

Museum Store Makeover

Change is a good thing! That is what I lectured time and time again as a Manager for a reputable home party plan. My thirty years in the Direct Sales Industry had proven to be rewarding, flexible and profitable; however after 30 years it was time for a change. If I was going to pursue a new career it had to be something I could feel good about, something that challenged me and offered a fun working atmosphere.

Living just a few miles away, I had driven past Reptiland as many as 2-3 times a day, never once did I imagine I would someday be a part of the Reptiland team.

In early fall of 2013 I was hired as the Retail Manager & buyer at Clyde Peelings Reptiland. Having had a career background in tableware, cookware, and home décor to my surprise, and the surprise of most people who knew me within a few months I could recognize most members of the reptile family, and identify nearly every dinosaur.

Although my experience in the direct selling industry has been a big plus in helping me to settle in it has been a big switch with lot's to learn, in fact I feel humbled today as I'm sure there is a great deal I could learn from many of you.

Although I am very proud of our Gift Shop, and regard it as if it were my own I take little credit for its success.

Reptiland started as one man's dream. Fascinated by reptiles as a boy throughout his lifetime Clyde Peeling pursued his interest. Last year Clyde Peelings Reptiland celebrated 50 years! Over the course of those 50 years Reptiland has evolved from being a small road side attraction selling what Clyde calls "tacky souvenirs" to a distinguished specialized AZA Accredited Zoo, with a world class gift shop. The transformation of our gift shop and the zoo go hand in hand.

From its humble beginnings to what it has developed into today is definitely the combination of talents within the Peeling family. Clyde remains active in the day to day management. He is a talented lecturer and very active member of the zoological community. His vision continues to expand, not just as a recreational complex but also as to what Reptiland can achieve at the community level by supporting animal conservation efforts through education.

His oldest son Chad serves as operations manager. I'm sure he would be the first to tell you his title includes everything from business administrator, project coordinator, and director of human resources, lecturer and marketing executive; amazingly he still manages to greet everyone with a smile.

Clyde's youngest son Elliot manages our design and fabrication department. Elliot just intuitively knows how to design and build.

In 1988 Chris Bergesen submitted an application to work at Reptiland. Her interest was working with animals but at that time working the snack bar and admissions was the position that needed filled. In 1990 after 2 years of working the gift shop and various other jobs throughout the zoo, she assumed the position of Retail manager and buyer for the facility. Chris later married Chad Peeling, and became part of the Peeling family.

In earlier years while traveling throughout Africa, Clyde had acquired a variety of Massai shields and made them available for sale. However the major transformation of the Gift Shop is largely a result of Chris's personal fascination for African culture, her love of fine jewelry, and her appreciation for quality accessories. Prior to working at Reptiland her dream was to conduct field research in Africa. She had always been fascinated with animals, especially African animals. She would read every book she could get her hands on about Africa, and as a child never missed an episode of Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. Her passion for African artifacts, coupled with an eye for the unique resulted in 500 square ft of our 1200 square ft gift shop now dedicated to cultural gifts and artifacts.

The launch of African products began with a traveling salesman .On his first visit to Reptiland the roof rack of his car was filled with African items and his backseat and trunk were overflowing with carvings, batiks and museum quality ceremonial masks. It was the largest collection of African items all in one place that Chris had ever seen. After living in Africa and having studied art, he was an enthusiastic story teller of sorts about the items he had to sell. The collection that Chris initially purchased from him was extensive. Reptiland became one of his best customers. Clyde was so impressed with the history, craftsmanship and quality of the items; he decided to finance a trip to Indonesia with Michel as the liaison. Our relationship with Michel still continues today. Unfortunately due to overwhelming challenges for many of the tribes in Africa, and the high cost of shipping it has become more difficult to attain as many of these distinctive artifacts as we would like.

Chris attended the New York Gift Fair where she discovered Swahili Imports, a fair trade company that imports from East Africa. As a member of the Fair Trade Federation since 1995 they have focused on building a network of talented African artisans, helping to build prosperity in African communities like Kenya, Tanzania, Mali, and Mozambique. Swahili presented an opportunity to extend our collection to include beautiful wood bowls, salad tongs and baskets. Through Swahili, our assortment of products has expanded over the years to include leather purses, hand painted pottery, mudcloths and African soapstone figurines.

Our vendor list has grown to include several other Fair Trade Companies offering exclusive products that showcase African heritage and make a tangible contributions to the fight

against poverty. Fair Trade ensures you are getting quality products and the people who grow, sew, and craft them get a fair deal for their work. Everyday purchases can help farmers in over 70 different countries work in safe conditions. Fair Trade supports much needed projects like schools, wells and building roads, and at the same time helps protect the environment by restricting GMO's and harmful pesticides. Child labor is also strictly prohibited, helping kids to stay in school and build a brighter future. Consumers are paying more attention to what they are purchasing, and guests are always impressed to see that most of our boutique type items are fair trade. **Because we recognize the significance of making socially conscious purchases, we carry a wide variety of fair trade merchandise across all price points.**

In addition to offering guests a rare shopping experience, the African and Indonesian merchandise on display continues to add character to the overall atmosphere of the gift shop. What started as a collection of items chosen for a niche market has become the focal point as you enter our facility.

After 25 years of many contributions to Reptiland, Chris made the decision to explore opening a business of her own. As you may have guessed her store is an expression of her cultural interest. Before she left, I was able to spend about 2 ½ months with her as my mentor.

I'm sure everyone has heard the saying "If it ain't broke, don't fix it".

Already in place was a successful working business model to follow. What came naturally to Chris was foreign to me. Along with learning the POS, how to schedule staff, and understanding how to maintain inventory levels for each season, when asked I needed to be able to explain the difference between an alligator and a crocodile.

When hiring new staff members, I understand they might be a bit overwhelmed just as I was, one of my goals was to enhance the training program for gift shop staff to include not only expectations but also product knowledge, people skills, and teamwork awareness. Because we are a seasonal business, 98% of the gift shop staff is part time. In many cases they may work no more than 1 day a week, so training is an on-going process, not just for them for me as well. I like to think that regardless of how many hours a week they may work, they will take as much pride in our shop as I do. Each new staff member is given a copy of our Reptiland Employee Handbook. The guide includes performance standards, safety and security guidelines, retail operation, cleaning and maintenance responsibilities. But more importantly there are tips on how to greet guests, suggestions on ways to deter theft, and an emphasis on the role they play in the overall guest experience. With so much information to cover, we do have a Gift Shop Training Checklist. The checklist is a virtual list of each of the skills/ and or procedures we would like each staff member to feel comfortable with. More experienced Gift Shop staff members assist with training. In some

cases a 17 year old is training a 40 year old. When we are confident that there is a clear understanding of any one of the items on the list it is initialed by the new staff member as well as the trainer. I believe this makes every person more accountable, and everyone seems to understand that our training program has a long term benefit for the entire team. Regardless of what training plan is implemented, there are always day to day clichés, or questions that may need addressed, for that we maintain a notebook at the admissions desk that keeps staff informed, and current.

By encouraging our Gift Shop staff to become more knowledgeable about our different collections, they are more comfortable talking to the guests. This in turn has an impact on sales. I think it's important to empower your staff to provide the best customer service as possible. For example, one of our best selling jewelry collections is our tagua jewelry. Every staff member is familiar with this collection, as to how it is made, where it is made and who it is made by. It's interesting to know the story behind TAGUA, since it does take several months from the time they collect the tagua nut, until the moment the product is made and ready to sell. The tagua nut is a dried seed from the tagua palm tree, which grows in tropical rain forests of South America (Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Brazil).

Because of its similarity to ivory (it's hard, unbreakable, resistant and beautiful) Tagua is known as natural ivory or vegetable ivory; because tagua is natural no animals are endangered to harvest it.

The nuts are sun-dried for 4 to 6 months before they can be worked with. Once dried, tagua can be carved and polished to a bright shine. Tagua's natural color is white but can easily be dyed and found in a variety of colors. Handmade tagua jewelry is not only stylish, colorful, and unique, but it is affordable as well.

With each exhibit, renovation or addition made to the zoo the gift shop has made changes accordingly. When the butterfly exhibit was included as part of general admission price, we introduced to the gift shop a wide range of butterfly themed products, from jewelry to cloisonné gift boxes. This past summer for a limited time an added attraction was the Ghost of the Bayou exhibit. On display a rare white alligator, whose name was actually Snowflake. In those 3 months by adding white alligator merchandise we increased retail sales.

Over the years Reptiland has undertaken several projects to modernize the zoo and the gift shop. The first major renovation to the gift shop was to close up oversized windows that were along the West wall. A large slatwall was added, where before there was virtually no retail display space. This allowed room to use waterfall hooks to expand the tee shirt selection. Prior to those tee shirts were folded on shelves, making them much harder to see.

The second and probably most significant change to the gift shop came in late 2012. Large glass jewelry showcases with lighting were added as part of the cash wrap and admissions

counter. This allowed for an expansion of our fine jewelry collection. Jewelry could be displayed beautifully with less chance of theft and the glass cases allow for creative displays each season. To stay with the theme of our Gift Shop and Zoo we use natural cork as a way to display jewelry. Although we have pieces that are of heirloom quality and style, our jewelry collection tends to be less traditional. One of my personal favorites is our selection of larimar; a rare light blue stone found only in the Dominican Republic. For anyone who loves color, style and fun our tagua jewelry collection continues to be a popular collection.

During this same renovation an oversized bookcase, with shelving from floor to ceiling was added to the south wall to anchor the store. This bookshelf is the perfect space to display a wide range of books, puzzles, and educational kits that offer a fun alternative to video games and TV. More than just a zoo, Reptiland has played an important role in changing public opinion towards reptiles especially children. Our programs include information that gives children and adults alike a better understanding of reptiles and the important role they play on our planet. Each year Reptiland is the host to numerous school groups, many traveling hours to be there. Hundreds of children ranging all ages explore the gift shop searching for that perfect souvenir to remember their visit. Our inventory includes inexpensive items that are appropriate. In some cases the amount of time allotted for a field trip is limited, so we offer a great alternative, our Student Shopper on-line catalog. By visiting our web-site this online catalog allows parents and students to view a selection of items available to purchase. Staying with our theme, the items made available to order for school students include things like crocodile book lights, dinosaur dig kits, and colorful turtle backpack clips. Order forms are brought along the day of the field trip, and while teachers and students are exploring the zoo, our gift shop staff fills the orders, having them bagged, tagged and ready to load on the bus with the students.

In addition to the cash wrap, jewelry counters, and bookcase other changes included carpeting which added warmth and made the space more upscale. Graphics were added to the slat wall for color, and grass wallpaper was chosen to create textural interest.

In early 2013, guests were greeted with a new entrance, into our gift shop and zoo. Whimsical geckos handcrafted from recycled oil drums greet the guests as they enter the gift shop.

Although they were gradual changes, over the years Reptiland transitioned from a roadside attraction centered on public amusement to an educational institution that has played an important role in giving the public a different perspective towards what was once a much less loved species.

As I pull into a parking space each morning I can't help but smile, like everyone else who enters Reptiland I am greeted by the sound of African drums. Unaware that someone is

watching we spot guests of all ages dancing to the beat as they enter the Gift Shop! Through appropriate music, eye catching displays, and the addition of special effects you can enhance the store environment to ensure a more positive shopping experience for customers. I went into some detail about the 500 sq. ft. dedicated to cultural items, but I wanted to be sure to mention the other 700 square ft of our gift shop is dedicated to FUN! Frogs, turtles, snakes and geckos are themed throughout the gift shop. Our theme is Reptiles, but regardless of what your establishments theme may be, I believe fun is the most important component to create a shopping experience that will lead to repeat visits. Children are the center of my day, and I never forget that when I'm considering new items for the gift shop. After all, it's important to know who your customer is. I look for the same thing I believe every parent is looking for, quality toys, books, and fun interactive games that teach while they entertain. When guests recall the fun and amazing experience they had at Reptiland I want the Gift Shop to be part of that conversation!

Throughout the year we host fun events like Flashlight Safari, Dino Days, and Bug Out. I work closely with our Marketing department to ensure each event is impressive. Our gift shop handles admissions, and therefore plays a major role in creating an initial and lasting impression of the facility.

Reptiland's mission is to provide the public with an entertaining experience. Meaningful, memorable, fun, unusual, and unexpected experiences influence the way customers perceive you. Little details are easy to overlook, but add a number of seemingly minor details together, and you end up with something far more valuable.

I believe it's important to stay passionate about what you do. I would tell any young person out there, your work should be something you enjoy doing. I'm looking forward to what's next at Reptiland and being a part of their on-going success story.

Melody Drick

Retail Manager / Buyer