



PHOTOS BY JULIE FEIRING, UMD STORES MARKETING AND SALES MANAGER

Going Above and Beyond

As the director of the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) Stores, Jeffrey Romano knows that providing exceptional customer service is the key to a successful shopping experience.

“Good customer service seems to be a lost art in retail today,” he said. “Our main goal is to provide the high level of service that our campus expects.”

Institutionally operated, UMD Stores focuses on taking the “above and beyond” – as Romano called it — approach to taking care of customers at three locations in the Kirby Student Center on campus.

The street-level store sells apparel, gifts/greeting cards and art products, and is also the location of the convenience store that UMD Stores operates. The lower-level store features course materials, general books, school and office supplies, and computer and electronics products.

Thirdly, the express store is a flex space with a small convenience store that offers different promotional products throughout the school year. It also houses book buyback at the end of each semester, textbook reservation distribution just before each semester starts and textbook returns for the first week of the semester.

Overall, UMD Stores occupies 11,442 square feet of retail sales floor space, 7,136 square feet of storage and work processing space, and 2,174 square feet of office space.

SALES

UMD Stores serves a total of approximately 11,700 undergraduate and graduate students each semester, in addition to the faculty, staff, alumni and visitors who also walk the sales floor throughout the school year.

Romano noted that store merchandise categories include course materials, general books, school and office supplies, art materials, electronics, computers, imprinted apparel, gifts/greeting cards, health and beauty care, and food/grocery items.

Sales in the fall 2010 semester were “at our highest level ever,” he said, with a 3 percent rise in total sales, led by increases in apparel, food/grocery and computer products. Course material sales were up less than 1 percent.

For the spring 2011 semester, sales increased by 15 percent, mainly due to the men’s hockey team winning the NCAA Men’s Ice Hockey Championship earlier this year. As a result, apparel sales were up 89 percent in the spring semester.

Double-digit percentage increases in gifts, computers and food/grocery items also contributed to the sales rise in the spring. Course material sales continued to increase by less than 1 percent.

“After the great year in 2010-11, it will be a challenge to repeat the sales numbers for the current academic year,” Romano said. “Although our total enrollment is up slightly, we

have 200 fewer incoming freshmen than our record high in fall 2010. This will have negative impact on our course material sales. Of course, for the spring 2012 semester, it will be tough to reach our sales level in apparel and gifts unless we win another national championship in men’s hockey.”

TOP-SELLING ITEMS

Top-selling items include UMD imprinted apparel, which makes up more than 15 percent of total store sales, according to Romano. On the heels of the men’s hockey team winning the championship, apparel marking the Bulldogs’ championship victory has also sold well in the stores.

Other top sellers in UMD Stores include The Cotton Exchange Minnesota Duluth T-shirts in four colors; lace-up hoodies from The Cotton Exchange, CI Sport and Signature Concepts; football tees from Russell Athletic; hockey and mascot hoods and crews from JanSport; and arch hoods and crews from Gear for Sports.

Top-selling items in the gift department are: Dakine and Ogio backpacks, CamelBak and Nalgene water bottles and Mundi accessories, as well as lanyards, diploma frames from University Frames and Burt’s Bees personal care products.

In the convenience store, top items are Clif Bar & Company and PowerBar energy bars;

Peace Iced Tea; Red Bull; Diet Coke; Snickers; Twix and Reese's candy bars; and all sizes of milk.

Popular notebooks are the four-subject and one-subject notebooks from Roaring Spring, Five Star notebooks by Mead and the LXE line of notebooks from Top Flight.

Top sellers in the supply area also include: Roaring Spring composition books, Samsill ring binders, poly expansion wallets from Better Office Products and imprinted custom academic planners from House of Doolittle.

Romano explained that art kits are put together in the art products area for courses offered to make sure students receive the supplies they need. "These kits are available as part of our course material reservation program, as well as in store," he said.

Bargain books have also become an important part of UMD Stores' everyday merchandise, with NACSCORP — a subsidiary of the National Association of College Stores (NACS) — and American Book Company as the main vendors.

UMD Stores is an authorized Apple Campus Store that stocks a large assortment of iPods and iPads, as well as accessories — headphones, cases, keyboards, mice, adapters, cables, iTunes gift cards and more. In addition, the store features a large headphone/earbud selection, including Beats by Dr. Dre headphones and Skullcandy Ink'd earbuds.

The store also carries a selection of aftermarket accessories for computer products, such as iHome products, speakers and laptop locks, as well as eco-friendly products when available, including GreenSmart laptop cases, as well as recycled printer inks and paper products.

In regard to writing instruments, Romano pointed out that UMD Stores "probably has one of the best writing instrument selections in the upper Midwest." The most popular are the Bic mechanical pencils in the five-pack, both .5mm and .7mm, that the director called "a great value."

G2 pens from Pilot Pen are huge sellers because of their smooth ink flow, and Sanford Uni-ball pens are also a top seller, Romano noted. With the university's focus on engineering studies, Pentel Graph Gear mechanical pencils in the .3mm size also do well in UMD Stores.

TEXTBOOK RENTALS, POS

With the emergence of textbook rental programs in college bookstores, UMD Stores began its in-store textbook rental program with a limited number of titles during fall 2010 and expanded the selection for the spring 2011 semester.

"The limited rentals during 2010-11 had little impact on our store sales," Romano admitted. "We have revamped our program this fall to include more titles and expect to continue to expand



throughout the year. We are also considering an online vendor partnership to expand the selection for our students.”

The bookstore has a website that averages more than one million views per year, “We process thousands of online textbook reservations and e-commerce orders each semester,” he said.

UMD Stores utilizes MBS Textbook Exchange’s point-of-sale (POS) system to process transactions and other store functions.

“This system has worked very well for us,” Romano said. “Credit card authorizations happen in a split second, and we are able to accept our campus card as form of payment through POS.”

RENOVATIONS

The most recent UMD Stores renovation took place in 2004, during which the street-level store was created to sell imprinted apparel and gifts, greeting cards and art supplies, as well as offer a convenience store with significant cooler and freezer space.

“This beautiful retail space has street level access with a two-story glass front atrium, and the lobby area is a hub for the city transit program, which is free to our students, faculty and staff,” Romano explained.

The lower-level store was in the midst of a complete remodel that was scheduled to be completed as of press time. “This will include more energy-efficient lighting, new flooring, a new and more flexible fixture plan, expanded retail space, a customer service counter and a

revamped entrance for more efficient utilization of existing space,” he stated.

MARKETING TOOLS, HOURS OF OPERATION

UMD Stores utilizes a variety of marketing tools to increase foot traffic.

“We advertise in our student newspaper, place posters on campus, use campus e-mail, window displays, partnerships with athletics, etc.,” Romano said. “We have an aggressive marketing calendar with key sale events spread throughout the semester. We allow students to make purchases with their ID card, and the charges go on their student account. We also promote our customer ‘rewards’ program. There are no exclusions, so all purchases made in the store can earn rewards.”

The street-level store is open Monday through Thursday from 7:30 a.m.-8 p.m.; Friday from 7:30 a.m.-5 p.m.; and Saturday and Sunday from 11 a.m.-5 p.m. during the school year.

Hours for the lower-level store are 7:30 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 7:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. on Friday; and only open on Saturdays at the beginning of each semester and during large campus events, such as Homecoming and Parents’ Weekend.

The express store is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m.-4 p.m.

Romano oversees 34 regular staff members who have different types of appointments. Student employees total 30-35 during the school year, with approximately 15 on-call students who help during busy times.

WEALTH OF CATEGORIES

In addition to the three stores, retail locations are featured at the off-campus arena for the men’s and women’s hockey teams, the football stadium on campus and the gift shop at the planetarium on campus.

Romano noted that with the many changes in the way course materials are distributed, UMD Stores has worked hard over the past seven years to diversify and expand its non-book merchandise.

“Although we understand the importance of providing course materials for our campus, we need to support that part of our academic mission by being successful in other areas,” he said. “In 2010-11, course material sales were just under 45 percent of our sales.

“We are truly a full-scale retail store with our current wealth of product categories.”

He added that what makes UMD Stores unique is its focus on customer service and the many partnerships forged to support the campus and the local community.

“We have campus partnerships with the Athletics, Sports and Recreation Department, our Medical School, our IT department, our university-wide supply warehouse and many academic departments,” Romano said. “Externally, we have partnerships with our public transit, local power company for rebates on Energy Star products, the regional breast cancer center and the American Heart Association. We also partner with the sustainable farmers’ group for a weekly Farmers’ Market Day on campus in the late spring and summer months.”

—CSE