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Five Ways to Lure Local Shoppers

November 24, 2010

Buying local is a movement that is garnering more and more attention and action from consumers as they learn that keeping their hard-earned dollars in their community has a significant benefit to their local economy. In fact, *American Express's Open Forum* reports that a *Yelp* poll found that 90 percent of shoppers feel it's important to support local stores this holiday season. *Open Forum* offers five ways to drive your local consumers to your store.

1. Create a better place.

Let's face it, an attraction of malls is that they're designed to be exciting places

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to hang out, with fountains, seating, interesting lighting, music and special events, especially during the holidays. Local merchants can compete by throwing a block party, just once or regularly.

Look at the example of Oak Cliff, a historic Dallas neighborhood that turned a bedraggled street into a pedestrian mall for a weekend. Creating a holiday street party not only draws shoppers in the short term; you can also use it as a planning tool to help you find out what kinds of businesses and amenities people in your neighborhood are attracted to.

The Oak Cliff merchants worked with property owners, artists, neighborhood activists and non-profits to design a family-friendly event that cost just \$1,000. They installed a temporary sidewalk café and "pop-up" stores in vacant buildings, livening things up with street performers. Several vacant stores were leased following the event, and the shopkeepers are hoping to make some of the changes permanent.

To get the most impact, time your block party to coincide with a farmer's market, art crawl or other regularly scheduled event, so you can piggybank publicity, permits and services. For free holiday entertainment and a likely traffic boost, marketing consultant Laurel Tielis, author of [Ka-Ching! How to Ring Up More Sales](#), suggests inviting carolers from local schools and churches to stroll your street.

"It's a guaranteed way to bring out Mom, Pop and the grandparents. By serving mulled wine, cider, and eggnog to adults, and hot chocolate to the kids you'll personalize the event and make it more fun for everyone," Tielis told *Open Forum*.

2. Make money local.

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A dozen or more communities in the United States have created local currencies, "bucks" you buy at participating banks and spend at participating merchants. For example, the Berkshires region of western Massachusetts has more than \$2 million BerkShares in circulation.

Local currencies, including Baltimore's and the [Brooklyn Torch Project](#), are designed to up the level of commerce within a community, keeping dollars local.

People use regular dollars to buy the local currency, usually getting a 5 to 10 percent discount; that is, you can buy \$100 worth of BerkShares for \$95.

"We find these programs work well where people are living and working in the same community together. It requires a basis of trust and a basis of local knowledge," Susan Witt, education director of the New Economics Institute and founder of BerkShares, Inc., told *Open Forum*.

Proponents say that local currencies circulate much faster and keep more money in the community while promoting cooperation and connection.

Admittedly, you won't be able to create a local currency in time for this holiday season, but there's always next year. For a list of local currency groups and plenty of other resources, see the [New Economics Institute](#), an organization dedicated to building strong local economies. For an overview of how local currencies work, visit the [Baltimore Green Currency Association](#).

3. Get consumers to invest their creativity.

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"How-to-Sell" series to the evolving home improvement channel, this year's lineup will provide plenty of useful tips and advice for the independent retailer.

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People love to tell you their ideas, and when you listen, they feel a sense of ownership. The [REO Eats Project](#) is letting the public weigh in on every aspect of a new restaurant in Lansing, Mich., including the name, décor and menu. The group uses online polls, Facebook and Twitter to keep fans talking about the project.

This tactic is known as crowdsourcing, and it's a better way to plan, says Neil Takemoto, CEO of [Cooltown Beta Communities](#), a company that helps real estate developers build projects that attract creative and progressive residents.

"We build relationship with people who will actually live, work and play there," Takemoto said to *Open Forum*. "These neighborhoods, businesses and buildings become the result of everyone's collective values and intelligence, what it is they would invest in if they were a developer."

Says Matt Dugener, one of the REO Eats Project team members, "When it opens, they're going to be the first people standing at the door, waiting to see what their input resulted in."

4. Play up your personality.

[Caitlin Kelly](#), author of the forthcoming book author of the forthcoming *Malled: My Unintentional Career in Retail*, profiled three small businesses in Tarrytown, N.Y. What set them apart -- and drew customers -- was the friendly and inviting presence of the stores' owners.

"Each of these three delights in knowing his customers personally -- as we do them. Parking is terrible in our town, and the pharmacy sits two doors away from a CVS. Still, much of the time, he gets my business anyway," Kelly says.

Of course, you already make eye contact and greet everyone who enters ... don't you? Go further. Offer hospitality, free samples, and take a personal interest in customers. If this is not your forte, designate one of your employees as Mr. or Ms. Hospitality. Above all, be yourself -- but your best self.

5. Get behind a cause.

A locally-based, cause-related marketing strategy is one of the best ways to compete with big-box retailers, according to Christine Moynihan, a retail consultant and founder of Retail Visioning in Walpole, Mass.

She points out that working with a local group that is actively fundraising provides you with access to a dedicated, loyal audience that will come in and spend money. "Even better," she says, "the work of reaching that audience is handled by the group itself."

For example, if your local high school is trying to raise funds, offer to donate 5 percent of sales on Thursdays for a month. She says, "The school sends out fliers through the students, posts email blasts through the PTA and submits a press release to the local paper about your generous offer. Everyone in town comes to your store."

Celebrate "Small Business Saturday" by visiting your favorite locally owned businesses on Saturday, November 27th. Learn more about this event and how you can show your support at facebook.com/smallbusinessaturday.

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