

FEBRUARY 17, 2014

LAST UPDATED: MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2014, 7:39 AM

## North Jersey comic book stores count on repeat business to keep stores profitable

BY ANDREW WYRICH

STAFF WRITER | THE RECORD

The comic book character might be known as "your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man."

However, owners of North Jersey comic book shops say a friendly neighborhood atmosphere is what keeps customers coming back. And that, they say, keeps them in business.

The fans who seek out the latest adventures of their favorite characters such as Batman and Spider-Man each week are part of what makes comic book stores in Bergen and Passaic counties profitable. "People who buy comics tend to have a \$40 weekly budget," said Len Katz, who co-owns The Joker's Child in Fair Lawn with his wife, Caren. "We hear of people who love comics, but eventually just hit a wall with expenses. The key for us is to get customers coming back. The reality is we are not a necessary item; we aren't milk, bread or cheese."

North American comic book sales reached almost \$518 million in 2013, according to ComicChron.com, a comic circulation data website. To get a slice of that business, North Jersey comic book stores have set up incentive programs that reward repeat customers and expanded their business to include all facets of geekdom to keep customers returning to their stores.

Katz said The Joker's Child — which has annual sales ranging between \$600,000 and \$800,000 and has been in business for 25 years — rewards frequent customers with "Joker Money." After spending more than \$25 on a single transaction, a 10 percent discount is given to the purchase in the form of yellow bills of Joker Money. Customers will spend the retail price on the comics, but they will receive the Joker Money, which they may use at a later date.

"Some people use it every week to knock down the price off their budgets, others tend to save it up to use it for something larger," Katz said. "The biggest pile of Joker Money we've seen was \$400, which means they would have spent \$4,000 on comics. It works for us."

Other North Jersey comic book stores say focusing on the customer experience is what brings customers back each Wednesday, the day new weekly issues are released.

Ben Lichtenstein, the owner of Zapp Comics in Wayne, said he tries frequently to update his specialty items — such as toys or collectibles — and keep a robust selection of out-of-print comics issues for customers he has served for 21 years. Besides offering the latest adventures of everyone's favorite superheroes, Zapp Comics features issues of comics or books from independent publishers.

"It keeps things fresh," Lichtenstein said. "People might come each week for the new title, but they might want a back issue also or maybe a figure they might have not known about."



Nick Grillo of Saddle Brook holding some "Joker Money" with a dollar bill as he prepared to pay Caren Katz, the co-owner of The Joker's Child at 12-23 River Road in Fair Lawn.



Lichtenstein said between the new issues and the secondary market products, Zapp Comics brings in about \$750,000 in annual sales.

The Gamers Gambit, a game and comic book store in Saddle Brook, has a different business model. The store rebranded itself after moving from Fair Lawn to Saddle Brook in 2007, and began selling comics in 2011. Since then, it has been slowly adding to its comics segment, which now is 15 percent to 20 percent of the store's overall sales.

Scott Roberts, a co-owner of The Gamers Gambit, said that while the store focuses primarily on games — like Dungeons & Dragons, Magic: The Gathering, Yu-Gi-Oh and Pokémon — the store recently hired a comics manager to oversee its growing sales.

"There is a crossover between the gaming customer and the comic customer," Roberts said. "That's who we cater to."

The Gamers Gambit hosts weekly tournaments and get-togethers for gaming enthusiasts. The store's goal is to have gamers come in and decide to buy a comic that could be related to a game they play.

The key, Roberts said, is forging a relationship with their customers, because just as the stores need customers, the customers need the stores.

"When customers come here, people are talking about comics — they're having arguments over whether Batman can beat Superman, they have strong opinions," Roberts said. "Those opinions breed conversations, those conversations breed interest and the interest breeds sales."

Email: [wyrich@northjersey.com](mailto:wyrich@northjersey.com)

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