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Green is in fashion, and businesses are noticing

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Retailers are dreaming of a green Christmas this year.

That's green as in helping the environment -- and green as in the extra sales retailers hope to generate from their efforts.

Green comes in many shades. Large retailers, such as Wal-Mart and J.C. Penney, are carrying more green products, such as eco-friendly cleaning and beauty products. Local entrepreneurs have opened Blue Anjou, idaBaby and Green Living to exclusively sell organic and fair-trade products that promote fair wages and management of work done in foreign countries. Retailers also are using Earth-friendly building materials and energy-efficient practices in the design of stores, and some are donating part of their sales to environmental-education groups or charities that plant trees.

By going green, companies are helping the environment, but they also can boost sales, save energy costs, gain big tax breaks and present a positive image to consumers.

Industry experts attribute the trend to heightened environmental awareness after Vice President Al Gore's Academy Award-winning film *An Inconvenient Truth* and Wal-Mart's involvement, signaling to other retailers that this is a large, lucrative market.

Green retailing is still a small slice of the total \$2.4 trillion retail-sales pie, but it's growing at about six times the rate of general retail sales. Exactly what that means for holiday gift buying this year remains to be seen.

The Natural Marketing Institute near Philadelphia estimates that the lifestyle, health and sustainability market will ring up \$229 billion in sales this year, \$420 billion in 2010 and \$845 billion in 2015.

"The movement is here to stay," said Sherrie McAvoy, regional retail leader for Deloitte & Touche in Dallas. "All companies should be looking at this. If you don't look at this area seriously, you're probably missing an opportunity to connect with your customer on a topic that's of increasing importance to them."

Green dreams

Retail is the latest industry to join the movement as *green* has become the new buzzword for business. Carmakers tout hybrid SUVs. Airlines, utility companies and others let their customers offset their carbon footprint. (Carbon forms the basis of fossil fuels that's linked to climate change.)

Such efforts appear to matter to consumers.

"I do seek out green products and retailers that are making steps to lessen their negative impact on the environment," Diana Dierks, organizer of the North Texas Environmental Meetup Group of 128 people who share similar environmental interests, wrote in an e-mail. "For instance, if a grocery store gives a discount for using my own cloth bags versus plastic bags, I am immediately more fond of that company and will try to shop at that store."

A recent Deloitte & Touche found that roughly 1 in 20 consumers plans to buy more eco-friendly products this holiday season, shop at more green retailers and pay more for green gifts and supplies.

Two local women launched their own eco-businesses in September as an extension of personal beliefs they already practice at home. They also installed used display racks, recycled wood and bamboo hangers in their shops.

DeAnna Nielsen, 34, opened a green yoga studio and eco-boutique called Blue Anjou in Lewisville after taking a trip to India for a yoga festival.

While there, a child delivered some custom-made Indian clothes, and she decided then to do something that would make a difference.

The shop's stock includes hemp clothing, stationery you can plant and greeting cards made from recycled sheep poop. (Yes, really.)

Nia Umoja, 28, spent five years tracking down vendors and two years sewing enough of her own designs to open *idaBaby* in south Fort Worth.

"I wanted to create something that was funky and fun but still ecologically sustainable," said Umoja, who named the business for one of her four children, daughter *Ida*. Her products -- including items made of organic fabrics and fair-trade toys -- cost \$6 for a ceramic frog whistle to \$109 for a layered dress-skirt ensemble in a purple African print.

IdaBaby's red building attracted Denise Lozano of Fort Worth and her 3-year-old son, Benjamin.

"I saw some things I really liked, especially with all the stories about lead," Lozano said, citing recent toy recalls. "I'm not green and I don't know anyone who's green, but giving a handmade gift and knowing that she's designed some of the clothes is neat."

Caveat emptor

Companies say it's not easy being green.

"To be honest, it's costing us a little more to do the right thing," said Kathy Doyle Thomas, executive vice president of Half Price Books, which has promoted sustainable living for 30 years.

It's especially hard for small-business owners who can't afford to advertise and educate consumers.

"It is very difficult because people walk in and ask, 'What's an eco-boutique?'" Nielsen said.

Umoja, who is below her weekly sales goal of about \$1,800, hopes to share customers with the Spiral Diner, a vegetarian restaurant about three blocks down the street.

Buyers should be aware that green labels may not be all they're cracked up to be, according to a recent report by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. The company studied environmental claims made for 1,018 products and found that all but one were false or misleading.

The "Six Sins of Greenwashing" report said the "sin of the hidden trade-off" happens when office printers, for example, promote energy efficiency without noting hazardous materials. The "sin of irrelevance" occurs when environmental claims are meaningless. For example, some oven cleaners and shaving gels claim to be free of chlorofluorocarbons, but CFCs have been banned for 30 years.

To help sift through the many products and environmental claims, TerraChoice Vice President Scot Case recommends that consumers:

Look for respected environmental labels that are standardized worldwide such as EcoLogo or Green Seal.

Ask: Does this claim make sense? What are the criteria?

"What we've found is that a lot of marketing claims are full of half-truths and irrelevant information," Case said. "By asking a lot of questions, you learn to see through the green fog."

Going green

What some retailers are doing to paint themselves green:

Nia Umoja, owner of idaBaby children's shop in Fort Worth, is trying to start a sewing co-op with local African refugees to do work for herself and five other local designers.

The Blue Anjou yoga studio and eco-boutique in Lewisville adopted a village in Haiti, committing to plant more than 5,000 trees to remove several tons of emissions from the air.

Plano-based J.C. Penney Co. has installed more efficient lighting and heating/cooling systems in stores, cutting nearly 31,000 tons of greenhouse-gas emissions last year from 2005.

Half Price Books is contributing 5 cents from each bagless or reusable-bag sale to BecomeGreen.org, a nonprofit organization it established to finance environmental-education programs. At its Dallas headquarters, a new "green roof" -- made of a rubber material that reflects light and heat -- has saved more than 3,000 kilowatt-hours a month since it was installed in August.

Whole Earth Provision stores in Dallas, Austin and Houston use renewable wind or solar power.

Wal-Mart, which has an experimental store in McKinney, wants zero waste by 2025 and to reduce greenhouse gases by at least 20 percent at stores.

Barneys New York, which has a store in Dallas, launched a holiday catalog this year of green gifts and its own line of green clothing, such as \$190 organic jeans. Barneys is donating 25,000 trees to the American Forest Organization.