

Pragmatic Snowflake enjoys ongoing success

Fur seller nears \$10m in annual sales by giving people what they want

Peter Mitham

Rokie Bernstein, who opened the first location of the fashionable women's outerwear store Snowflake in Banff's Sundance Mall in 1979, says small businesses can't afford to be idealistic.

They've got to keep tight reins on their inventory and financing.

"You have to buy enough that you're in the game, but not so much that you're out of it when the game changes," said the 55-year-old president and majority owner of Snowflake, which is co-owned by Bernstein's sister, husband and sister-in-law.

Snowflake, which has two locations in Vancouver, a location in Whistler and an outlet in Banff, is approaching \$10 million in annual sales. A year ago, it opened a new store in Banff specializing in cashmere dubbed Miriam Joy. In addition to Snowflake, Bernstein finds time to pursue public speaking and lead dream workshops.

With stores in some of Western Canada's major tourist destinations, Bernstein is attentive to news that could affect her international clientele.

"We pay a lot of attention to world events, probably a lot more than most small companies," she said, noting that Snowflake has to anticipate consumers' moods because it buys stock a year in advance.

It seems to have worked: Snowflake, with stores between 800 and 1,600 square feet, has survived long enough to see the resurgence of fur and leather, traditional elements in its showrooms.

"We were extraordinarily successful because we went with the will of the people," Bernstein said, noting that Snowflake bowed to shoppers' sensitivity to fur at the time by offering faux fur alongside the real thing.

The tide is changing, however,



Downturn: Rokie Bernstein's Snowflake stores must anticipate tourist trends

with the Fur Council of Canada in Montreal reporting that 16 per cent of B.C. women wear fur. Sales of finished garments in Canada have also doubled over the past decade to hit nearly \$120 million annually.

Alan Herscovici, executive vice-president of the council, said the development of lighter, smaller pieces has been ideal for Vancouver retailers who operate in a warmer climate with significant tourist traffic.

But declining tourist traffic is the next big challenge Bernstein sees for her local stores as Seattle grabs an increasing share of cruise ship business. She said traffic has fallen over the past two years and she expects it to continue dropping.

John Hansen, president of the Northwest Cruise Ship Association, said that while 2002 was a record year for cruise passengers — 740,000, up seven per cent from 2001 — there will be a slight decline this year as the number of ships calling Vancouver home falls from 21 to 19.

Even more significant, the short-haul cruises that ran between Seattle, Victoria and Vancouver won't be operating, taking 18 schedules offline.

"I think that will have quite an impact," Hansen said. "We're disappointed."

But Constantine Pappas, president of 90-year-old Pappas Furs Designers Ltd. in Vancouver, isn't worried about the loss of cruises, even though about half of his retail sales are to overseas tourists.

An influx of tourists from Asia is creating opportunities, with Taiwan, Korea and China being major countries of origin.

Bernstein has also noticed an upswing in traffic from Taiwan, as well as the People's Republic of China. The Philippines, Thailand and South America are also growing sources of tourists.

A recent Tourism BC report backed up the significance of Asian traffic, noting that Asian visitors accounted for a 10th of the \$9.2 billion visitors spent in B.C. in 2001, even though they represented less than 10 per cent of total visitors. ♦

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**Declining
tourist
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next big
challenge
Bernstein
sees for her
local stores**