

Welcome To The 'Made In America' Store

Carolyn Thompson, Associated Press Writer

ELMA, N.Y. (AP) — Mark Andol has one requirement for the products he stocks at his retail store: They have to be made in America — 100 percent from product to packaging.

So not only is the maple syrup tapped from U.S. trees, but it's also bottled in U.S.-made containers. Toys are shrink-wrapped in American-made plastic, clothing and American flags stitched with homegrown thread.

Everything is displayed on American-made hangers and shelving in a converted, closed Ford dealership.

"It's what I've always believed in," said Andol, whose Made in America Store in suburban Buffalo drew 800 customers on opening day two months ago, including war veterans eager to shake his hand.

The idea has caught on so quickly that Andol is already in franchising discussions, with visions of having a store in every state.

"I've had so many people say they'd never felt so American before," said the 43-year-old Andol, his T-shirt bearing the store's motto: "Save our Country First."

The idea grew out of Andol's other business, General Welding & Fabricating, which he began in his father's garage in 1985. The business expanded to a four-location manufacturing operation before losing a big account to a Chinese competitor and seeing sales drop off in the recession. While closing two facilities, laying off workers and reading up on overseas competition, Andol saw the appeal of an entirely U.S.-centered business.

"I feel for the blue-collar worker," Andol said.

That a store selling strictly American-made products is a novelty troubles David Gonsiorek of East Aurora, who said he makes a point to buy American whenever possible and teaches his 10- and 12-year-old daughters to do the same.

"It just shows you the state we're in now," said Gonsiorek, the son of a former steelworker, as he browsed a toy display at the store last week. "This is a specialty store in our own country. I think it's a good idea. I'm sorry that it had to come to this point."

Andol, who gives veterans a 5 percent discount, knows of no other retailer who goes so far to feature U.S.-made goods. He ensures that even the display shelving and racks fit the bill by fabricating them at General Welding, which also makes fire pits, grills and other items sold at the store.

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Outside vendors have to sign a letter of authenticity guaranteeing their items are entirely made in this country before he'll sell their products. The Federal Trade Commission requires "virtually all" of the product to be of U.S. origin to carry the Made in USA claim, but that doesn't go far enough for Andol.

He said the hardest part of finding merchandise to add to his inventory of Okabashi sandals, Texas jeans and the like is the research. Even well-meaning vendors can slip, like the one who slid decorative signs into protective plastic sleeves that were made elsewhere. The sleeves were quickly replaced, Andol said.

While Andol's store seems to have struck a chord, retailers as a whole have not seen a measurable preference for American-made products among shoppers, according to the National Retail Federation. Generally, price and quality have more influence than where a product was made, said Erik Autor, the federation's vice president and international trade counsel.

"There may be individuals for whom that's an important consideration, but as a general matter that's not really what drives American consumers and their buying behavior," he said.

But "if he's tapped into something that consumers respond to, I think that's fabulous," Autor added.

He also notes that the United States remains the world's largest manufacturer, despite the impression consumers might get while shopping.

"The things that we make are not consumer goods," Autor explained. "They are capital goods, things like airplanes and engines and power plants and factory equipment. That's not something that the American consumer sees, so they reach the assumption based upon what they see in the store that we don't make anything. We don't make the widgets and gadgets that are sold in the store. All that moved offshore long ago."

In March, the U.S. trade deficit in goods and services increased to \$40.4 billion, up from \$39.4 billion in February, according to the Commerce Department. The deficit with trading partners Mexico and China widened.

"I just think the country should be more 50-50. It's way lopsided," said Andol, who believes the recession has made more people see things his way.

"I think people are really looking now like, geez, we have to make more things," he said. "It's just a shame. There'd be more jobs. American products made by American workers in an American factory."

Andol has two radio station remote broadcasts and an appearance by the Buffalo Bills cheerleaders lined up for Memorial Day weekend — Memorial Day specials are part of the retail world.

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"But between me and you," he asks, "when shouldn't you buy American?"

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