

Downtown Dollars buy gifts at 85 unique stores

By Tara Marion

Whether you're in the process of making your list or you're already checking it twice, top your Christmas list this year with Downtown Dollars gift certificates, which are redeemable at 85 downtown merchants.

These merchants include a variety of restaurants, services and entertainment venues, as well as retailers—and all are unique. “Our shops are not chain stores,” said Stacey Monroe, marketing manager at Downtown Kalamazoo Incorporated, 157 S. Kalamazoo Mall. “They're one-of-a-kind businesses that you're not going to find anywhere else.”

At Terrapin, for example, someone could use their Downtown Dollars to purchase sweaters, silver jewelry, incense, gems, minerals or masks from Africa and Indonesia.

As Monroe pointed out, it's difficult to know whether someone would want a gift certificate at Terrapin or at Gilmore's (which sells specialty apparel, accessories and gifts for men and women)—which is why Downtown Dollars are the perfect gift that lets the recipient choose his or her favorite shops.

Downtown Dollars are also redeemable at restaurants, such as Coney Island or Old Burdick's Bar & Grill. Another option: Spend a night out on the town at the Kalamazoo Civic and Bell's General Store and Kalamazoo Brewing Co., where you can use Downtown Dollars to pay for your evening's entertainment. You can even use your Downtown Dollars at the Downtown Amoco.

“I think people really like them because they're versatile” said Kristine McKendry, DKI administrative assistant. “They're not just for one store but for most of (the places) downtown.”

Downtown Dollars are an ideal gift for those who enjoy coming downtown to shop, but Monroe says that she sells many of them to downtown companies and employees as well.

Some of the larger companies, she said, have really embraced the concept of Downtown Dollars by purchasing them year-round and offering them as employee incentives.

Many companies even purchase them at Christmastime for holiday bonuses, “Instead of giving our employees a \$50 holiday bonus that they can spend on groceries, we'll give them Downtown Dollars so they can keep the money downtown,” Monroe said.

In addition to the popularity of Downtown Dollars among downtown shoppers and companies, DKI sells a number of gift certificates to private schools at a slightly discounted price, which schools can use as fund-raising tools. This idea has resulted in a 600 percent sales increase since the unique gift certificates were initiated in 1995.

How it works, Monroe explained, is that private schools purchase Downtown Dollars at a 10 percent discount and resell them to parents and staff members at face value to raise money for different objectives.

St. Monica School, for example, has used their funds from Downtown Dollars to purchase a new computer for the school.

Added Monroe, “Some of the money also goes towards the child's tuition, so you can imagine parents are very loyal to the places that do this gift-certificate program.”

DKI even began selling Downtown Dollars to Battle Creek schools recently, which rather surprised Monroe because of the distance between Battle Creek and Downtown Kalamazoo.

In the past, the downtown organization has approached these fund-raising groups on a per-request basis, but Monroe said DKI is open to selling Downtown Dollars to other non-profit organizations as well.

Recently her office sent letters to Western Michigan University's fund-raising groups and offered Downtown Dollars as a fund-raising method, she said.

Downtown Dollars have been marketed through a variety of venues, including direct mail, occasional print ads and radio—especially as Christmas approaches.

Whether you're shopping for friends, family, employees or clients, Downtown Dollars are available in \$5 increments, which allow the recipient to spend them \$5 at a time with a variety of merchants.

DKI used to issue gift certificates in larger denominations; however it limited the recipient to shopping at one retailer because the difference between the purchase price and gift certificate was issued in the form of a store credit, rather than cash.

Downtown Dollars, on the other hand, are much more flexible, said Monroe. "With \$5 denominations, you can just go have lunch."

Although Downtown Dollars usually expire six months from the date of purchase, DKI is flexible with that too. If someone lives in Three Rivers, for example, DKI is willing to give them more than six months to spend their Downtown Dollars. "We're pretty user friendly in that way," Monroe said.

Downtown Dollars are available Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the DKI office, located in the Mall Plaza next to Gilmore's.

To give people an opportunity to purchase Downtown Dollars on weekends and evenings, they're also available at Gilmore's second-floor service counter, Monday through Friday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday 12 p.m. to 5 p.m.