

Deck The Windows: Holiday displays a downtown tradition for businesses

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Gayle Akerman, owner of Eye Mart in Streator, has a lot in common with Illinois Office Supply owner Peggy Keeney. Both women carry on their late husbands' decorating traditions at their businesses. Both fondly recall how their husbands enjoyed brightening city streets with holiday window displays.

Also, once December rolls around, people are quick to remind Akerman and Keeney it is time for their annual Christmas displays.

"Sometimes we get calls from people asking when the decorations will go up," Keeney said.

The Keeneys have owned the downtown Ottawa business for 18 years and worked there for 30. For decades, Disney-themed Christmas decorations have waved and winked to traffic on La Salle Street. The multicolored lights are shining again this year.

Akerman takes pride in Eye Mart's displays and the town's feedback year-round. The Akermans took over operation of Eye Mart in 1981 and have decorated for more than 30 years.

"People always come in and comment about my windows," Akerman said. "Some say in the summer their big night is to go buy ice cream and see my (displays)."

No matter what the season, Akerman and Keeney are only two of dozens who give their windows holiday makeovers.



Photo: Tom Sistik

Peggy Keeney, owner of Illinois Office Supply in downtown Ottawa, and Jeff Sheppard, company vice president, touch up the Disney-themed office window display. Seasonal displays are a tradition for many downtown businesses in Ottawa and Streator. Keeney and her brother-in-law continue the decorating tradition in honor of her late husband Robert Keeney Jr., who made it his mission to brighten La Salle Street each December.



Photo: Tom Sistik

Jim Pellino of Harte's Cards and Gifts in downtown Streator touches up his holiday window display looking out on Main Street. Seasonal displays are a tradition for many downtown businesses in Streator and Ottawa. Pellino decorates two large display windows with the changing seasons in an effort to attract customers

A BRIGHT IDEA

Why does Jim Pellino of Harte's Cards and Gifts decorate his display windows for the holidays?

Simple. " 'Tis the season," Pellino said.

Decking the store is as much a tradition for Pellino as putting up ornaments at home. He, his wife and friends gather in the evening for a marathon decorating session.

Window displays are not just a business ploy to lasso customers. The decorations also are a good neighbor act to improve the town's appearance and boost people's spirits.

"Putting up holiday windows is group effort of downtown businesses," said Judy Myers, who works for The Class Room, owned by her sister Colleen Fennessey. "It builds holiday spirit for community."

MAIN STREET ATTRACTION

Another reason business owners decorate is to give residents local Christmas exhibits to view.

"I love to walk downtown and see the windows," Keeney said. "People go up to Chicago to see Christmas displays in store windows. It's nice to have that in Ottawa, too."

Pellino believes these many micro-exhibits draw people to the city streets, even if customers don't cross the threshold into the store.

"When people are driving through town and see decorations, they know we care about our Main Street," Pellino said. "It's an attraction."

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

Displays aren't all fun and pretty lights. Despite being festive, each one fulfills a sales strategy.

"You can judge a book by its cover, and I think you can judge a store by its window," said Eileen Fesco, owner of The Book Mouse in Ottawa.

Fesco's philosophy is to create a tidy, organized display to reflect the store's overall appearance. Although Fesco has downsized the scale of her decorations, she says displays of any size attract eyes.

Decorations have a more magnetic effect on customers than plain product displays. Festive arrangements draw foot traffic off the sidewalk and into the store.

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Photo: Tom Sistik

A handmade Santa looks out on Main Street in Eye Mart's holiday window display. Gayle Akerman, owner of Eye Mart, decks her windows for multiple holidays and seasons. Akerman says she uses the displays to vent her creativity and follow in her late husband Dr. Dwight Akerman's tradition of beautifying both the business and city streets.

"It's more eye-catching (to have decorations) than to just have products," Myers said.

A balance of decorations and products is the key. Merchandise in window displays typically sell better than those interior floor displays. Pellino said items in the window serve as a small sampling that entice buyers to seek the same or similar products.

THE ART OF THE MATTER

There is a method to the holiday madness. Just ask Myers or Fesco.

The Class Room sells school products for teachers and toys for children. Which products go in the window depends on the season. Back-to-school displays feature classroom products while toys take precedence at Christmas.

Myers also color coordinates products with the decorations. A red Fisher Price Doodle Pro is not only a hot seller for Christmas in 2011 — it also matches traditional holiday decorations.

A sale item can double as a decoration. The Book Mouse incorporates holidays books into the display, such as a large mouse "reading" to a cluster of smaller mice.

Fesco also recommends building toward the audience. Because many of The Book Mouse customers are children, she is mindful of placing displays at children's eye level.

Seasonal arrangements instead of holiday arrangements can save time. This year, Fesco used a winter theme — snowflakes, snowmen and mice bundled in winter clothing — instead of a purely Christmas theme. Decorations that are not holiday-centric can last throughout the winter.

Once spring rolls around, though, downtown will get another facelift. Winter decorations go into hibernation, and Akerman and Keeney will have to wait a year before the phone calls remind them it's time for Christmas displays again.