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In Your Own Backyard

By Barbara Scofidio



Remember the days when people shopped at their local hardware store every Saturday and knew their neighborhood pharmacist by name? The Shop Local movement is working to bring those days back. Driven in part by rising energy prices and the consumer backlash against big-box stores, groups are forming in communities as diverse as Cambridge, Mass., and Bellingham, Wash.

"Downtown businesses, especially after they have been there awhile, become an integral part of a community," says Haynes Turkle, leader of Groton Local. The group explores local sustainability issues in Groton, Mass., a community with a population of less than 10,000. Founded in the fall of 2006, Groton Local has begun recruiting merchant members to create an awareness campaign, including reusable hemp bags with the "Local First" message, a directory of local businesses and articles in the local paper.

Changing Behavior

Sustainable Connections in Bellingham, Wash., which started six years ago and now has 600 member businesses, has proof that its efforts have shifted the mindset in its arts-rich community. A recent independent study found that 69% of Bellingham residents are familiar with the group's Think Local First program— and three out of five respondents said they have changed their behavior to deliberately choose a local business first.

"It's hard to walk around downtown and not see our message," says Michelle Grandy, manager of Think Local First. It's featured on posters, decals, bumper stickers and ads in the local paper. She also attributes their success to the culture of the community, "which already had these values in place," she says.

She sees an opportunity for craft galleries to align with Local First efforts. "Art is an amazing resource that often gets overlooked," Grandy says. "But it follows naturally, that as people think locally about shopping for groceries," she adds, "when they want to buy something special for their homes, they would look locally, too."

Hamann's Gallery & Gift in Bellingham has seen results from its involvement with Sustainable Connections since joining three years ago. Owner Julie Coull estimates that as many as 70% of her customers mention their interest in supporting local businesses. She promotes her involvement in Sustainable Connections in her advertising.

Often, Shop Local members can be competitors, but that's never been an issue for Coull, or for Karen Kelley, a member of the Cambridge Artists Cooperative in Cambridge, Mass., and the executive director of Cambridge Local First. "It's not about competition," she says. "It's about working together. With galleries, it should be that way."

Ripple Effect

The Shop Local concept can be taken even further. When a gallery carries locally made art, the money made from those sales is more likely to be reinvested into the community. That's what BALLE, the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, calls "the multiplier effect." According to BALLE, as much as 68 cents on the dollar stays within the community when consumers purchase goods locally. That's because local businesses spend more locally, on things like local advertising and services, and also hire local employees, who purchase items locally with the money they make.

As logical as it all sounds, there have been charges that Shop Local movements are anti-chain, even protectionist. But their goal is not to wage war on anything, but simply to promote locally owned and independent businesses. "[Our neighborhood] has changed so much from what it was 30 years ago," says Kelley. "The remaining local businesses are responsible for the vibrancy of the community." Cambridge Local First, which was founded in 2005, distributes more than 20,000 copies of its 92-page member directory annually.

Another misconception is that local stores cost more. Proponents of the movement argue that, in many cases, independent retailers can compete with big-box stores on price. And if they are more expensive, "that difference is wiped out by the rising cost of gas," says Turtle. One of his first efforts in Groton will be to launch a media campaign comparing prices of goods found along Main Street to the prices of those same goods at chain stores in retailheavy Nashua, N.H., 15 miles away—factoring in the price of gas.

The energy issue brings it all full circle, says Kelley. She has been able to benchmark her green efforts against those of other Cambridge Local First members, and now looks for green artists, such as jewelers who use recycled materials or beach glass.

"The Local First movement is bringing sustainability to the forefront, and vice versa," she says. "If they're not on people's consciousness, they should be."