Supply chain woes offer holiday shopping opportunity for craft makers

By Grant Welker – Projects Reporter, Boston Business Journal
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In a former Destination Maternity store in Burlington, Caroline Wilcox Horton is running a shop that might not last past the holidays.
The store, at the shopping plaza Wayside, is called Tin Box Jewelry and Supply. It's packed with homemade items like jewelry made from old tin cans — which Horton makes herself — knitted hats and soaps. Two woodworkers use naturally-felled wood for bowls and other items, and another makes terrariums out of vintage glass.

As a pop-up store, it may last only until someone takes the storefront longer-term, or until the end of holiday shopping. But it has at least one factor helping it this holiday season: supply chain issues that have delayed shipments of virtually any type of item, making receiving a gift no sure bet.

“I don’t have to wait for any of those to come off a ship,” Horton said of her homemade jewelry, which includes earrings, necklaces and bracelets. “I’m finding these at flea markets or thrift stores.”

Experts agree that craft gifts like those for sale at Tin Box Jewelry and Supply may look more appealing than ever to shoppers, because of both the assurance that items will be available in stock, and a renewed awareness of the environmental toll from so many items made on the other side of the world and shipped across the ocean.

If a meaningful comeback by craft makers seems daunting, Ellis Jones, a sociology professor at the College of the Holy Cross sees at least one precedent: craft brewing taking a major slice out of a market once owned by the likes of Budweiser and Coors.

“It’s so important that consumers support anyone who is trying to do a local effort,” said Jones, whose work includes rating large companies on their environmental records, who has also published a book called “The Better World Shopping Guide.”

**Pandemic’s toll on shipping**

Few thought about or appreciated the international supply chain until the pandemic upended what had been working smoothly, said Effie Stavrulaki, a management professor at Bentley University.

The health and economic crisis changed where people worked, ate and shopped. Far fewer people took trips and far more money was spent at home — where people were spending virtually all of their time.

Virtually every business along the supply chain was caught off guard by those changes, Stavrulaki said, from factory and port workers and their employers to the truckers who would unload goods and ship them to their final destination. Businesses who stocked lean inventory to save money were especially pummeled, she said, and those who drastically reduced factory production very early in the pandemic overestimated how much the global economy would slow down.

“It’s totally unprecedented,” Stavrulaki said.
Tim Dooner, who hosts the shipping podcast, FreightWaves, has such a familiarity with the workings of the industry that he rattles off all the factors that have combined to cause delays in so many things people may have ordered long ago.

“This all started back at the start of the pandemic,” said Dooner, a Needham native now in Tennessee. “Since then, it’s just been bouncing and bouncing and bouncing.”

The two biggest factors, he said: ports that had to shut down from sometimes a single pandemic case, and massive shifts in where people spent their money, especially on home items.

More than one-third of American imports pass through ports outside Los Angeles, where ships are anchored off the coast waiting for a chance to offload their cargo — “the very definition of a bottleneck,” Dooner said.

Smaller retailers are particularly hurt, he said, because they can’t absorb higher shipping costs like, say, Target or Walmart can. And some analysts are estimating freight won’t return to normalcy until 2023.

The rarity of ‘in-stock’

Tin Box Jewelry and Supply stands next to an L.L. Bean store, giving Horton a firsthand look at how the iconic retailer is affected by supply chain woes. Many of Tin Box’s shoppers stopped next door looking for items online and found many were in-store only.

“People are acutely aware,” she said of shoppers already noticing how less likely they are to see things in stock. “People will say, this is amazing that you’re all here and you’re making these products with your hands.”

One of the craft makers there, Mary DiMauro, sells mesh bags made of material reused from trucks and boats. She’s been making bags for her On the Road Again brand late at night at her own sewing machine at home after days working in corporate information technology sales.

“I’d love it to be my full-time job one of these days,” DiMauro said. She auditioned for the 13th season of the entrepreneur TV contest “Shark Tank” and sees more interest from shoppers in looking for environmentally friendly gifts.

“More people are thinking local and supporting local,” she said. “I’ve seen that more in recent years.”

Tin Box Jewelry and Supply is meant as a pop-up at the least, and Horton isn’t sure if it’ll last past the holidays.

“It’s daunting once you get back to December, because January, February and March can be the death knell for traditional retail locations,” she said. But in the meantime,
shoppers have responded to the store’s homemade goods with an appreciation that leaves her encouraged.
“That it’s so nice to be shopping in person again, and to be supporting your neighbor,” Horton said of shoppers’ response. “Because anyone there could be your neighbor.”