



Hard times feed make-your-own-crafts trend in Sacramento area

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Gathered around a table surrounded by walls of woolly yarn skeins, several women hunker over furiously working knitting needles in a small shop.

This is how they create Christmas presents, baby-shower gifts and things for themselves these days.

"It's kind of an art," said Barbara Debert as she knitted herself an enviro-friendly, colorful shopping bag. "It's nicer than going to the mall."

The do-it-yourself trend kicked into high gear during last holiday's recession-dampened season and is proving a mainstay for this one. Craft and sewing retailers are riding high in the recession, posting sales gains or relatively small losses.

Same-store sales increased 4.3 percent this past quarter over the same time last year for the parent company of Jo-Ann Fabrics & Craft Stores, where beginners can buy a kit that lets them whip out a fleece blanket in a half-hour or less.

Sewing machines, particularly beginner models, are flying out the door at the Jo-Ann store in Citrus Heights.

"We can't keep them in stock," said Janette Layher, the store manager.

For smaller, independent stores catering to do-it-yourselfers, the trend is a welcome respite from hard times.

"We've been really busy. Knock on wood," said Linda Urquhart, who owns Rumpelstiltskin, a yarn and crafts store in Sacramento.

Even when the economy rebounds, beading bracelets, knitting scarves and making soap and candles will endure, a hallmark of how the recession has reshaped values, say trend watchers.

What might have started as a money-saver is taking hold as much more, said Kit Yarrow, a professor of consumer psychology at Golden Gate University.

"It's here to stay," she said of do-it-yourself trends.

"It's not just about saving money. It's about feeling in control. Now, it's for creative expression and for companionship. Once people start doing it, it becomes part of their identity."

At the knitting class at Rumpelstiltskin, newcomers and the more experienced have found an easy companionship and a place to share their interest, said Mary Griggs, one of the retired women in the class.

"I'm addicted," said Griggs who joined a year ago for something to do. "It's a very satisfying hobby."

The warm reception she got for her baby outfit for a shower gift and a scarf she gave as an early Christmas gift is gratification enough to keep her going, Griggs said.

"It's wonderful to give something you've made," she said.

Sales at Michael's, the national craft store chain, are flat over last year, but that's still a better position than most retailers, said Drew White, chief financial officer of Sageworks Inc., which tracks privately held companies.

Though the company cut expenses, it is still growing confidently, he said.

Jo-Ann Fabric & Craft Stores is posting sales gains as the company offers options for even the most novice crafter.

"When times get rough, people return to tradition. What is more traditional than making things?" said Lorraine Schuchart, a company spokeswoman.

BeadBabe.com wholesales beads online and at a Sacramento warehouse open to the public.

"We're the Costco of beads," said owner Tonette Pillitteri.

"I've seen a huge increase in newbies," she said of new customers who select beads and jewelry parts to create earrings, bracelets and necklaces.

"It's a sense of accomplishment during these times when everyone's feeling deflated," she said.

Some newly unemployed customers are looking for a new income stream or others just need a supplement, she said.

One customer made a rosary as a gift and ended up making them for the whole church, Pillitteri said.

As the world embraces high-tech gadgetry, there is a natural yearning for simplicity, said Rachel Weingarten of Octagon Strategy Group in New York City. Like the young girl strung to her iPod, which is resting in a crocheted pouch she made.

Retailers have noticed, too. Stores like Fresh, where customers buy soap sliced off handmade bars, are generating sales by capturing some of the same feeling, Weingarten said.

"It's really put a dent in mass-produced stuff," she said.

She recalled women during World War II who couldn't buy stockings and instead drew a line down the backs of their legs to mimic the seams on nylons of the day.

"When the country is in flux, people have learned to be more creative," Weingarten said.

Take a look at any magazine stand and notice the 10 different magazines devoted to a particular craft, such as beading, she said. Same with books, said Weingarten, the proud owner of "How to Make Lampshades."

Men are also turning to some of the crafts, but more often favor stained glass or metal-smithing, she said.

"No one is going to make fun of a guy who makes cuff links," she said.

Where quilting bees drew women together out of necessity – it took many hands to quickly do a quilt – today's crafters are finding connection, Weingarten said.

"We can conduct our entire social and business life in front of a computer. You need an excuse to get together with your girlfriends," she said.