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## Bargain shopping is booming

**More consumers are turning to thrift stores, spurred in part by the struggling economy**

By **Nina Wu**

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Traffic is up at thrift stores in Hawaii these days as more cash-strapped consumers look to stretch their dollars.

While regular retailers are rolling out sales and ads to bring in customers, more shoppers are heading to secondhand stores to look for bargains on clothes, household goods and furnishings.

"Our business hasn't been hit by the recession at all," said Phil Carey, district manager for Savers in Hawaii. "As a general rule, we've seen increased traffic to our stores, both in customers and transactions. Everyone's looking for value."

Savers, which has been in Hawaii for 19 years, has two stores on Oahu — in Waipahu and Kalihi — and one in Kahului, Maui.

At Goodwill and Salvation Army stores on Oahu, the story is the same.

"We are seeing more people come to our stores," said Laura Kay Rand, spokeswoman for Goodwill Industries of Hawaii.

Compared with the first quarter of last year, Rand said there has been a 10 percent jump in sales transactions this year. However, people are also spending less, so there has been no significant increase in sales volume.

But more secondhand stores are drawing in new shoppers like Leilani Vasquez.

A friend tipped her about the deals to be found at Goodwill. Since then she's been hooked, and says she is trying to stretch her dollar during these uncertain economic times.

She does early Christmas shopping, finds Quiksilver and Billabong brand clothes for her kids, and other simple household items that will cost just a fraction of what it would be new at a regular retail store.

Despite what some would think, the folks shopping at thrift stores are not on the brink of unemployment or worried about making the rent.

Some, like Maria Santos, just like to hunt for a good bargain. Santos visits the Goodwill on Beretania Street at least once a week with a good friend. She calls it therapy.

"It's just delightful," she said. "What I really enjoy is, they make it so neat."

Her find? A floral I.N.C. blouse that likely came from a department store for just \$6.99. Jeans can be found for \$7.99.

She says it's good to know that what she buys goes back to the nonprofit, which helps people find jobs.

Michelle Li and Mike Bothe, both visiting from Berlin, enjoy combing through the racks at Goodwill and Salvation Army for vintage Hawaiian wear — stuff they can't find in regular stores.

Also, Li picked up a nice cooler to take to the beach for just \$2.

Besides that, shopping secondhand stores is also considered "green" because the goods are, in essence, being recycled and reused.

Goodwill also redeems recyclable bottles, which has created more jobs. The idea is to provide a one-stop shop, according to Rand.

At Salvation Army, same-store sales for this fiscal year have increased 16 percent compared with last year, according to business administrator Rafael Escalera.

Sales of clothing (where children's clothes cost only \$1.50 and aloha shirts start at \$7.99) have jumped significantly, he said, as well as small appliances like coffee makers, irons and hot plates.

Even with those low prices, there are weekly sales offering half off.

The flip side is that donation levels are also down.

"We are not getting the quantity of donations that we got last year," said Escalera.

Instead of replacing furniture and large appliances, more people are hanging on to them, so donations of large-ticket items are down.

Thus, the nonprofit has to make more of an effort to solicit donations. The Salvation Army relies on thrift shop proceeds to run its rehabilitation programs.

Likewise, donations at Goodwill and Savers are also down.

Savers works with three nonprofit partners to supply merchandise at its stores — Big Brothers Big Sisters, the National Kidney Foundation of Hawaii and United Cerebral Palsy.



DENNIS ODA / DODA@STARBULLETIN.COM  
 Laurence Herrera, 4, and his sister, Kennedy, 3, enjoy themselves as their mother, Christina Rainwater, right, shops at Goodwill with her sister, Cyrenna Villegas, who had just flown in from Austin, Texas. Villegas said Goodwill was the first place she wanted to go to shop.

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