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A store that 'gets' pop culture

Spencer's stores marks 60 years of supplying America with gag gifts

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A bloodied, half-torso man of plastic let out an excruciating scream from its sound box.

"That's Chin Up," said Steven Silverstein, standing next to the human likeness in the Spencer's store in the Hamilton Mall in Mays Landing. The screaming figure is a creation exclusively made for Spencer's and its seasonal sister chain, Spirit Halloween Superstores, Silverstein explained, as a melodramatic dirge cued up against mash-ups of electronic music.

"Halloween is always in the DNA of Spencer's," said Silverstein, CEO of the company and the man responsible for filling malls across America with black lights and baby aliens in lava lamps.

"AHHHH! AHHH! AHHHH! UHHH-AHHHHH!"

Chin Up continued to hang in there, its death-throes eliciting smiles in a moment that wouldn't be unusual in most stores during Halloween. But at Spencer's stores around the country, moments like these happen every day of the year. A typical workday at the quirky gift shop will see employees - including the Hamilton Mall store's bustiered sex toy expert Pat Abate - don costumes to demonstrate the scary or sexy appeal of merchandise.

Working at Spencer's isn't just a job. It's an adventure and an opportunity to play.

"Authenticity is huge for (the Spencer's) customer," said Silverstein. "They're not going to buy it if you're a phony. Do it right or don't do it at all."

The ethos of providing what others don't - the supremacy of niche, the niche of the out-there, unruly and irreverent - has kept the business going for 60 years. Need something outrageous, weird, or just want to have a laugh in the mall? The answer is usually Spencer's. Where else could you buy a megaphone programmed with prerecorded expletives - a favorite of store manager Tracey Posner - or a talking insult parrot?

"You can get really good gag gifts here," said Krystal Geese, 23, of Galloway Township, purchasing a skull fairy "sexy costume," also having bought a star-pattern book bag for college at the store this past year. "You can get the sexy or the fun or the gory. I like the variety."

"Oh my gosh, is that the BK guy?" cooed Kristin Brannan, 19, of North Cape May, spotting the infamous Burger King mascot grinning among the racks of Halloween masks at the front of the store.

Despite corporate changeovers, the company's national headquarters remains in Egg Harbor Township. The store still sells its plasma lightning balls, lava lamps and black lights, products hot in the 1970s. Much of the recently retro is desirable again, including pro-peace and earth-loving attire. But Spencer's has also been molded by trend, its merchandise changing along with cultural mores since its inaugural retail location opened in 1964 at the Cherry Hill Mall.

To "Spencerize" something, said Silverstein, is to give a popular item a fresh twist, regardless of being retro. For example, the Al Pacino flick "Scarface" is a favorite of young gangster movie fans. Rubik's Cube is also hot with young shoppers. So this Christmas, Spencer's says: Scarface Rubik's cube.

"In marketing terms, the firm has followed the classical marketing dictum: Find a customer niche and fill it," said Eugene Fram, retail trend watcher and professor of Marketing at Rochester Institute of Technology's E. Philip Saunders College of Business in New York.

In 1947, Max Spencer Adler and Harry Adler did not list rhinestone-encrusted pimp cups and pole-dancing kits (now readily available at the store) among their inventory at Spencer Gifts. Carol Weisl, Harry's granddaughter, says little among Spencer's current merchandise resembles the stuff that was sold from the store off the Black Horse Pike during her youth. After World War II, her uncle Max, who gave his middle name to the enterprise, parlayed it into a big name in the burgeoning mail-order catalog industry supported by Atlantic City's printing presses.

"He really looked long and hard to find unusual, fun things that no one else had," she said.

The company was then one of only a few to sell products such as cotton-candy makers and do-it-yourself ice skating rinks for backyards. Its now 602 stores turned 360 degrees from G-rated curiosities and toys to suggestive T-shirts and sex toys. Four years ago, the chain transitioned from Spencer Gifts to Spencer's after being sold by Universal Studios, changing its look in the process. Instead of blank, white shelves, the stores now employ rolling displays, metal surfaces and graffiti-font signage, with specific markings alluding to its history (one says BHP for "Black Horse Pike" and a faux cornerstone on the exterior reads "1947.")

Doug Williams, 17, loved Spencer's even before he became an employee. Now his work there often means play. His task? Fool around with a \$9.99 laser light that projects designs on any surface. The idea is to get customers interested in the gizmo. The interactive approach speaks to another strength of the mall brand: store as entertainment. In this way, Spencer's replicates the feeling of visiting Atlantic City's Boardwalk and not having any set plans, susceptible to the nearest hawker of "stuff," said Fram.

"It's the same thing only they've encapsulated it in a small retail space," he said. Silverstein admitted many customers come for the entertaining walk-through alone.

Matt Yaure, 20, of Egg Harbor Township, bought a shot glass while friends like Fran Goboy was happy just to browse, even if she didn't make any purchases that day.

"I think it's the first store I go to," said Goboy, 20, of Egg Harbor Township. To determine the wants and sense of humor of its customers, Spencer's developed two mascot characters, Jack and Nikki, a guy and girl team falling somewhere in the store's primary 18-to-24 target demographic. Still, Silverstein maintains the common link between customers is not a question of age, but attitude.

Just a few paces from a shirt warning, "Don't Make Me Go Walken On You!" accompanied by the actor's icy-cold stare, are "senior moment pills" and "over the hill" gag products. A few steps from that, pet outfits.

"This is for the mom expressing her attitude through the kids," said Silverstein, pointing to a new addition: a rack of baby T-shirts and onesies that proclaim scandalous (yet cute) statements for the next-generation of Spencer's customer, such as, "I only cry when ugly people hold me."

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Spencer's divided

You might not notice it, but each Spencer store is sectioned into specific neighborhoods.

'Luv Stuff,' aka 'No-Tell Motel' or 'ABC': In this section, customers can pick up sex toys and various other sensual items, books and games, including a portable pole-dancing kit and sex report card. "It's a nice place that men and women can come in, and very discretely, get some things to make their lives fun," said "Luv" saleswoman Pat Abate. "The only other place around here that you could do that is in an adult bookstore."

Beverage: Classic drinking games sit alongside a beer pong kit, "beer chugging glove," beer bong and official-looking certificates praising successful intoxication.

Rock 'n' Roll and Tees: A wall of band T-shirts has long been a staple Spencer's offerings, a rock focus shifting with the addition of music greats who represent an overriding edgy aesthetic, such as Tupac Shakur and Marilyn Manson. A newer, straightforward yet decidedly female selection of T-shirts offers taglines including, "\$*! The Prom," and the pro-natural message, "Keepin' Them Real."

Playboy, WWE: Playboy brands its signature bunny ears on a full line of Spencer's merchandise, including nonhuman, pet accessories and girly commodities such as purses. World Wrestling Entertainment holds strong amongst T-shirts and action figures.

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