

Balloon business soars amidst tough economy

Recession doesn't keep enthusiasts down

By Chelsey Levingston, Staff Writer

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MIDDLETOWN — Balloon pilots are soaring as consumers, who are hard hit by the recession, push “staycation” trends.

Local pilots participating in the MidFirst Ohio Challenge Hot Air Balloon Festival have found people hurt by the recession and doing “staycations,” or home vacationing, have been good for business.

As people are making cutbacks in spending out of fear and uncertainty, some who are not spending money on plane trips and hotel stays are looking to see what they can do locally, said Janice Kinghorn, who teaches economics at Miami University Middletown. That’s when people think about something like balloon rides, she said, “substituting away from the luxury goods, but still treating yourself.”

Balloon rides at the Ohio Challenge cost \$200 a person, and can be scheduled by calling (513) 705-1770. Tethered balloon rides are \$5 for children and \$10 for adults.

Business for Bella Balloons in Lebanon has gone up 25 percent, said co-owner Mike Gliatti, who noted that his biggest costs are propane, insurance, equipment, crew costs and advertising.

Gliatti said that in addition to vacationing trends, going the extra mile, such as meeting customers closer to home for launch sites, and diversification, such as added revenue from corporate advertising, has helped the business grow.

“If we had been around 10 or 15 years at this point, maybe we’d be feeling the downturn, but we’re still in the growth phase,” said Gliatti, who has been making a living from ballooning for six years.

Diversification has been the edge for Gentle Breeze Hot Air Balloon Co., also in Lebanon, said Brian Trapp, co-owner. Gentle Breeze has balloon rides, a repair station, and Trapp is a designated pilot examiner for aspiring pilots.

“Business is off a little bit, but we’re seeing individuals doing something nice close to home instead of taking the family on extravagant, long vacations,” said Trapp, in the business 29 years.

Hobbyist Dr. Mark Frazer of Summit Family Physicians hasn’t found the recession limiting, either. Frazer, chairman of the Ohio Challenge pilot committee, said the biggest cost is the balloon, especially the envelope, or the colorful fabric bag over the basket. But the everyday operational costs haven’t changed much, he said.

“It’s something I’d be very committed to even in these economic times,” Frazer said. “Obviously, if you’re a hobbyist balloonist, it’s using your discretionary income to fulfill your hobby and your enjoyment.”

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