

# GIFTBEAT

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GIFTBEAT...tracking the  
product pulse of the gift industry.

## Step Inside Fern's Garden, An Artisan Haven

By Sharon Bopp

Southern California retailer Fern Solomon has a mission for her Long Beach store Fern's Garden — and she's sticking to it. "I've never wavered from my vision for selling American artisan and fair-trade gifts," she says.

In the 1990s, Solomon was traveling to all the major gift shows in her role as president of Jacob's Musical Chimes (a position she has held for 30 years). "We were in the juried sections of the shows, so I was surrounded by fabulous American artisans," she says. "I'd tell my husband, 'I could make such a cool store!'"

Solomon had the chance to open that store in 1998, in 800 square feet of retail storefront in Los Alamitos, California. "It was a big hit with the neighborhood folks," she says. Two years later, Fern's Garden relocated to a 1,200-square-foot space. In 2004, Solomon brought the store to Long Beach's trendy, beachside Belmont Shore location.

With a Belmont Shore address and 2,000 square feet of retailing space, Fern's Garden draws local customers, those from the greater Los Angeles area and passengers from the cruise ships docking in Long Beach. "We have the people of the world coming through here," Solomon says.

By combining a focused product niche with a high-traffic location, Fern's Garden saw 20% growth in annual sales each year through 2007. In 2008, sales were down 4%. "The slide continued until Christmas 2011, which was up — just 1% — but up!"

Solomon credits reasonable price points for the store's ability to weather the economic downfall. "People perceive American-made to be high end, but I knew it was affordable," she says. Many of Fern's Garden items sell for \$5, \$10 or under \$20.

Solomon buys her store's merchandise at several gift shows, as well as from wholesalecrafts.com. "I love to buy [at wholesalecrafts.com] because I don't have to think about where [items are] made. They're all American and Canadian," she says. Philadelphia's Buyers Market of American Craft is another source. Solomon also recommends C.R.A.F.T.



◆ Birdhouses are popular at Fern's Garden, where the focus is on American artisan and fair-trade gifts.

(craftonline.org) as a resource connecting stores and galleries with American artists.

One full-time and seven part-time employees tend to Fern's Garden customers. Products are organized by departments, including: Chimes & Bells; Zen; Bird; Practical (gardening gloves, seed balls, etc.); Kids' Korner; Bargain Corner; Jewelry; and Personal Accessories. "We're like a mini department store," she says.

To keep customer attention on the store's philosophy, Solomon's husband/software engineer wrote POS software that includes labels with an item's price, store logo and "Made in USA" or "Fair Trade." Customers often ask staffers: "Did you realize so many things in the store are made in the United States?"

Fern's Garden is an active member of the Belmont Shore Business Association. In addition to hosting events like a chocolate festival, car show, Haute Dog Parade at Halloween (a dress-up event that drew more than 600 dogs and their owners in 2011), and a Christmas parade attended by 60,000 people last year, the association holds Stroll & Savor tasting events in June, July, August and September.

Solomon combines traditional and social media marketing to promote Fern's Garden. The store's 5,000-name mailing list includes 2,000 email addresses. A November postcard offers a free item from Jacob's Musical Chimes for those shopping over Thanksgiving weekend. No purchase is required. "The postcard is a hugely successful promotion," she says.

With 777 fans, Solomon posts on the store's Facebook page two to four times weekly. Hair accessories became a new store category after a suggestion from a Facebook fan. Solomon's "next adventure" in marketing is a blog to increase traffic to the store's website.

Although she admits it's a hard job, Solomon remains passionate about retailing. "I feel like I am walking in my dream come true. I tell people, 'Welcome to my playground!'"

### Store Stats At A Glance

- **Name:** Fern's Garden
- **City:** Long Beach, California
- **Opened:** 1998
- **Size:** 2,000 square feet
- **Location:** Belmont Shore area of Long Beach
- **Website:** www.fernsarden.com
- **Top Lines:** Jacob's Musical Chimes, Artesano, Eye for the Find, Paul Strauch, Music of the Spheres

### 6 Tips For Retailing Longevity

Fern Solomon, owner of Fern's Garden in Long Beach, Calif., is a retailer with a passion for supporting artisans in the United States and around the world. Although her goal is lofty, Solomon's feet are firmly planted in retailing reality. Here, she shares her advice for longevity in the retailing business:

- **Match price points with customers.** Solomon tried high-end merchandise at first. "If that was the first thing people touched, they wouldn't even come into the store."
- **Buy what your customers will love.** "There are so many different tastes out there. You can't just buy what you like."
- **Don't keep slow sellers.** With high rental costs, "every square inch has to perform in our store." She suggests retailers overcome any fear of putting items on sale. "Get rid of them and try something new." Solomon says her "cool sales area" increases store traffic.
- **Be computerized.** "It's a must." And it allows store owners to keep tight control of inventory and money.
- **Brand your store.** Get your store name out wherever you can by advertising and participating in community events.
- **Bend over backward to please customers.** "NEVER question a return, always suggest where customers can go to find something you don't carry, and make sure every employee follows these guidelines."



◆ Retailer Fern Solomon stands in her California shop, Fern's Garden. In business since 1998, she has learned that "every square inch has to perform in our store."

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