

Guest Column: Shopping choices and community

By Dick Lahn and Jeff Milchen
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Compared to mass demonstrations by Occupiers and their supporters rising up against big banks and corporations, and the anger of tea partiers, focusing on consumer choices may seem a bit dull, even trivial.

But how we choose to spend and invest our hard-earned dollars has a direct bearing on the concentration of wealth and political power and the weakening of the bonds of community and local self-reliance.

We constantly make choices of whether to patronize absentee-owned chains, Internet giants or independent community-based businesses (including privately owned, co-ops, credit unions and more) for our needs and wants. Choosing large remote businesses concentrates wealth and power into few hands, usually far from our homes. Doing business with locals, however, helps decentralize wealth and power, and creates opportunities to build local bonds and cooperation strengthening our communities.

The Annapolis Sustainable Business Alliance supports the overwhelmingly positive approach to help advance a broader localization movement working to revitalize communities, downtowns and independent businesses of all kinds.

We've joined forces with 160 other local business alliances affiliated with the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies and American Independent Business Alliance to launch the national Shift Your Shopping campaign, which urges residents to integrate our values into purchasing decisions.

The campaign's mission statement is hardly radical: "By shifting the focus of holiday shopping to locally owned, independent businesses, we seek to build an annual tradition that strengthens local economies, expands employment, nurtures a sense of community, and provides a more relaxed, fun, and rewarding gift-buying experience." The impact of shifting even 10 percent of the billions of dollars in holiday spending to community-based enterprises will create seismic shifts in our economy while building community wealth and cohesiveness.

We're not advocating for needless consumption. Gifts of meals at local restaurants, lessons to learn a new skill or activity, and countless others often are more welcomed than another necktie. Giving durable (often American-made) goods to fill known needs might even reduce overall consumption.

Purchasing goods and services locally also provides a vital benefit to many others in our community. Whereas chains may minimize costs by off-shoring production to cut labor costs and centralize, usually nationally, marketing and advertising, each local business employs local people (whether in-house or by contracting with others) for their ad design, websites, legal and accounting services, copy writing and many other tasks.

As American Express pointed out in a recent newsletter, consumers are examining their choices and they need to feel they are doing something that has an impact - environmentally, charitably, etc. - according to data from the Futures Company. In its data, 62 percent said making a difference in their local community is important in their personal lives; 82 percent believe that groups of individuals making small changes in behavior can achieve a real difference. American Express OPEN data shows that 89 percent are aware of the impact local spending has on their communities.

As citizens we have many ways to influence the system: we can cast our vote in the electoral booth, we can raise our voices and use the freedom to associate, and we can choose to shift 10 percent of our purchasing power to benefit our communities directly. Our power lies in purposeful concerted action.

Shifting to buying local is not difficult and the rewards benefit us immediately by producing results for those we care about most: our families, friends, neighbors and community.

Happy holidays!

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