

Holiday pop-ups serve as big-box alternative

Consumers are attracted to the sales for their exclusive “here today, gone tomorrow” concept.

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HOLIDAY POP-UP SALES

Holiday Boutique: U.S. Bank Stadium, concourse level, 401 Chicago Av., Mpls. , 612-777-8881 , www.minneapolisholidayboutique.com . Tickets \$10-\$12., 10 a.m.- 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday , 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday . More than 200 vendors with jewelry, gifts, kids items, gourmet foods.

Merry & Mod Market: True Ethic , Northrup King Building , 1500 NE. Jackson St. , No. 238 , Mpls., 612-207-2968, trueethic.com . Free. Noon to 4 p.m. Saturday and Nov. 19 . Vintage, fair trade, eco-conscious gifts.

Showroom's Small Business Saturday Pop-up: Showroom , 615 W. Lake St. , Mpls., 612-345-7391 , showroommpls.com , 11 a.m.- 7 p.m . Nov. 26 . Free. Locally made makeup, skin products, clothing, accessories.

SooVac's Local Artists' Holiday Shop: Soo Visual Arts Center, 2909 Bryant Av. S. , #101 , Mpls., 612-871-2263 , soovac.org . Dec. 2-30 . Free. For local art lovers.

For many holiday shoppers seeking to simplify and enrich gift buying, pop-up sales are Etsy brought to life. This weekend, a supersized pop-up — called Holiday Boutique — is happening at U.S. Bank Stadium .

Pop-up holiday shows appeal chiefly to women who are seeking scarves, handbags, jewelry, candles, chocolate, lotions, home decor and jewelry. Girlfriends, sisters, mothers, daughters, grandmothers, alcohol and appetizers mix freely for an experience that's much more relaxed and unfocused than most holiday hunting .

“It's built out of a desire to select something different,” said Wendy Liebmann , chief executive and founder of WSL Strategic Retail in New York. “When people are buying

for a special occasion, there is little differentiation among products and services.”

For an entrepreneur like Holly Mihalovich , it’s a chance to bring her Hidden Heel product, a silicone wedge that adds comfort and 2 inches of height in shoes and boots, to a much larger audience.

“These shows are a phenomenon,” she said after a very successful stint at a similar show in Kansas City last weekend. “I hope it becomes an annual social tradition.”

Angie McGuire of New Hope , who designs saucy-mouthed greeting cards called Muddy Mouth Cards , said holiday pop-up sales yield nearly 20 percent of her annual revenue. Her booth does especially well when women laugh loudly at the cards, attracting others who wonder about the commotion.

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“Craft shows aren’t in the church basement anymore,” McGuire said. “It’s about craft beer, wine, jewelry and trendy home decor, not pot holders.”

Maiden Minnesota , which started its Twin Cities holiday pop-up in 2007 , attracted more than 1,200 attendees last weekend at its event, an increase of 15 percent over last year.

“This was a great year for us. We’ve been fortunate to have steady business even with lots of new competition,” said Jen Stack , co-founder of the event. Maiden Minnesota, which charged \$20 admission, was competing against several free events — Paikka Holiday Bazaar in St. Paul, and Northern Grade and Bespeak Holiday Pop-Up , both in Minneapolis.

Holiday Boutique easily dwarfs all the other local pop-up sales. More than 20,000 shoppers are expected at an event that the organizers are saying is not a “craft show,” but rather a “shopping extravaganza” with holiday-themed dresses designed by “Project Runway’s” Christopher Straub , a festival of decorated holiday trees, music, cocktails and door prizes.

“It’s all about kicking off the holidays,” said Jennifer Wallin , brand manager of Holiday Boutique. “We are producing memories. It’s a time to be with people who are important in their lives.”

Holiday Boutique, launched by Marketplace Events, producers of the Minneapolis Home + Garden Show, started the concept in Kansas City last year. Last weekend’s

event there pulled in 40,000 visitors. The company will add another show in Des Moines next year.

Analysts are finding that consumers want to shop big and small. Big-box retailers such as Target, Wal-Mart and Walgreens keep growing, but the power of smaller manufacturing is too. “A big retailer can only afford to buy from suppliers who can fill the order for all their stores,” said Paco Underhill, chief executive and founder of Envirosell, a behavioral research and consulting company in New York. “People going to the pop-ups are finding different things, often locally made, than they find in big-box stores.”

Taylor Starkman is selling her Cherry Rock Design jewelry at several holiday shows including the Minneapolis Craft Market and Holiday Boutique. She has seen strong sales at previous holiday pop-ups, but she especially values the direct contact with people.

“Online reviews on Etsy are encouraging, but it’s so important for me to interact directly with the customers,” she said. “The feedback is huge to me. I like seeing who ends up with my work.”

Analysts think there’s still growth in the category. Mary Van Note of Ginger Consulting in Minneapolis thinks it has to work to maintain freshness just as any mall, neighborhood shopping area or brick-and-mortar store does. “If too many vendors are not just right, it chips away at the specialness,” she said. “These events are designed to sweep you away so that before you know it, you’ve bought three pairs of shoes.”

Maiden Minnesota, which typically has almost 40 vendors, counts on almost half its businesses being new each year to keep its unique feel. Stack is concerned about new competition, but she feels Maiden Minnesota has positioned itself well as an event for female-owned businesses based in Minnesota. “There are enough women’s expos out there. We try to keep our boutique feel,” she said.

Wallin thinks that some people attending Holiday Boutique may be doing so in part to see the new Vikings stadium, if they haven’t already. The sale takes place around the concourse, not the field, but there are several spots to view the field from the concourse. Knowing that the sale is not a testosterone-fueled event, she added, “It’s still a great event to meet women.”

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