vasquez, retail manager and buyer for Premier Parks LLC, which operates Pacific Park. "Once people see what we have out there, they're enticed to come in and see what else is inside."

USING SPACE EFFECTIVELY

With only 700 square feet to work with inside the store, Vasquez uses every square inch to show people the best of what Santa Monica has to offer in magnets, apparel, shells, candles, glassware, jewelry, beach bags and water globes. She says the fact that the items are branded with the city's name is one advantage Pier Gear has over neighboring locations.

"If you're a visitor and you come to the Los Angeles area, you can go to Hollywood or Venice, and you'll find a lot of Los Angeles items or even California items there," she explains. "But nothing really with Santa Monica, so we try to customize our gifts so they can carry Santa Monica home with them."

Among the bestselling items are magnets, particularly one that's custom made with iconic images of the Ferris wheel, the Santa Monica arch and the Route 66 sign at the end of the pier.

"We found out that people love magnets," Vasquez notes. "They come from all over the world and take them home as a souvenir."



Items such as coffee mugs branded with the Santa Monica name drop are appealing to customers.

Not only is there a wall front and center within Pier Gear dedicated to the small magnetic mementos, but there is another unit elsewhere on the boardwalk called The Magnet Wall that hopes to catch the attention of avid collectors.

With limited space to work with indoors, Vasquez uses the boardwalk in front of the store to expand her square footage and her reach to the foot traffic pounding the planks outside the two roll-up garage doors.

"When I first started, we only had one garage door and it was closed, and I felt we didn't have the exposure to the traffic on the boardwalk that we needed," explains Vasquez, a 20-plus-year employee of Premier Parks. "I feel like the [two] garage doors helped us because it's more open and we're able to put displays and racks outside in the front patio; it captures people's eyes and they're able to see what kind of business we are."

Once inside, guests are greeted by a rainbow neon Pier Gear sign while



Customers love collecting Santa Monica-themed keychains, stickers and magnets.

surfboards and Ferris wheels dangle from the ceiling and flip flops lazily track a path across the worn, wooden floor. Meanwhile, a wall dedicated to T-shirts displays 36 of the store's most notable designs and open shelves below stock the shirts in various sizes for easy access.

Elsewhere in the store, displays are broken down by icons or landmarks, including Los Angeles, Route 66, California and Santa Monica.

Vasquez notes the space hasn't

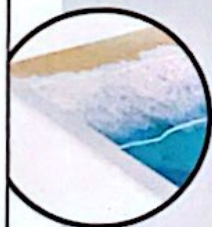


changed much since it opened in 1996 save for a minor renovation in 2014 when a wall for small back room was torn down and the registers were relocated to utilize the space in the back of the store.

GROWING WITH GRACE

Vasquez joined the company in 1999 and worked as a supervisor in the games department before her boss transferred her to merchandise. She had no experience

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⚓ COASTAL CONNECTION

in retail or gift shops, and she learned on the job instead.

"I feel like spending time in the store, watching what moved and what people were purchasing, and hearing people what they wanted kind of gave me an idea of what needed to be purchased," she explains. "I would communicate that

"People are visual buyers. They're drawn to something that catches their eye. So keep your displays full and looking nice." — KATHERINE VASQUEZ

to the director and little by little, he gave me a little bit of rope to go ahead and order it. The next thing I know, I was in charge of a store."

Vasquez marvels over how her department has grown from about 10 employees to over 50 employees during peak season between mid-March to September. She likes to reminisce with her co-worker, Isherrie Dunk, who has been with the company nearly as long as her.

"It was like a family," Vasquez says of the few employees who worked together in the beginning to tend to the gift shop.

She adds that while she's grateful the department has expanded to what it is today, it hasn't been without challenges, most notably in recent years in finding committed employees.

"I know times have changed and I definitely know that we're not the only ones going through this, but as far as commitment from the younger generation it's just different. At times, you know, you miss that [level of commitment]."

RELYING ON RELATIONSHIPS

In this business, Vasquez knows all too well relationships are where it's at. Whether employees or vendors, the years

together in the industry make a difference. When it comes to vendors, Vasquez refers to them as her "partners."

"I started this maybe 18 years ago, so the vendors I put on my list or the people that we do business with are people who have worked in this industry for a long time," she says, adding that she met some of her longtime vendors when they visited her store and others at the gift shows.

She notes that her go-to show is the Las Vegas Souvenir & Resort Gift Show as she says it's a good place to source out vendors and meet new people.

Among the brands she feels are her closest allies are American Gift Corp., Koppes Kandles, Barry-Owen Corp. for jewelry; Pinnacle Designs for keychains and magnets; and Popularity Products, The Duck Company and Lakeshirts for apparel.

Vasquez admits she has also learned to trust her closest vendors' opinions when they offer advice on a product that she may not have necessarily considered

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— and it typically pays off.

"I think your perception and the reality of what's selling are two different things, so I try to run reports on a daily basis," she says. "I might think this product is awesome, but the numbers might say otherwise."

Conversely, she notes, she's had to take a vendor's word when they recommended a product she thought she would never buy. "Some of the vendors suggested this is doing great, and I'll give it a try and then I'll see in fact the item does well," she says.

Vasquez says she also learned a long time ago to listen to her shoppers for some of the best advice.

"When I first started, I used to listen to people's reactions about the products — what did they think was nice? Did they like the feel? Did they think it was too expensive? How they reacted told me a lot about their purchasing preferences."

Vasquez still relies on basic retail formulas to sell products and find merchan-



Pier Gear has a wall featuring 36 of the store's most notable T-shirt designs.

dise that appeals to Pier Gear visitors. No matter a shop's size, she says working with what you have and making it pop is all you need to turn a "no" into a "whoa."

"People are visual buyers. They're drawn to something that catches their eye," she explains. "So keep your displays full and looking nice."

As far as what has kept Vasquez so happy working in the same place all these years, she says it's the same "magic" that attracts tourists to the pier.



"It's such a magical place to work. I know that sounds so cliché or so Disney," she admits. "But the sunsets are so unique. I always think about that. Some people have to wait for so long to come and visit us. I get to come here every day and I'm in my 'office' and I can see the sunset, and that's just awesome to me." ♣



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