



For-Profit Thrift Chain Expanding And Hiring

April 29, 2009/Linda Doan

Two years ago, wearing vintage clothing was a stylish trend.

Today, it's becoming a necessity.

Secondhand clothing stores have been riding a celebrity-driven wave of popularity for years that has style-conscious shoppers rummaging their racks for torn, faded and fashionably outdated clothes.

In the last year, though, a new wave of customers has joined the mix: recession-pinched, middle-class consumers looking for a cheaper way to keep shirts on their backs.

"All of a sudden, we're seeing people walking up and down the aisles and they're holding Starbucks coffee in their hands," said Larry Kahan, manager of the soon-to-open Savers secondhand store in Manchester.

Savers, an international chain based in Bellevue, Wash., that buys clothes from nonprofit organizations and sells them for a profit, is one of the rare companies that are expanding during the recession. In addition to the Manchester store opening in June, the company plans to open five to seven other new stores across the state in the next 18 months, Kahan said.

The Connecticut stores will buy clothes by the pound from Springfield-based Hartsprings Foundation Inc., which raises money for Big Brothers Big Sisters.

There was a hiring fair at the Manchester location Tuesday that will run through Thursday as the store seeks to recruit employees to fill about 60 full- and part-time jobs. Store employees guided candidates toward a counter lined with job applications, and recruiters interviewed them at red customer check-out stands near the front of the store. Kahan's crew had interviewed about 100 people by noon, "from all walks of life and all salary levels," he said.

"I had one gentleman come in who once owned his own business and was quite proud of that," Kahan said. "And now he's at this point where he was saying, 'I will do whatever it takes, as long as it draws a weekly paycheck.'"

Wayne Defreitas of Windsor, a stay-at-home father of two boys, was filling out an application at the Savers store Tuesday hoping to land a job working nights, possibly stocking merchandise. His wife, who works at an insurance company, is worried that she'll soon suffer a pay cut or lose her

job, Defreitas said.

If there's one industry to turn to for a new job right now, consumer psychologist Kit Yarrow said, it's the resale industry.

Yarrow, a professor at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, said thrift shopping is serving as a "guilt-free adventure" for those who love shopping but no longer have the budgets to sustain it. That, combined with recycling efforts that have made secondhand shopping more popular, has sent thrift shop sales through the roof, she said.

"Thrift," she said, "is everybody's middle name right now."