

The Business of Birthdays

OC retailers make big bucks creating unique kids' parties.

Time was, when little Johnnie or Janie turned 4 or 8 or even 12, mom asked the birthday kiddo how he or she wanted to be feted, suggested some party themes, then went about the business of planning entertainment, decorations and party fare for the occasion. There were backyard games to stage, tableware to buy, eating arrangements to make, piñatas to stuff and a commemorative cake to bake. And, of course, the de rigueur practice of assembling goody bags that would amuse guests and put everyone in a good mood while announcing to all posterity, "I went to Johnnie's party."

That was then. This is now – a time when domestic role model June Cleaver has been gone for nearly a half-century, and when no one aspires to be Martha Stewart. Even the few parents not employed outside the home may not have time to prepare a homemade dinner or bake a cake from scratch, much less plan a child's birthday affair, because they're too busy carting said child from classroom to piano lessons to soccer practice.

Enter retailers who have identified birthdays as both a profit source and a marketing opportunity. At such outlets as First Cut, Girl Mania, Beach Bound and Build-A-Bear, fêtes marking children's annual calendar milestones have become big business.

"Both Build-A-Bear and Girl Mania are so successful at hosting birthday parties because the experience is great for kids, and for parents it's turnkey and effortless," explained Patsy Sanquist, director of marketing at The Shops at Mission Viejo. "Especially here, where most of our market is families with young kids, more and more stores will be offering birthday services because kids really enjoy them, and for retailers, it's an area for increased success."

A cut above

First Cut owner Leora Fogel can provide ample testimony that Sanquist is right on the money. "With today's parents busy with work, household responsibilities and



Family fun at a First Cut "Stellar Spa Party" bolsters the Fashion Island retailer's bottom line.

multiple children, it's wonderful to have a one-stop shopping venue where an entire party can be arranged, including invitations, food and goody bags," she observed. "All you have to do is show up for your little princess and her friends to be pampered."

You also have to bring your checkbook, as a basic First Cut "Stellar Spa Party and Fashion Show" for 4 or more aspiring divas, typically age 4 to 16, will set you back \$35 per princess. Add-ons that can easily run up the tab include personalized invitations and a theme cake and pizza or a McDonald's Happy Meal. Upgraded goody bags, available for an additional \$15 per child, include such finery as a First Cut "OC Baby" or "Divatude" T-shirt, fancy sunglasses, photo frame, feather boa, sugar cosmetic and a sticker. For an additional \$50, the shop will capture the festivities on videotape and create a DVD as a lasting memoir.

At a recent affair for 40 young girls, doting parents plunked down \$4,000

to celebrate their eldest daughter's birth. The occasion was so successful that a sister opted for an encore event that brought the family's year-end birthday tally to \$8,000.

If guests don't feel like royalty when they enter what Fogel bills as "a kids' hair salon for the new millennium," they will when they leave the Fashion Island shop. Combining a laid-back spa experience with a high-energy, disco-style modeling extravaganza, the fun begins when girls don specially-sized lime green spa robes and have their feet soaked in a vanilla-scented rose petal foot bath. After a deep conditioning hair treatment and chocolate facial, fingernails and toenails are painted and tresses are fashioned into funky up-do's by licensed stylists.

Once the young clients are turned out to a "t," the robes come off and First Cut's party coordinator teaches them to strut their stuff on the catwalk stage, affectionately dubbed "The Kitten Walk." Outfits are completed with such funky accessories as cool sunglasses and hair jewels. Then it's show time.

"We dim the lights, start the smoke-maker and pump up the music for a nightclub

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Build-A-Bear

RETAIL

atmosphere,” said Lance Fogel, who left the corporate world to open First Cut a year ago with his wife, a former pharmacist. At the urging of customers, the couple (ironically, parents of 3 sons under age 7) developed the birthday packages for little girls.

When party guests’ parents reappear for the grand finale, the birthday girl receives a rhinestone tiara, bejeweled scepter and feather boa to model for her friends. After the fashion show, everyone toasts the guest of honor with sparkling cider in champagne flutes, and the young divas feast on goodies First Cut provides or edibles they bring in themselves. Everyone poses for a group picture that can be reproduced as a take-home souvenir for all guests for an additional fee.

More than a store

The estrogen-fest continues at Girl Mania, a retail phenomenon that celebrates the pink gene at 3 Orange County “lifestyle destination” shops targeting the age 4 to 14 set. Party packages begin at \$300 and include à la carte affairs and 15 different theme parties for \$35 per girl.

Similar to affairs at First Cut, Girl Mania parties include salon services (hair styling, make-up, nail and toe painting), as well as crafts to amuse young starlets while they’re getting their makeovers, priced from \$10-\$20 a girl. The birthday girl can select from such themed gatherings as a pedicure party, Hawaiian princess affair, cheerleading and soccer camps, and a “Shop ‘til you Sparkle” revelry. At each one, superstar guests learn a dance and can rock out à la Britney Spears, J-Lo or Shakira on the shops’ stages.

Bound for business

Beyond meeting a need in the family marketplace, Beach Bound owner Barry Boren sees children’s birthday parties as an optimal way to get customers in his store, thus promoting business. “At the parties, guests see what we offer and essentially pay us to advertise.”

A former tennis pro who now owns a sportswear manufacturing firm, Boren and his marketing savvy wife, Jean Butler, conceived the idea for their Irvine Spectrum outlet a year ago and opened its doors in January. Just 4 months later, “We’re booking like crazy,” he said.

“People’s lives are scheduled these days and most folks have neither time nor desire to throw a party in their home. They’re tired of Chuck E. Cheese and looking for something different.” To provide it, Boren

offers three different packages: a basic “Build A Tee” for \$25 per guest and variations that include a fashion show for \$40 per child or hula lessons for \$50 per guest. “Most of our customers don’t even blink at the price,” Boren confesses.

At all Beach Bound affairs, kids decorate a T-shirt with rhinestones that are pressed on during the party. A limbo contest ensues, followed by runway modeling or dancing. Recalling a recent event, Boren explained, “Of the 21 guests, 18 had never seen the store. Shortly thereafter, we booked 6 parties for kids who had attended.”

A beary good idea

If Nina Robinson’s 6-year-old son has his way, he’ll opt for a party at Build-A-Bear in Fashion Island or

The Shops at Mission Viejo. “It’s a win-win experience,” reflected Robinson, who just happens to be vice president of marketing for the Irvine Company Retail Properties.

“As a working mom, I’m concerned about time efficiencies, but I also want to provide a wonderful experience for my child,” she said. “Our retailers know I’m like other working parents who are juggling home and career, who want a great value at a fair price. From a business standpoint they see birthday parties as a key marketing component that targets their core audience and prompts kids to tell their parents about their experience.”

Priced from \$10 per guest, the Build-A-Bear interactive concept entails creating unique stuffed animals. At

the conclusion of the festivities, each participant walks away with a custom-crafted furry friend. Party bags for guests and a gift for the birthday child are included. Printable invites and thank-you cards are accessible at the company’s website.

If one-stop turnkey options don’t appeal, there’s lots of less-structured fun to be had at Orange County malls, which have evolved, says Robinson, into much more than shopping destinations. With a little creativity, devoted parents can cart birthday celebrants to Fashion Island for rides on the carousel or kiddy train. Or, head for Irvine Spectrum Center for ice cream at Ben & Jerry’s and arcade games at Dave & Busters. Top it all off with spins around the center’s 108-foot Giant Wheel. **OCM**

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BOOK-A-BIRTHDAY

Parents seeking one-stop turnkey options for celebrating birthdays of toddlers to young teens can turn to numerous Orange County retailers. Most parties run from \$10-\$50 per guest and average approximately 2 hours. Check out possibilities at these local venues:

- Beach Bound at Irvine Spectrum Center, 949.453.0213
- Build-A-Bear at Fashion Island, 949.640.0865 and The Shops at Mission Viejo, 949.347.6992
- Girl Mania at Brea Mall, 714.529.7955; Fashion Island, 949.721.5709 and The Shops at Mission Viejo, 949.347.1531
- First Cut at Fashion Island, 949.640.0956