

Retail hops with spring

by Ellis Smith

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The pollen flies fast and heavy, shorts come out of the closet and businesses brace for an onslaught of new customers. It must be springtime.

Spring brings a new set of challenges for consumers and new batches of customers for some area businesses.

Increased sales in 2011 could signal a new season for the local economy as well.

"For us, it kicks into gear right now," said John Baldschun, co-owner of a local swimming pool supplier. "This is when we see the heaviest three months from a gross revenue standpoint in a year."

It's not so much the cleaning that drives sales, he said, "it's the rush to get pools open."

"I call it a level of uncomfortable demand," he said.

And for 2011, demand is up 50 percent from 2010, he said.

As a result, he's doubled his staff to six from three as calls pour in from pool owners eager to soak up some rays.

Car washes, too, see a bump in business. When freezing temperatures subside, the bays at Max Falk's string of 11 self-service car-washing stations across Chattanooga come to life.

"Spring can be the best time of the year if the weather cooperates because it's also pollen season," Falk said.

But nothing's for sure in his business. Heavy rains can keep consumers' cars parked in the driveway instead of in one of his stalls.

"Spring's one of the better times of the year, but it's not guaranteed," he said.

Still, on average, he sees a 20 percent jump in business during the longer, sunnier days of the warm season.

Those sunny days aren't nearly as much fun for consumers suffering from allergies, who often seek relief by making regular pilgrimages to the local drug store, said Roy Phipps, pharmacist at Kingwood Pharmacy.

"People have allergies year-round, but in the spring and in fall is when sales peak, of course," Phipps said. "When the Bradford pears start blooming [in mid-March], that's when they start coming in."

Phipps sees "a good 20 percent" increase in sales overall in spring, "maybe more," he said.

And with the locally made Allegra on shelves next to the traditional Claritin, Benadryl and Zyrtec, customers have more choices for combating hay fever than ever before.

According to a recent survey, Chattanooga is the nation's fifth-worst city for allergy sufferers in the nation after Knoxville, which is the worst overall.

Homeowners who want to keep the pollen outside and the clean air inside often turn to companies like Chattanooga-based Hullco Exteriors, which specializes in installing high-efficiency windows, doors, siding, gutters and more for existing homes.

Hullco receives more calls in both the spring and fall, said sales manager Brian Brock, when homeowners begin thinking about spikes in cooling or heating bills.

Sales this year are up about 15 percent more than 2010, and another 15 percent more than 2009 numbers, Brock said.

"I anticipate a 20 to 30 percent increase overall this year when you factor in spring sales," he said.

When homeowners add in the rising cost of energy and the slim chance of selling a house, Brock said, it just makes sense that consumers are increasingly embracing home improvements.

"Electricity has increased 56 percent in last 10 years," he said. "It's one of those things people do to try to counterbalance some of those increases in energy costs."