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Spooky spending

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An elaborate Halloween display of severed heads on sticks makes for a

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By **Christopher Boyce**, **St. Louis Post-Dispatch**
October 28, 2006 2:00 AM

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- It would seem Larry Kirchner's year-round work paid off when AOL CityGuide rated his Soulard, Mo., haunted house, The Darkness, as sixth-best in the nation. Now if only he could scare up more customers.

A recent survey by the National Retail Federation found 17 percent of consumers will visit a haunted house this Halloween season. Despite that, the profit numbers can be frightening for entrepreneurs.

Kirchner's two local attractions, which are open for about six weeks during the Halloween season, typically scare 30,000 people to the tune of nearly \$500,000. Kirchner regularly finds himself questioning the hundreds of thousands of dollars his company, Halloween Productions Inc., dumps into yearly upgrades at the Soulard location and another attraction, Scarefest, in Fenton.

"I always question if it's worth it because we never seem to make any money," Kirchner said. "Every year, there's a famous saying here that next year we won't have to do so many things and it will be cheaper. But it never is cheaper."

Expenses mount quickly. Kirchner employs up to 100 people each night at each haunted house. There are amusement and property taxes and expensive computer animation. At Scarefest, he put more than \$100,000 into a new hayride.

At the same time, Kirchner must compete with spook houses operated by non-profits that use volunteers and don't have the same tax concerns.

The Haunted Hotel in St. Charles, Mo., for example, had about \$30,000 in operating expenses in 2005, said Capt. Robb F. Watkins of the St. Charles City Fire Department, one of the sponsors of the house. In the end, the not-for-profit haunt was able to donate \$240,000 to three charities.

At for-profit operations, many owners have side jobs during the offseason, said Bill Criscione, vice president of the International Association of Haunted Attractions.

Criscione runs Ghostly Manor in Sandusky, Ohio, five months of the year while working full-time buying and selling grains.

"I think a lot of people have come into and out of this business to get rich quick," Criscione said. "The people who say they do are lying. It just doesn't happen."

Those who do stick in the business are driven by a love for all things Halloween, said Amber Arnett-Bequeaith, vice president of Full Moon Productions Inc., which runs The Beast and The Edge of Hell haunted houses in Kansas City. Her family has been running the latter house for 32 years and The Beast since 1991.

Arnett-Bequeaith said Full Moon's haunts see a combined 100,000 guests annually in a good year. But not every year is a good one.

To get repeat customers, Full Moon spends up to three years on new scenes and story lines and anywhere from \$10,000 to \$100,000 per room. Each year's budget depends on the previous year's profit from roughly a two-month period.

"We're tired right now, but it's better than July when we're eating tuna," said Arnett-Bequeaith. "You get one shot and if you're off on souvenir T-shirts or if something breaks down for a couple days, it's like missing a

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whole quarter of business."

That was the case this year when a patron broke the jaw of a \$20,000 animatronic talking statue in the second week of business at The Beast. Instead of throwing it out, the staff draped a black cloak over its head and kept the show rolling.

Despite the tribulations, the Halloween market is one that entrepreneurs such as Kirchner and his year-round staff of 10 people milk in many ways.

Halloween Productions also builds Halloween sets, rides and black-light miniature golf courses.

But those services, too, are subject to the demands of business customers who try to guess every year if Halloween will be a hit or a dud.

"You have a business that almost lives and dies by weather. ... If you were running the Cardinals, they can do a make-up date," said Kirchner.

"But there's no make up for a Saturday in October or Halloween."

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