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View From the Market Booth

*Behind the Counters, a Group
Of Diverse Artisans Brave Cold
To Sell at Thriving U.S. Fairs*

By ELIZABETH HOLMES

MOLLIE MERCER, a 43-year-old from Philadelphia, spends her days in the freezing cold on the southwest corner of Manhattan's Central Park.

Having rented a studio apartment for the month of December, Ms. Mercer is one of about 100 vendors at the outdoor market at New York's Columbus Circle. Under the glow of holiday lights and a candy-cane striped awning, she sells colorful custom-made clothing from her fledgling brand Kizmet Yogawear.

Ms. Mercer, a former professional skydiver, began designing clothing as a sideline. About a year and a half ago, she went into the business full-time, designing and silkscreening the T-shirts and yoga pants and selling them at fairs around the U.S.—she's been to about 30 so far. "Every weekend it's great to go someplace different," she says.

Outdoor holiday markets in cities across the country draw the



Elizabeth Holmes



Ethan Lercher, Bryant Park Corporation

Above, the holiday market at **Bryant Park** in New York, which this year has around 100 sellers; below, a booth at another Christmas fair at New York's Columbus Circle.

smallest of businesses—a diverse group of individuals who sell their wares at booths, either once a year or making a circuit of weekend crafts fairs and markets throughout the year. For many of these sellers, showing at the fairs is part of their business strategy—in addition to making money from the sales, they use the exposure as a marketing tool.

Many U.S. holiday fairs model themselves after those that began overseas several centuries ago. Chicago's Christkindlmarket is an American version of the fair in Nuremberg, Germany, that began in the mid-1500s. More than 50 vendors fill Chicago's Daley Plaza for the event, which runs each year from Thanksgiving Day to Christmas Eve.

Cities from New York to Seattle welcome the holiday markets. "It keeps the downtown area alive," says Veronica Resa, spokeswoman for the Mayor's Office of Special Events in Chicago. "The public really embraces the event."

It's difficult to get a reading on how much money this fragmented market brings in, and it's certainly only a fraction of national holiday sales, which the National Retail Federation projects this year at \$457.4 billion. However, the markets are a source of revenue for cities and often bring activity to parks that would otherwise lie dormant during the winter. Last year, New York City received more than \$530,000 from the Union Square Holiday Market, according to Adrian Benepe, New York's Commissioner of Parks and Recreation. Columbus Circle yielded around \$250,000. "For a month-long market, that's really quite extraordinary," Mr. Benepe says.

Organizers of holiday fairs have seen them

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Behind the Counters, Diverse Artisans Sell at Thriving U.S. Fairs

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grow in recent years. "There's an appetite for it," says Liz Rees, executive director of the Columbus Circle and Union Square Markets for Urban Space Management. In the past five years, New York has gained the markets at Columbus Square and Bryant Park, now among the most popular in the city. "They're just sort of being rediscovered as a no-brainer for downtowns," says Ethan Kent, vice president of the Project for Public Space, an international nonprofit organization based in New York that promote activities like holiday markets.

Local businesses, which pay high rents for permanent stores, aren't necessarily so enthusiastic. Christina Clark, owner of the family-owned toy shop Kidding Around near New York's Union Square, dreads the month-long holiday market that takes place two blocks away. She says she doesn't benefit from the crowds and even loses customers to toy vendors—some of whom use the same suppliers she does. But she says the independent artists who sell their own work are different. "I don't begrudge them," she says.

Many of these sellers come for the prime locations, brand exposure and potential for business contacts.

Frank Rauscher, 59, and his wife travel to Chicago every year from Germany to sell handmade beer steins. In addition to renting an apartment for the seven-week duration of the market, Mr. Rauscher spends nearly \$20,000 for a booth in the downtown plaza. He spends another €2,000 (\$2,657) to ship over about 500 beer steins (which he sells for \$10 to \$199). It's the price he pays for heavy foot traffic—organizers estimate nearly one million people visit the market each year.

Generally, the markets are organized and run by corporations that get a share of the profits. These companies screen the sellers, set up the booths and provide security. At the Fêtes de Noël in New York City's Bryant Park, booth rental—the only cost to the vendors—ranges from \$8,750 to \$25,000 depending on size and location, says Frank Diprisco, execu-

tive director of Bryant Park Market Events. Even so, there's tough competition to reserve one of the booths, which surround a skating rink just a few blocks from tourist-laden Times Square. The selection process, which begins the previous spring, includes an application, product samples and one-on-one interviews, says Mr. Diprisco. At Bryant Park, the emphasis is on high-end offerings such as upscale handmade jewelry and other gifts, and vendors must meet high standards in the design and decor of their booths. "We want each booth to feel like a boutique," he says.

Once accepted at a market, vendors must get a month's worth of merchandise there—whether by driving it, mailing it, or shipping it. Jay Bridgland, a glass artisan who comes to Columbus Circle from Oakland every year, says this year a shipment of his glass work got lost between California and New York. Though his jewelry arrived for the opening of the market on Dec. 2, he still hadn't received his Venetian goblets. "It can be a real setback," he said.

Once the market is open, the wait begins. Unlike weekend craft fairs, another year-round venue where these sellers ply their wares, holiday markets tend to run the entire month of December. With set-up and close, a day easily lasts 12 hours. Although some vendors employ temporary workers to staff the booths, the majority of artisans are a one-person-show.

While customers check out the booths, the sellers watch the customers. One common move: A shopper doing a lap around the market to scope out the options before returning to make a purchase. Outdoor market customers will also barter over prices more than in a traditional retail setting.

Seasoned sellers like Mr. Bridgland know how to beat the cold. On a chilly morning earlier this week, he not only had a heater running in his booth, he wore a thick, plaid hat with earflaps and an outfit that would look at home on a mountain hiker. In front of him, an array of delicate glass jewelry, ranging in price from \$30 to \$1,500.



The **Christkindlmarkt Chicago**, that city's largest open-air Christmas festival, was inspired by the Christmas Market in Nuremberg, which dates back to 1545.

"I spend 11 months of the year in front of a hot torch," he says with a smile. "And then I come here."

Mr. Bridgland, who has been attending open-air markets in New York for several years, has built a following among some of Manhattan's Upper West Side residents, to the point that they seek him out at the market. He generally brings in \$50,000 to \$100,000 in sales at this holiday market from the Holiday Market. But much of his overall annual business revenue of \$200,000 to \$250,000 comes from orders on his Web site.

The camaraderie among businesses surprised Steven L. Miller, a photographer who spent nearly three decades in his job running state chapters of United Way and got into the vending circuit a few years ago to change his hobby into a business. He will be at Washington, D.C.'s Downtown Holiday Market Dec. 11 to 22. He learned how to set up his booth and approach customers from his fellow sellers. "We're unique enough that we don't have to worry about eating each

other's lunch," he says.

As in any other business venture, it's important to do the research. Ms. Mercer says she's made mistakes, ending up at shows where the buyers weren't interested in what she was selling. But New York's Columbus Circle market works for her. "You just really can't go wrong," says Ms. Mercer, "Tons of traffic and tons of draw."

Last Tuesday, Ms. Mercer held up a jacket to shield a customer trying on a T-shirt—and sold the woman three shirts at about \$24 apiece.

Ms. Mercer didn't know what to expect on sales. She hopes to unload most of her inventory so that she doesn't have to haul it back to Pennsylvania. But in this stage of her business, she's happy to break even. "If you make your costs back and you make some contacts, it's a success," she says.



Online Today: Hear how a Christmas tree seller has used the Internet to increase his business, in a podcast, on StartupJournal.com.