

Shopping with soul

More and more retailers feature merchandise with a metaphysical twist

BY ANNE BOKMA

Last year, Marissa Farrell, a 30-year-old real estate agent, did most of her Christmas shopping at the Spiritual Emporium, a store in Port Credit, Ont., that celebrates “all paths to the divine.” She dropped a bundle on gifts that included seven \$50 Himalayan salt lamps, purported to neutralize ions in the air and enhance sleep, and 12 custom-made bracelets, ranging from \$20 to \$50, made of hematite, a gemstone that is believed to promote inner peace and positive energy. The gifts were chosen in the hope of “bringing good vibes” to family and friends, says Farrell. “I really believe in supporting stores like this.”

Stores like this — whether they are called New Age, metaphysical or spiritual — are on the rise, thanks to consumers who are also driving the trend for fair trade, organic and environmentally friendly products. Retailing Insight, the trade magazine for New Age retailers, calls these shoppers “spiritual hipsters,” the type of folks who read *The Secret*, check their horoscopes daily, stuff rose quartz crystals into their pillowcases to boost their love quotient and burn sage to banish negativity.

In *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World*, authors Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson report that New Age consumers, mostly well-educated women who came to adulthood in the Age of Aquarius and now have the financial clout to influence purchasing trends, are spending billions a year on products such as crystals, oracle and tarot cards, chakra balancing kits, goddess jewelry, prayer flags, worry stones, yoga accessories, meditation mats, statues, essential oils, incense and inspira-

tional books. There are thousands of spiritual stores supplying these products across North America, including Canadian outlets such as Utopia in North Vancouver, Gypsy Chicks in Stony Plain, Alta., Green Spirit in Ottawa and Into the Mystic in Dartmouth, N.S. “New Age products . . . represent hope,” Susie Hare, show manager for the International New Age Trade Show, told Gift Shop magazine. “When things are tough, people are searching for things to help.”

In addition to metaphysical merchandise, these stores typically offer a service component, whether it’s tarot card readings or alternative therapies such as reiki. Store staff often double as holistic healers and spiritual advisers. “I often overhear people say, ‘I come here instead of

church,’” says Justin Swanström, executive director of the Coalition of Visionary Resources, a New Age trade industry association, who helps his partner run Shining Lotus Metaphysical Bookstore in Denver.

At the Spiritual Emporium, owner Maggie Costa offers meditation classes, as well as workshops on intuition development, group love spells, space blessings and clearings, and Egyptian aura clearing. She says her store is “part haven, part confessional” and is designed as “a sacred space where people can come to heal and not be judged.”

While most of her customers may describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” she also attracts Catholics (who favour frankincense and religious statues), as well as Wiccans, pagans, Unitarians, United Church folk, Hindus and Muslims. “Certain things like incense cross all religious boundaries,” she says.

Skeptics might accuse these retailers of being more focused on profit than the well-being of their consumers. Costa acknowledges she’s seen some of her clients “bamboozled and conned” by unscrupulous practitioners. “I know someone who spent thousands to remove evil spirits through an exorcism when they could have tried something as simple as a sage cleanse,” she says. “It’s important to have the integrity not to take advantage of someone who is in turmoil or desperate.”

Most customers, she says, are like Farrell — spiritually minded shoppers looking for unique products and services they believe will bring hope and healing, prosperity and peace.

As for Farrell, she plans to do most of her Christmas shopping at the Spiritual Emporium again this year. But she’s also let others know there are a couple of items she’d love to find under her own tree come Christmas morn: a Buddha statue and a Tibetan singing bowl.

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