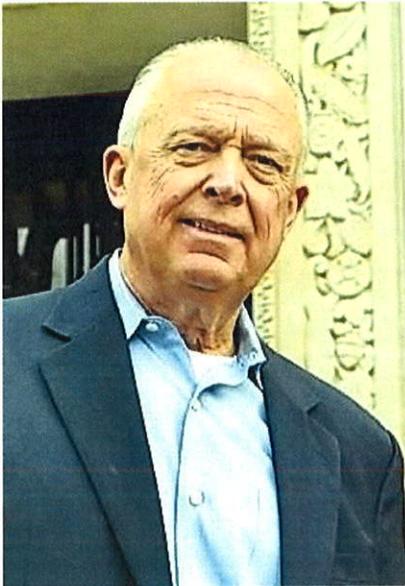


Shop locally, and improve your community

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The benefits of shopping locally can't be overstated.

When we spend our money at locally-owned businesses, we're often reinvesting in our community. The dollars spent at local stores, shops, restaurants, garages and other businesses tend to remain in local circulation, boosting the local economy and keeping many people in jobs.

Various studies have tried to quantify the benefit. The York County Regional Chamber of Commerce estimates that 45 cents of every dollar spent at a local business stays within a community, compared to just 15 cents of every dollar spent at national chains and other non-local businesses.

And when we support our local businesses, they often return the favor by giving back to the community. They sponsor little league teams, form partnerships with local schools and support civic groups. Some national chains do that too, but one report I read recently concluded that nonprofit organizations receive about 250 percent more support from small or local businesses than from large businesses or national chains.

Many people think of economic development as being outside investment by big-name manufacturers or national chains. And certainly, those larger businesses have their place. But small businesses are the driving force behind our local, state and national economies — accounting for more than 6 out of every 10 jobs in the U.S.

With that in mind, here are a few easy ways we can all help our hometown businesses thrive:

1. Eat at locally owned restaurants. If you dine out frequently, make an extra effort to visit local, family-run establishments. Here in South Carolina, it's no secret that some of the most delicious food can be found at our smaller "mom-and-pop" restaurants. And these places are more likely to offer great customer service because they know how vital local patrons are to their success.

When I'm at work in Columbia, one of my favorite lunch spots is a small restaurant called "Bernie's Chicken." The food is fantastic. The cashiers, cooks and servers there know me by name, and they're always eager to engage in conversation. Another of my favorites is the locally-owned and operated chain of Lizards Thicket restaurants, where the food, service, and customer base are impossible to beat.

2. Network when you visit local stores. If you're trying to drum up a little business yourself, shopping locally can be great for networking. Whether you're a salesman trying to spread the word about a product, or a hair stylist wanting new clients, introduce yourself to the owner or manager whenever you visit a local business. Leave a business card if you have one. They'll sometimes reciprocate if they need a service you offer.

3. Try to pick up a copy of your town's community newspaper each week. Local newspapers strengthen the communities they serve by spotlighting positive, local news and connecting us with our neighbors. They also provide an affordable way for small businesses, which often lack large advertising budgets, to get out the word about what they have to offer. (If you decide to patronize one of these advertisers, make sure to mention you saw their ad in the local paper!)

4. For a night out, consider local sports or cultural events. Whether you're planning a date, a get-together with friends or a night out with family, why not check to see if one of your area's high school or college sports teams has a game scheduled? Or consider a play, concert or some other cultural event. This can be a fun and inexpensive way to support your community.

5. Visit your local farmers market. We all need fruit and vegetables, and the local produce sold at a farmers market are often the freshest and tastiest available. Shopping at a local farmers market or the State Farmers Market in Columbia supports family farmers.

6. Share your experience. If you have a good experience with a local business, tell your friends and neighbors. Share it on social media. Because they operate on tight budgets, many local businesses rely on word-of-mouth to help them gain new customers.

Many of these businesses are run by people working to build their own piece of the American dream. Some invest their life savings into their business. But competition from national chains represents a tall challenge, and, sadly, over half of all small businesses fail within five years of opening.

If you stop to think about it, even a modest shift in our personal spending habits can help level the playing field for small businesses — and improve our communities as well.

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