

Twin Cities secondhand stores are ringing up increasing sales as economic woes weigh on shoppers looking to stretch their dollars.

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As consumer skittishness paralyzes the retail sector, customers talking about the economy and looking for value are driving hefty sales increases at thrift stores. Some charities that get support from the stores are receiving windfalls from the uptick in sales.

THRIVING THRIFTS

By MARIA ELENA BACA • Maria.Baca@startribune.com

Cisse Sylla browsed the racks at the back of the Twice Nice Thrift Shop in Blaine, scooping up a sweater vest, a top coat and a long violet wool coat for his wife. It was his second visit to the shop, a branch of the Anoka County Community Action Program. He has also looked for clothes for his three school-age kids.

“The economy is kind of tight,” he said, “so we don’t have money to buy something expensive. So I come here to buy some stuff.”

Though consumer skittishness is paralyzing the retail sector, Twin Cities thrift stores are reporting increasing sales — fueled by shoppers’ desire to stretch their budgets and often creating windfalls for the charities the stores support.

After only six months in business, the Hidden Treasures Thrift Store in St. Anthony is planning to share the wealth, by sending its first thousand-dollar donation to Care of Creation, a U.S.-based ministry that operates in Kenya.



Diane Zeipelt of Coon Rapids is a frequent shopper at Twice Nice Thrift Shop in Blaine, a branch of the Anoka County Community Action Program

Thrift continues: Scrounged coins fill one store’s till. **B3 ▶**

Thrift store sales, donations are up nationally, too

◀ **THRIFT FROM B1**

"We had a really great opening," said store manager Lorene Genidy. "I didn't think that would be possible this soon."

Arc Value Village is reporting a 10 percent increase in sales and customers; Goodwill stores are seeing a 9 percent increase over this time last year. Part of that is sales of Halloween costumes, but part is the economy.

"We hear people saying money's tight, and this is a great place to find things at good prices and good values," said Pam Carlson, director of community relations for Arc Greater Twin Cities, which runs the three Metro Value Village stores.

The National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops (NARTS) reports huge increases, anecdotally in receipts and donations compared with last year. A representative of the organization referred reporters to the group's website.

"As [consumers] run out of purchasing power, they cut back on discretionary spending and change the way they shop — but don't be mistaken, people will still shop!" a statement on the site read.

The thrifty mindset

Customers are talking about the economy and looking for value, the folks who run thrift stores say.

"They're saying that there's no way they'd pay that high a price in the store, especially when kids grow so fast," Gen-

idy said. "They say they don't need anything, but if there's something they like they say they'd rather spend less money."

Twice Nice, which opened in the summer of 2007, has yet to make a cash payment to its sponsor, the Anoka County Community Action Program, but the shop will get closer to doing so if it has a few more days like their Friday Frenzy — 50 percent off the whole store. The parking lot fills and the line snakes through the store.

One recent Friday sales added up to \$900, compared with a daily average of about \$400.

Rita Wilson is a regular shopper and volunteer. During a visit last week, she watched a customer walk by.

"That's my shirt," she whispered. "I'll look better on her."

Wilson, whose parents survived the Depression, said

she's never been much for buying new, and especially not now.

"I'm retired," she said. "I don't need new clothes or really good clothes. I can come here and for \$3 to \$5 I can find a new outfit."

Fears about the future

The uptick in business isn't just about penny-pinchers looking to save a buck, although they probably always will be thrift store mainstays. There's also an undercurrent of fear about what the economy will bring in the coming months, and of people already desperately in need of help.

At Stone Soup Thrift Shop in St. Paul Park, store manager Becky Monson has noticed that over the past three weeks, her till has had an overabundance of coins, likely scrounged from under seat cushions and penny jars. The shop — an outlet

for gently used clothing, shoes, housewares and furniture — relies on grants and sales to the general public to fund vouchers to people who have no income to receive merchandise at no cost. Last year's receipts totaled \$94,000. By late October, the shop had done \$91,000 in sales. Over all of 2007, the shop had given away about \$30,000 worth of goods. As of last week voucher transactions for 2008 had added up to \$39,000.

"There are a lot of people who are watching their dollars and trying to do what they can to stretch them," said Majel Carroll, chairwoman of the board of Basic Needs Inc., which runs Stone Soup. "We know people in foreclosure, we've seen people who have lost their homes, and we help people who have been in shelters. ... It's another resource we can provide to the community to resettle them. We know there's a lot more behind this."

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