

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Rooting for the retail underdogs

Small details can lead to big sales

By Michael Guilfoil
Staff writer

In the battle between retail Davids and Goliaths, marketing guru Jon Schallert roots for the little guys. And he travels around the country with an arsenal of tips to help mom-and-pop shops compete successfully with the big boys.

Schallert, who developed his creative marketing chops during a career with Hallmark Cards, was in Spokane Thursday for the Spokane Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau annual meeting.

Earlier in the day, he conducted a workshop titled "Destination Marketing For Any Business." About 80 members of the Downtown Spokane Partnership attended.

What they heard was an energetic pep talk saturated with specific ideas and punctuated by anecdotes about Schallert's heroes – shopowners in out-of-the-way places who made their stores so irresistible that time-strapped consumers eagerly travel hundreds of miles to spend money.

People like Mary Carol Garrity, who opened an eclectic home-furnishings shop in tiny Atchison, Kan., 12 years ago and now sells more than \$4 million in merchandise a year to customers from Kansas City and Omaha, Neb.

Garrity's store, Nell Hill's, offers free delivery to those and other cities, and her delivery crews are trained to suggest other merchandise that will complement the buyers' home décor.

Or Mike and Carol Hamilton, who put their Chutter General Store, along with their remote

hometown of Littleton, N.H. on the retail map by installing the world's longest candy counter. At just under 112 feet, the counter is stocked with 600 jars of candy, from 1-cent Apple Frooties to 55-cent Zagnuts.

Or talk about cutting-edge ideas, Hamilton Hardware of New Albany, Miss., is famous not for nuts and bolts, but for being the world's biggest seller of Case knives. Thanks to the store's huge inventory of collectible blades, New Albany attracts international knife conventions.

But earning retail destination status doesn't require stocking more candy or Case knives than anyone else, Schallert told his audience. It only requires focusing on a niche market and providing exceptional customer service.

"You'll never beat the big boxes on price." He pointed out.

Schallert offered a 14-step plan for becoming a destination business.

Many of his tips focused on the minutiae of retailing, such as encouraging employees to make eye contact with customers. Schallert told how one employer starts each day with a pocket full of dollar bills. Every so often he asks employees if they recall the color of their last customer's eyes. If they do, they earn an instant \$1 bonus.

Schallert also recounted how once he was enlisted to tell a business owner that her partner and sister-in-law needed to pay more attention to personal hygiene.

Whether Schallert was touting the merits of well-lit, uncluttered storefronts or the importance of maintaining a Web presence, he managed to keep his audience amused, interested and occasionally inspired.

"I'm going to get off the dime and put up more signage," art gallery owner Lorinda Knight said afterward. "Particularly up on my mezzanine, which a lot of people don't know about yet.

"And I'm thinking about getting someone to build me some pedestals that I can place inside the front door" to create a more formal entrance to her downtown shop.

"I've been to so many motivational things over the years, from Zig Ziglar to Norman Vincent Peale," said Jigsaw women's boutique owner Susan Carmody. "What I liked about (Schallert) is that he tells stories in a manner that you can relate to."

Carmody's favorite tip was for stores to partner with groups seeking donations, so that donations are proportionate to the amount that group members spend in the store.

Auntie's Bookstore owner Chris O'Harra bubbled with enthusiasm following the 2 ½-hour presentation.

"In retail, you get so *tired*," she said. "This kind of thing just rejuvenates you. During the 10-minute break, my whole staff was standing around brainstorming."

What did O'Harra learn?

"We have to do more to differentiate ourselves," she said. "There are things about Auntie's that set us apart from all the other bookstores."

For instance, O'Harra has photos of famous authors standing outside Auntie's when they came to talk and sign books.

"What other bookstores have that?" she asked. "We should have those hanging on the wall."

■ Business writer Michael Guilfoil can be reached at (509) 459-5491 or by e-mail at mikegu@spokesman.com