

Retailers employing discount promotions for senior citizens

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By Teresa F. Lindeman, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Bette Michak, of Jefferson Hills, pays attention to sales and which stores are offering senior discounts. She noticed not long ago when the region's Kmart stores began offering 10 percent off on Tuesdays to anyone 55 and older.

In fact, the discounts are just about two months old and are part of the massive retailer's experiments in rebuilding its sales base. Kmart, which has been working through Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization since early this year, has given its district managers the flexibility to try out different marketing techniques.

"What we've been doing throughout bankruptcy is try to look at ways to appeal to customers," said Stephen E. Pagnani, a spokesman at the company's headquarters in Troy, Mich.

The Pittsburgh region's managers decided to test senior discounts. Elsewhere in the country, store leadership may be offering more frequent blue-light specials or other promotions tailored to the different markets.

Allegheny County and southwestern Pennsylvania have a well-established senior population. Besides, the area was an important market for Ames Department Stores, which shuttered its last stores a few months ago. Even as Ames ran into other problems, one of its successes seemed to be senior discounts available every Tuesday.

Pagnani said he didn't know of any direct relationship between the Ames' closings and Kmart's new promotions, but he acknowledged the surviving discounter wouldn't mind picking up the extra business. "We had certainly expected and hoped that when Ames closed some of their shoppers would shop us."

The popularity of discounts based on age has been debated in recent years, but plenty of companies still see older customers as a valuable group. At SeniorDiscounts.com, a Web site that tracks such deals, the staff has compiled a list of 120,000 offers ranging from air fares to restaurant meals. That's up from 25,000 when the site launched in April 2001.

Seniors can be valuable because they not only pay attention to sales, but because they tell their friends, said David Smidt, president and chief executive officer of SeniorDiscounts.com.

A search of his site's listings for Pittsburgh turns up deals at Kohl's Department Stores, Sally Beauty Supply, Jo-Ann Fabrics and Crafts, even Goodwill Industries.

Target discount stores held their 29th annual holiday helpers event yesterday morning, inviting senior citizens and guests with disabilities to come in for a 10 percent discount, a little extra help finding things and free gift wrapping. A company spokesman said about 500,000 guests (read customers) were expected nationwide.

Lazarus department stores hold a senior discount day at least once a month.

On the other hand, Wal-Mart does not. "We have everyday low prices for all our customers," said a company spokesman. "We don't need any special promotions."

Teresa Lindeman can be reached at tlindeman@post-gazette.com or 412-263-2018.

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