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SAN BERNARDINO AND THE INLAND EMPIRE

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Scary good time

Halloween retailers optimistic this year

Rebecca U. Cho, Staff Writer
Posted: 10/19/2010 06:45:43 PM PDT

Halloween retailers in the Inland Empire, spooked by the recession, are hoping this year they are in for a treat.

After seeing sales declines in recent years, costume sellers are watching for a stronger year and a surge in coming weeks.

"I'm optimistic. I hope for the best," said Deanna Jimenez, owner of A Costume Affair in Chino Hills. "We usually don't see a final rush until the last two weeks."

Nationwide, retailers expect to see Halloween sales bounce back this year from a 2009 dip, with Americans spending \$66.28 on average for the holiday on items such as costumes, candy and decorations, the National Retail Federation reported last month.

That amount is a significant jump from last year's \$56.31, and is back up to 2008 levels.

Retailers selling costumes are expected to benefit from the rise in spending, with four out of 10 people planning to don a costume, the highest percentage of people in the survey's history.

Jimenez's store, which is open from mid-September to Halloween, saw a 20 percent decline in sales in 2008 from the year before, she said. Her store expects sales this year to at least match that of the past two years.

Customers are shopping for costumes, but continue to watch their spending closely, she said. Shoppers are making costumes at home and coming into the store to accessorize or buy outfits without the trimmings.

"Usually we can upsell people on getting additional accessories,

shoes, stockings," Jimenez said. "It doesn't seem like everybody can afford to. They're keeping in mind their budgets more."

Linda Sutherland, owner of Fun Corner, a year-round costume store in San Bernardino, said her business is seeing more sales than last year. Customers this year are ready to spend more than last year, she said. They are choosing, for example, to add a petticoat to an "Alice in Wonderland" dress, she said. Sutherland has owned the shop with her husband since 1984.

"It's been very, very difficult - a lot of (costume shops) have gone out of business. We're a niche market," Sutherland said. "But so far this year we seem to be up."

Despite the rough economy and cutbacks in spending, consumers are still willing to open their wallets to feel good on Halloween, Sutherland said. Halloween is the only "me" holiday where

consumers' spending is focused on themselves, she said.

"A guy without a lot of money can have just as much fun as the guy with a great job," Sutherland said.

"Toy Story," "Alice in Wonderland" and vampire costumes are in demand this season, she said.

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