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of The Sentinel Staff**

Sleigh bells ring when customers come in. Cash registers ring when they leave. And, in the time between, customers at The Christmas Collection get a hearty dose of yuletide cheer.

Christmas begins as soon as customers arrive at the Altamonte Springs store, as the woodsy scent of fresh-cut Christmas trees, on sale next door, wafts across the entrance. Opening the door, customers trigger the jingle of sleigh bells.

Inside, the store's showrooms look more like drawing rooms, enticing patrons with Christmas trees fully trimmed with shiny ornaments.

In one room, an animated Mr. and Mrs. Claus greet guests; in another, a dozen or so creches remind visitors of the birth of Jesus.

Completing the mood are the lilting tones of piped-in organ music playing traditional Christmas carols.

At The Christmas Collection, atmosphere is the edge to attracting and keeping customers, store owner Judy Lanphear said.

"If we had snow, we wouldn't need the atmosphere," she explained. "But we don't have the atmosphere, so we create it."

Faced with an increasing number of stores that specialize in yuletide fare plus competition from department stores and other merchants that have enhanced their Christmas sections, Christmas-specialty shops are pulling out all the stops by emphasizing product exclusivity, customer service and atmosphere.

"There has been an explosion" of competitors, said Lanphear, who opened her trim-a-tree shop four years ago to supplement a business in freshly cut and artificial trees. When she started, she said, only one other store in her area sold Christmas items year-round, McCracken's Christmas House in Longwood. Today, more than a dozen stores in Central Florida make Christmas their primary business, either by specializing in it year-round or by devoting a major portion of their space to it. With few exceptions, mom-and-pop operations dominate the industry, which even on a national level is fragmented. Consequently, industry sales figures are unavailable. And store owners will not disclose their sales.

But Central Florida Christmas stores will face a new threat in the spring, when J. Callaway's, a national chain of 44 year-round and seasonal Christmas shops, opens an outlet in the Belz Factory Outlet Mall in south Orlando.

Owners of Christmas-specialty stores say that Central Florida may have too many outlets, especially when competition from other retailers is considered. "Everyone is really in the Christmas business -- every drugstore, every department store, every supermarket," said JoAnn Callaway, president of J. Callaway's. Burdines Department Stores Inc., for example, increased the variety of its Christmas merchandise this year and placed displays in busier areas of its stores, said Jane Smiley, spokeswoman for the Miami-based chain.

Retailers also have brought out their holiday goods earlier this year. For example, Silk Greenhouse Inc.'s warehouse stores began in September devoting about a quarter of their space to Christmas flowers and ornaments. As the holiday approaches, such merchandise will consume most of the store, said Michael Blanck, marketing director of the Tampa-based chain of silk-flowers stores.

Specialty-store owners say that their year-round devotion to Christmas enables them to build a wide selection of holiday merchandise, setting them apart from department stores and home-and-garden shops.

"They are not specialists in what we do; they just come in to make a quick buck at it," said Sherry McCracken, co-owner of McCracken's, one of the oldest Christmas-specialty stores in Central Florida. "They may have three tree skirts, but we may have 20 tree skirts."

Specialty shops also typically carry more exclusive and often pricier items -- creches from Italy, hand-painted thimbles from Taiwan, nutcrackers from Germany -- that store owners travel the world to find. Much of their merchandise, however, is made in the United States and is distributed by a only handful of suppliers. That means owners go to great lengths -- like concealing the cities of origin of their products -- to keep the identity of their suppliers secret.

"Most of the suppliers who sell merchandise sell to everyone in the area," said Vernon Hopper, owner of Chris Mouse Trim A Tree Shop in College Park. "So a store owner would ask what the other retailers are putting in their stores and put the opposite in his. You have to play this silly game." Christmas-store owners say that their customers are generally more concerned with quality and variety than with price. Some of the stores sell ornaments priced from as little as 95 cents each and collectibles that carry price tags of \$200 or more. Most sell tree ornaments that cost from \$3 to \$5 each.