

Scary how one day in October rakes in monstrous dollars

BY JEFF MITCHELL
Staff Writer

Forgive Mary Martino if it takes her a few rings to answer the phone.

She's just a little busy these days.

See, it's the Halloween season. And for the proprietor of Richmond Hill's Wonderland Costumes, it never gets crazier than it is right now.

"It's everything," Ms Martino said of the spooky season.

"It's my Christmas."

Indeed, the comparison with the festive season isn't far off the mark. The Retail Council of Canada estimates consumers will this year spend \$800 million on Halloween, which means it ranks third — behind Christmas and the back-to-school rush — in terms of consumer spending frenzies.

"Halloween is something that has been gaining more strength as the years go by," said Pamela Addo, a spokesperson with the retail council.

"We see Halloween is growing year after year."

In 2000, the first year the council tracked Halloween sales, they rang in at \$600 million. The growth in potential for retailers in just a few years has been staggering, Ms Addo said.

"Certainly, the demand is there from the customer," Ms Addo said. "The retailer is responding to the demand."

And it's not only candies we're rushing out to buy. In addition to confectionery — which is expected to account for some \$205 million in sales this year — we're buying and renting costumes (\$2.4 million), sending scary greetings to one another (\$7.6 million at stationery stores), flooding the aisles at discount stores to grab up decorations, masks and miscellany (\$6.7 million) and dispersing another \$39 million in various other retail outlets.

It is estimated about 85 per cent of Canadians will decorate their homes and yards, while another 23 per cent intend on making their workplace even freakier than usual. That's a hefty percentage of 31 million Canadian souls, who the council predicts will spend about \$10 each on decorations alone.



STAFF PHOTO/BILL ROBERTS

Mary Martino of Wonderland Costumes Ltd. poses among some of the many costumes at her Richmond Hill store.

All this for an occasion that is generally believed to have begun as a Celtic feast symbolizing the end of the harvest and the advent of winter — with a nod to the dearly departed, as well. It's not even an official holiday.

So what gives?

"We can only hypothesize," Ms Addo said.

Number one, it's fun."

Ms Martino agrees.

"It gives people an opportunity to step out of their everyday lives and live out a fantasy," she said.

This year, people are stepping up in large numbers to demand *Matrix*-style trench coats and shades, emulating the characters in the popular film. It's a typical phenomenon, Ms Martino said. Each year, popular costumes for both adults and kids are determined by what goes on in Hollywood.

With that in mind, she's busy each spring ordering and buying

her inventory for this time of year. But it's not an infallible system.

"It's not that I haven't made mistakes," Ms Martino said. "When *Star Wars* came out, I bought a lot of the stuff — and nobody wanted it."

One thing you can always count on is our collective sweet tooth.

That keeps the CeDe Candy Company's 100 employees toiling year-round, primarily for one day, Oct. 31.

"It's our day," said Brad Wolfe, vice-president of operations at the Newmarket plant.

The company produces the ever-popular *Rocketts*, those tangy little tablets that come wrapped in cellophane, ready to be devoured by trick-or-treaters.

Halloween accounts for about three-quarters of CeDe's production. The company ships "anywhere between 10 and 12 million pounds" of candy in advance of the big day, Mr. Wolfe said.

"That's about 11 billion tablets."

Talk about a sugar buzz.

Mr. Wolfe agrees with the generally held assessment that Halloween is big and getting bigger.

"We'd like to think it's increasing," he said. "Our sales have gone up steadily over the years."

Everyone seems to get more involved in it and embraces it."

For retailers, Halloween is an important part of a frenetically busy fourth quarter that can make or break a year. It begins with the back to school rush and concludes with Christmas.

And it's getting so the seasons blend with one another in a massive shopping blur.

At this moment inside the Dollarama discount store on Newmarket's busy Davis Drive, Halloween is fading into the background as Christmas emerges. Masks, party favours and other items are being phased out, while a

giant display of colourful gift wrap takes up space in the front window.

It used to be Christmas displays weren't going up until November, but that's all changed, Dollarama manager Kimberly Ridley said.

"Now you're starting to see where you're merchandising both (seasons)," she said.

Ms Ridley said it's not unusual to see season-specific merchandise hitting the shelves well in advance of the actual day. Halloween in August, anyone?

"I'm usually about two months ahead of the game," Ms Ridley said. "People do start buying that early."

"They may complain about it, but at the same time, you see that hand reaching out for it."

Consumers realize they'll get what they want — and get the best bang for their buck — if they snap up items the minute they appear on shelves, Ms Ridley said.

"It's not so much impulse buying as it is smart shopping," she said.

Indeed, it is the diligent shopper who gets what he or she wants, said Ms Martino, who starts fielding calls months in advance as people book that special costume.

"The majority is last minute, but I have regular customers who start renting in June and July," she said.

And right now?

Well, right now Halloween mayhem is in full swing, with parties happening both this weekend and next. People are phoning and flooding through the doors to rent what it takes to fulfill their fantasies — there are those *Matrix* wannabes, of course, but also bunches of grapes, a Henry VIII or two and the ever-popular G-String Gina (think lots of fake latex flesh and a too-tiny bikini).

Then there are those creative souls who do it themselves. They're after liquid latex, fake blood and the like as they prepare to sculpt themselves into something — or someone — else.

It's a frantic time, but a make or break one, too. Ms Martino is as busy as she gets all year.

So where will she be next weekend when it's Halloween party time?

"I'm just gonna go home and go to sleep," she said, matter-of-factly.

Dr. Elagu V. Elaguppillai

REGIONAL COUNCILLOR FOR MARKHAM

- Successful Business in Bio-tech & Pharmaceutical in Markham
- Ph.D in Nuclear Physics from University of Toronto
- 22 years as an Atomic Scientist & Administrator
- University Professor & Students' Council Advisor
- Canadian Specialist at United Nations Scientific Committee
- Director, Joint Council of Canadian Communities (JCCC)
- Improved Public Transport
- Protection of the Environment & Promotion of Green Belt Zones
- Better Hospital Services
- Community Safety and Law & Order
- Youth Employment & Better Care for Senior Citizens
- Lower Taxes

Tel: 905-947-8866 E-mail: info@elagu.ca Website: www.elagu.ca