

Shopping locally amounts to more than just buying stuff

by Rob Pasick

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To the casual observer, the view from Ann Street - where my office is - may seem about as uncertain as the view from that mythical Main Street everyone keeps talking about. (Funny, I don't recall anyone being too concerned about Main Street before the world entered its recent economic coma.)

I could sit in a funk like everyone else, but I'd rather look for signs of encouragement.

OK, so here's one:

A few weeks back, Cara Hurley, a young woman who interned for me last year, dropped by my office. Just out of college, she was hunting for a part-time job. We talked a bit and then took a walk around the corner. She's a dog lover, and I wanted to show her our swell neighborhood pet shop, Dogma Catmantoo, on North Fourth Avenue.

As we walked up to the store, it occurred to me that Alice Liberson, the owner, might be looking for help. Alice had helped me when our Jack Russell terrier was having problems, and I'd given Alice some ideas on her business. Now, I found myself asking Cara if she'd like to work at Dogma, and she said, "Yes!" I gave her some advice on approaching Alice, and within days, she landed a job.

The Washington pols and bureaucrats can jabber all they want about the impact of the billions they're doling out, but what happened on Fourth Avenue - isn't that what it comes down to? A person in need of a job; a job filled.

A few blocks from Dogma is Zingerman's Deli, which, besides being a very famous food emporium, has supported my efforts to bring together Ann Arbor area business leaders on a regular basis. In turn, I'm happy to tout Zingerman's and its many delights to my clients.

Hungry people in need of food; a catering business in need of hungry people. Bon appetit!

A while back, when I was running more often than I do now, I got to know Steve Angerman, owner of Running Fit on Liberty Street. I often gave him advice on his business, and when he needed help staffing a booth at the Ann Arbor Street Art Fair, he hired my teenaged sons. He got sales help and my sons got their first jobs.

I've shopped at the John Leidy Shop on Liberty for so many years, I've known three generations of the Leidy family. Liz and Ann Leidy know what kind of cups I like. If I want to give my wife a gift, I can call and they'll put the package together. They've also carried my books in their store, even though they're not a bookstore.

You catch my drift.

The big guys will be rescued by the billions, some of which Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson now says he'll somehow (who knows how?) get to us little guys. But if we wait for that, we might see a lot more "Going out of Business" signs on Main Street - and on Fourth Avenue, Liberty Street and every other thoroughfare around Ann Arbor, Dexter, Ypsilanti, etc.

So why wait for Hank?

Let's roll out our own individual economic stimulus plan. Spend a few bucks and build some social capital as we do. Here's how:

- A. Maneuver vehicle or shoe leather of choice to a locally owned business.
- B. Say hello to the proprietor or person behind the counter. Introduce yourself. Have a nice, friendly chat.
- C. Buy or eat something.
- D. Wave bye-bye.
- E. Repeat as often as you can.

If you need more encouragement, be advised that studies done all over the country, including a recent one in Grand Rapids, show that more of the dollars spent in locally owned businesses stay in the community - in the form of wages paid to workers, taxes paid to governments to provide services, money donated to community causes and investments and improvements to boost the quality of life.

The best part? The studies show that even a modest shift in consumer buying habits - as little as 10 percent - can have a big impact on independent businesses.

(By the way, I wholeheartedly agree with Paul Saginaw's recent op-ed article in which he pointed out why it is so important to our community's health to bank locally as well as buy locally.)

What was it that our new president said in Grant Park in the warm embrace of the election night darkness?

"This is our moment."

Let's seize it. In hard times, the social capital that we acquire by investing in our local communities may be the most important contribution of all. Aren't relationships worth far more than what's in our wallets?

So, please, toss some bills into local tills this holiday season (and beyond) - but don't forget to smile and say hello as you do.