

# Field Museum looks to revamp its gift shops by outsourcing retail management



Ellie Ramirez, 4, center, and her sister Lucia, 2, visit Sue Store, one of the gift shops at the Field Museum in Chicago, on Aug. 3, 2018. (Zbigniew Bzdak / Chicago Tribune)

By **Lauren Zumbach**

Chicago Tribune

AUGUST 6, 2018, 6:00 AM

**T**he Field Museum has tapped a new company to run its gift shops — one that’s no stranger to big-name Chicago brands.

Rank + Rally, part of Chicago-based sports and entertainment concessionaire Levy, helped the Chicago Cubs create the team’s “Fly the W” merchandise and the flagship store that opened last year outside Wrigley Field. It also works with the Blackhawks, the Bulls, the United Center and Arlington International Racecourse.

Rank + Rally will help the museum revamp its gift shops outside the sports and entertainment industries as Jan. 1. Rank + Rally’s duties will include O’Hare International Airport and online.

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Specific plans are still in development, but the company plans to stock the stores with more products from local brands, something that appeals to both tourists and hometown visitors, Rank + Rally President Catherine Cronin said. It's also working on products customers are more likely to use in day-to-day life than a typical souvenir T-shirt, including childrens' bedding. Others will be linked to particular exhibitions. Field Museum scientists conduct research in Antarctica, so Rank + Rally could, for example, create products based on gear expedition members use, like a line of outerwear, Cronin said.

In addition to updating the retail shops and products, the company will train employees to be able to tell customers more about exhibitions and products. The museum store will have space for events, which could include talks with artists and authors.

"Rather than it just being a transaction, we want to create an experience," Cronin said.

There was some hesitation about partnering with a company whose background is in ballparks and jerseys, not fossils and mummies, said Megan Williams, the museum's director of business enterprises.

But Williams said Rank + Rally had a creative approach that meshed with the museum's. She likened it to hiring a new employee.

"Do they fit within the character and personality and long-range vision of the institution? That's 80 percent of it. The other 20 percent, we can teach," she said.

The Field Museum ran its own retail operations before turning them over to Aramark, the company running its restaurants, about five years ago, Williams said. Aramark's contract on the retail side ends in January, but it will continue to handle food and restaurant operations.

Outsourcing retail isn't unheard of at cultural institutions, though Andrew Andoniadis, an Oregon consultant specializing in museum retail, estimated that fewer than half of museums do.

The strategy is more common at zoos and aquariums, he said. A stuffed animal giraffe in a zoo gift shop doesn't have to look like that particular zoo's giraffe, making it easier for vendors to buy products for multiple institutions, keeping costs low.

That's harder to do at museums that are more specialized, Andoniadis said.

Critics of outsourcing question whether another company can match the quality of the merchandise and overall store experience.

But for cultural institutions, Cronin said, it's different than retail, said Ione Saroyan,

ors.

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m a collection or memory this person got

and externalizing it in an object,” Saroyan said. “It’s much more personal, and it’s so important that we tell the story of our own institution.”

Rank + Rally said it understands the importance of storytelling and the museum’s mission.

“Everything we do is bespoke to that specific partner, it’s not cookie-cutter,” Cronin said.

Williams declined to say how much of the Field Museum’s revenues comes from retail sales. “Every dime counts here,” she said, but it’s not just about cash — purchases keep the museum on visitors’ minds.

“They think of the museum when they’re not here, and they want to come back,” she said.

[lzumbach@chicagotribune.com](mailto:lzumbach@chicagotribune.com)

*Twitter @laurenzumbach*

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