

SHARON KURTZ

All too often the world, especially America, gets stuck in big stores and name brands. Well, this weekend buying and supporting local business will be at the forefront for some shoppers.

This weekend is the second annual Buy Local Day. I am a relative newcomer to the Bellingham community, as I moved here about two years ago, however I believe in the power of the local community. This is my home now and I will do what I can to support it.

Buy Local Day started last year and now involves more than 300 businesses. Business of diverse offerings, staffs and locations. Some are small, some are large, but they are all local.

None of us are kidding ourselves that we're saving any money by buying out of most mail-order catalogs. Most of the time we're paying retail price plus shipping. The catalog folks are relying on the fact that we're

either lazy, desperate or both.

As we approach the make-or-break (for many retailers) holiday shopping season, it's time for a gentle reminder. This has a lot to do with the mind-boggling amount of money that will be spent over the next seven weeks and where those dollars are ending up.

I'd prefer you spent your money with any local business in preference to the mail-order folks or the big-time stores. Even better would be to spend money with a locally owned small business in preference to a national chain.

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Every dollar spent with a locally-owned business is a dollar that is not wire-transferred to some corporate headquarters, God knows where, faster than you can say guaranteed low prices.

Not that I have anything against national chains. Their gift is also their curse - they have driven all possible costs out of the distribution process in a relentless pursuit of market share. Those of us who value higher quality merchandise, product expertise, individual attention or service after the sale should check out our local alternatives.

And it won't necessarily cost you more. Most independent small businesses belong to purchasing and marketing cooperatives that help them compete. Meanwhile, the huge retailers employ legions of experts that do nothing all day except dream up ways to manipulate the public's perception.

Usually, all this takes is a big advertising budget and a willingness to sell a hundred high-visibility items at or below cost. No problem - they also sell 10,000 other items that they can make money on. You won't know which

is which - the manufacturer's price is rarely displayed for comparison.

The chain grocery stores dreamed this pricing formula up years ago. They're not making any money on the bread and milk but watch out for the pickled okra.

Shopping locally is a mindset foreign to many of us.

Businesses have a key role to play in neighborhood renewal. They impact the local community in many different ways - as employers, as providers of a wide range of services, and as a source of leadership and expertise. They

are also important consumers of public services, whose needs must be understood by the providers of those services, if the business sector is to grow and prosper

Business is a particularly important partner to involve in the process of economic regeneration of deprived areas. This is clearly important when developing the best strategy to deliver local economic growth, where the role of business as a potential investor is likely to be vital. It is also important to involve business in planning associated measures such as training, local recruitment schemes and the engagement of excluded groups. These measures are needed to ensure that the benefits of economic growth, especially the new or better-paid jobs, do not all go to people living elsewhere.

However business is also relevant to other issues. For example, business can support the improvement of educational performance, by providing reading volunteers or governors to local schools as part of their corporate social responsibility programs. Equally, business can be both a partner and a beneficiary in the fight against crime, perhaps by improving their external lighting as part of a wider scheme. ■■■

*Sharon Kurtz is a Bellingham resident and fiction writer who appreciates simple, local living and encourages others to do the same.*

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