

"I used to shop for only American-made items and only bought American for our store, but I was finding less and less items to buy that the public wanted and the quality was becoming poorer and poorer," said Marilyn Patridge, a store owner in Michigan. "I finally surrendered to overseas products. Sad, isn't it? But we have to do what we have to do to survive."

When it comes to turning products, there's no competition.

"If you have two similar items, one made here in the USA and one made in China, Korea or Taiwan, the items made overseas are less expensive so they generally have quicker turns," said Tara Jurica of Arcola Feed in Texas.

More turns mean more profits.

Some retailers find customers who want certain products to be Made in the USA.

"No one wants a Western saddle made in Mexico in my shop or an English saddle from India unless they're a real novice and on a very small budget," said Wisconsin retailer Funke. "But it doesn't seem to bother people when they purchase apparel or horse blankets, which are mainly manufactured overseas."

Saddles made in the United States are a consideration for Sharron Bennett of North Country Tack Box in New York. She stocks one brand over another because of it.

"I proudly promote their products as a premium Made in USA value," she said.

The shrinking availability of products made in the United States leaves retailers frustrated.

"I would love to sell more American products. Where are they?" said D.J. Tardiff Jr., owner of Bearskin Neck Leathers in Massachusetts.

His store offers shoes from Denmark, sandals from Israel and moccasins from China because they are brand names "people recognize and accept."

"It's all well and good to say 'buy American,' but the product isn't here to start with," said Roberta Workman, who operates an online retail store. "Thanks to North American Free Trade Act, American companies have farmed the work out overseas."

She also observed that the quality of imported products has improved, particularly in such items as bits.

"Some Indian leather bridles I have are better quality than American (ones)," she added.

Where a store is located in the country appears to play some role in the demand for American-made products.

Joe McBride operates Ranch-Land Western Store in Nebraska, the heart of the Midwest.

"We have many of our core customers who very much prefer to buy American," McBride said. "They realize that we must all rely upon each other to keep this country up and running."

He said his customers are willing to give "a little" on price to buy American-made, but added he has an increasingly hard time finding those products.

In Texas where cotton is king, customers want shirts made from material that supports area farmers.

"It is very difficult to find shirts made in America that can compete with imported shirts cost-wise," Ken Fincher at Gebo's Distributing Co., which has 16 farm and ranch stores. "Being located in cotton country in West Texas, our consumers like American-made products with American-grown cotton. It's difficult to offer American-made products with American-grown cotton and be competitive."

Fincher believes offering the best of both worlds is an important strategy for his business.

In communities with a high proportion of union members, Made in the USA labels are sought out.

Mel Bertrand, president of MMJ&M in Louisville, Ky., said he has a particularly difficult time finding American-made footwear. One brand he had carried, and which was popular with his customers, recently moved its manufacturing overseas.

He stocks Double H, Abilene and Sage boots "because many of them are still made in Pennsylvania."

Veterans are a particularly tough group of customers to convince to buy foreign-made products.

"If they served in the armed forces, it is made known (that they prefer American-made)," said Amos Brinkman, owner of Livestock Supply & Western Shop in North Dakota. "They become very upset with all the foreign clothing. They refuse to buy the imports."

For retailers who specialize in low-end products, the choice is clear.

Ron Demers of Trader Ron in Maine is a seasonal mobile retailer who sells at agricultural fairs in the Northeast. His customers are nearly completely price-driven.

"They'll buy a hat and walk out of my tent blending in with the crowd," Demers said. "I'm sure that 75% or better of these people will probably never wear a Western hat more than once or twice in the remainder of their lives."

Demers said no more than 10% of his clientele would even think of buying a more expensive Western hat.



MADE IN THE U.S.A.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- Retailers looking for Made in the USA products to stock their shelves say they often have a hard time finding them. Manufacturers whose products are still made in the United States need to do a better job of letting retailers know which products are available.
- To find unique American-made products that sell, retailers often turn to small manufacturers of such things as pottery, hand-painted china, soap and other items.

[Workers in Hatco's plant in Garland, Texas, turn out Stetson, Resistol and Charlie One Horse hats.]