

Local retailers get creative to save summer, optimistic about fall revenue

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Traditionally, as summer fades into fall, local retailers along the Jersey Shore tend to see a lull in revenue. But 2020 is anything but traditional, and with the COVID-19 pandemic turning everything upside down, some actually are reporting a spike in sales.

In the weirdest summer in recent memory, most local shops lost revenue during the pandemic while others saw record sales. As October begins, most store owners remain optimistic about the fall, hoping to make up for what they lost in the spring and early summer, when they were closed by state order.

Store owner Barry Tischler had the best August revenue since 2014, he said. Tischler and his wife, Susan, own Just For Laughs and Kaleidoscope, a gag-gift shop and women's boutique, respectively, in Cape May.

"We actually had some great months," Barry Tischler said of the summer. "When we lost a lot of money in the springtime, we thought that maybe it would be over for us. The theory is that the spring was bad, but we're going to make it up in the fall."

After talking with hotel and bed-and-breakfast owners in the shore resort, a lot of tourists who had reserved stays in the spring rebooked stays in the fall, he said.

On a warm late September day, the Washington Street Mall in Cape May was busy with shoppers. Two blocks down at Bath Time soap shop, store owner Bonnie Mullock was happy to see it. There were so many shoppers, her store ran out of shopping bags.

"It was much better than we expected," Mullock said of the summer. "It was much more difficult than we ever expected, probably the hardest year, and we've been here for 26 years."

The store's tenure in the city helped, said store associate Laurie Johnson, because locals and tourists who are loyal customers to the shop came right back once it reopened.

And while those loyal customers came back, Mullock was still met with challenges.

"There was extra work, more people and less money and extra employees for cleaning," she said.

To help with social distancing, she put a gate at her entryway to only allow eight people in the store at once and had to staff an employee at the gate.

Another challenge was getting inventory, which is still an issue.

"We deal only with small companies, and a lot of them are still closed," she said.

Some of the companies Mullock deals with also have limited inventory and can't send her full orders. And for products she makes, she couldn't get oils or lids for jars.

As a soap shop, Johnson said the business strives to maintain a consistency in products because most customers come back repeatedly for the same scented soap or bath item. That consistency was upended at times when some products weren't available, she said.

Like other store owners, they're optimistic about the fall, but they're still taking it one day at a time.

Jill Lehman had the same mindset going into October. Lehman, who owns Shorely Chic Boutique in Stone Harbor, said her store is down about 30% compared to last summer.

"September has been very well for me," she said. "I am optimistic about October, but I'm going to take it week by week and see. Typically in the past, I was only going to open on weekends, and now I'm considering being open at least five days if not six days a week."

Once she reopened, she had to get creative to attract customers. Her boutique primarily sells dresses and clothes for special occasions. With many large gatherings and functions canceled due to COVID-19, Lehman had to switch up her product to sell to women who are going to fewer business events and logging in to more Zoom calls.

Canceled events also are affecting businesses at the shore that rely on the crowds those events bring in.

In Atlantic City, Boardwalk retailers took a hit due to casinos operating at a limited capacity, said Michael Chait, president of the Greater Atlantic City Chamber. He said while other shore towns may have a stronger shoulder season, Atlantic City may not.

"You didn't have that Boardwalk foot traffic," he said. "And going into the fall and winter, not having conventions, not having entertainment ... it's absolutely going to impact the retailers going forward."

To get through the fall, Roger Brangan travels up and down the Jersey Shore as a vendor at different street fairs and fall festivals. But some, if not all, have been canceled this year due to the virus.

Brangan, who owns Pacific Soul, a shop in Ocean City specializing in gifts and garments from Bali and Indonesia, also brought merchandise to the Ocean City farmer's market each week during the summer. That in turn did well for his business in September, adding that this September may have been better than 2019.

"July and August were down. June was down. But September seems to be right where it needs to be," he said.

Cathy Schaffer, owner of Bellanova women's boutique on 96th Street in Stone Harbor, agreed. Despite sales being off 30% to 40% for the summer, September has been an exceptionally good month.

"Our night business was way off," she said of the summer. "The restaurants were outdoor dining only, and there were no movie theater or bars. The only reason to come to town, I think, was really to get ice cream or takeout food, and then they went back home."

Many of Bellanova's customers are older, Schaffer said, and some just simply didn't come back due to fear over the virus.

"I think it's part of the reason we've had a really good September," she said. "Some of those people now feel that maybe towns are not so busy and so it's safer to come."

While business in September was about the same for her compared to last September, her store did better this September than the summer months.

“Everything has been turned upside down,” she said. “September is usually our third biggest month. This year September may be the best month of the year.

“Everybody has been saying the same thing, September has just been a godsend because we were struggling so much in the summer,” she added.