

crest of the wave

Based in the seaside town of Wells-Next-The-Sea in Norfolk, Mermaid's Purse offers a mix of tourist and unusual design-led gifts, which sets them aside from local retailers



Situated in a popular seaside town, Mermaid's Purse obviously caters for the tourist market but the shop offers much more than mementos and nauticalia. An increase in second home and holiday homeowners in the area has led to a sophisticated product mix. We spoke to partner, Daryl Bowers to find out more...

When was Mermaid's Purse first established and what was the reason for founding it?

Mermaid's Purse is a family-run business comprising mum Sally, daughter Kat, and Kat's partner Daryl. In December 2001 the opportunity arose to acquire the lease on a wonderful building with bags of character and lots of potential. Sally had always wanted to be her own boss, Daryl likes a challenge, and Kat went along for the ride. Mermaid's Purse opened its doors in Easter 2002. Comprising three shops under one roof – a clothes shop, a coffee shop and a gift shop, Mermaid's Purse also offers a pretty garden with outside seating that is a haven for local wildlife.

What kind of products do you stock?

As we are in a seaside town flooded with holidaymakers throughout summer, we like to stock products that cater to their demands

such as cards featuring Norfolk scenes and Wells beach huts, model boats, tide clocks and carved wooden birds. Cromer, famous for fresh crabs, is a few miles along the coast so items featuring crabs are always popular including kitchen textiles, tableware and wall plaques.

However, we offer much more than just tourist mementos and nauticalia. We like to stock high quality design led giftware and items that are desirable and unusual, products that people don't come across very often.



What is your most popular price point?

What are the cheapest and most expensive gifts you sell?

Our most popular items generally sell for between £10 and £20. Our cheapest lines are cards and fridge magnets ranging from £1.20 to £3.99, and the most expensive are deluxe picnic hampers and wooden boats and birds selling for between £50 and £75. We do have some paintings and framed photographs that sell for between £250 and £500.

How does the layout of the shop appeal to customers?

We transformed the original tired and gloomy interior with bright neutral colours and additional lighting. We made a conscious effort to arrange our island displays with ample space between them for wheelchair users and mums with buggies to move around with ease. Together with the high ceilings and simple, uncluttered displays we've tried to create a spacious and welcoming environment.

How regularly do you update your window displays and how do you ensure they attract passers-by?

We are located in a listed building that was formerly a rather grand private residence. As it was never intended for commercial use, we have no big display windows. To make up for this, we try to create an attractive and inviting garden using seasonal shrubs and flowers in planters and hanging baskets. In summer we have a large colourful Bill Brown bag display under the porch that is very eye-catching and attracts a lot of attention.

What aspect of the business do you enjoy the most?

Receiving favourable comments and positive feedback from happy customers is very rewarding. Visiting trade shows and trying to spot the next big thing is exciting, and we always enjoy taking delivery of new stock and finding a home for it in the shop.



What have been its key developments/successes?

We are continually trying to improve the presentation and appearance of the shop both internally and externally, and this has been reflected in the ongoing success of the business.

Who is your target audience?

We try to appeal to as many people as possible. With the exception of baby gifts, we don't really cater for young children, as there are many shops in the town already covering this market - although we always have baskets of small toys at hand to keep youngsters entertained while mum and dad shop. There is a definite increase in holiday home and second homeowners in this area, so we've tailored our lines to include soft furnishings and accessories that reflect our coastal location.

How do you promote your business?

We're involved in local community activities, such as the Wells Carnival, and we also donate prizes to local charities and events. We regularly feature in the Best of Norfolk magazine and Sally is a frequent guest on North Norfolk Radio. Also, we've recently been approached to sponsor the local youth football team.

Every customer is invited to take a business card. Our bags feature our logo, web address and contact details. We also distribute flyers

through the local newspapers at Christmas.

We believe that word of mouth is our best form of marketing – we have noticed that many regular customers bring friends on their return trips to the shop, and then those friends go on to be regulars and so on.

Where do you source your stock?

We keep a close eye on Gift Focus to see what trends are emerging and we attend Spring Fair, Top Drawer, Pulse and Harrogate (our favourite show – a lovely place to visit in July). We also make 'reconnaissance' trips to larger towns and cities.

How do you choose which products to stock?

We try to find products that aren't available locally in other shops, and that complement our existing ranges. We also prefer to stock items that appeal to us on a personal level – products we could see ourselves buying for someone else, or are happy to receive.

Which products have worked well for you and why?

Hands carved wooden ducks from The Duck Company are very popular. Each duck is individually named and no two are alike.

Drinking glasses made from recycled beer bottles are a favourite with customers. They make an unusual and striking gift, particularly the ones made from branded bottles like Grolsch and Reef. Customers also find the environmental aspect appealing. Juicy Lucy fairy cards and stationery is a good seller. Little fairy themed cards and notebooks with a slightly naughty twist – the cheekier the better for our customers!

Wooden birds and seals from Archipelago are always in demand due to our location. Wells is located in the middle of a stretch of coast designated an area of outstanding natural beauty that attracts birdwatchers throughout the year. There are also seal watching boat trips from Wells Quay to Blakeney Point where seal colonies gather.

Smashable Money Pots from Terramundi are a quirky yet practical gift that always attracts attention. The themed pots are suitable for many occasions, including weddings, birthdays and new babies.

What plans do you have to develop your business?

The name of the shop fits our seaside location but loses its relevance online. In the last 12 months we've launched two websites – www.TotallyFunky.com and www.StrawberryFool.com - each with its own individual character, reflecting the kind of products on offer. We're now putting our efforts into building brand awareness.

How do you view the gift industry at present?

Over the last few years we've seen many traditional gift shops that sell figurines and collectibles close down. Consumers are now looking for something more interesting and unusual. It seems that all manufacturing is now taking place in China and the Far East so the industry in the UK is dependent on a steady flow of new ideas to remain buoyant.

What trends do you predict will be popular in the future?

I believe there will be a return to sustainable methods of manufacture using renewable resources such as wood and ceramics. We will see a move away from plastics and other oil based materials due to the escalating cost of oil and dwindling reserves.

What do you believe is the key to running a successful gift shop?

Identifying the products that people want at the price they're prepared to pay. Maintaining the interest of regular shoppers with new lines and creative merchandising, and building a team of helpful, knowledgeable and friendly staff. ☺

Further Information

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If you are interested in your shop being featured in Gift Focus, please send some information and images to editor@giftfocus.com