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Patronize local merchants, boost regional economy

BY LESLIE COLLINS

Small businesses are the economic backbone of our country, and our community. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration and the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, 1 million of the 30.7 million small businesses in the United States are right here in Pennsylvania.

We are halfway through a year of challenges and uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and small businesses need our support now more than ever to stay viable. There are countless ways to help shape the future of our small business communities and some of the most meaningful actions don't come with a price tag or major time commitment. Here are seven simple ways to make a positive impact on your small business district:

- Think local first. According to the American Independent Business Alliance (AMI-BA), every dollar spent at an independent business returns three times more into the local economy than a dollar spent a national chain, and almost 50 times more than a purchase from an online megaretailer. Buying local strengthens the local economy because those dollars support business owners and their employees and families, as well as the local professionals and services they rely upon to keep their operations running smoothly. Imagine that every day is Small Business Saturday and consider local options before making a purchase — large or small. When you buy local, you support your neighbors and help shape the future of your business community.

- Follow your favorites on social media. Many small businesses rely heavily on social media to stay connected with current and potential customers. For some, it may be their primary marketing tool. Following your favorite businesses on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter is an easy way to show your support and help increase community awareness about the products and services they provide. The few seconds it takes to "like" and share a post can have a significant impact on the reach of a local business. It's also a gesture of goodwill as business owners notice, and appreciate, the support.

- Write positive reviews. One of the greatest benefits of patronizing small businesses is the personalized service so many offer. If a boutique owner was kind enough to set aside new items they knew you would like, or your stylist gave you an appointment during off hours so you would feel comfortable in the salon, or

your favorite restaurant included extra sides because you're a regular customer, give them five stars. They've earned it!

- Engage in word-of-mouth marketing. How many times does a request for a referral pop up in your Facebook feed? Friends are always looking for professionals and service providers they can trust. When you see a request posted online or a friend calls and asks for a referral, consider referring them to your favorite locally owned businesses.

- Be generous with tips. Now is a great time to increase tips to the professionals in the service industry whose businesses have been impacted by full and partial closures. Whenever possible, make up for some lost time and show your support with an extra gratuity.

- Jump-start holiday shopping. The holiday season will be here before we know it. Why not get an early start on shopping and buy as many gifts from locally owned businesses as possible? Cross off items on your gift list and help to support the local economy sooner than later. There are lots of options to shop locally, safely and responsibly this holiday season.

- Make the most of online, curbside and delivery. Local business owners have modified their operations (in some cases, almost overnight) to include online, curbside and delivery options that allow customers to shop and dine safely. Take advantage of these new options as often as possible and take heart in knowing that your actions help shape the future of your hometown's main street or downtown business district.

Leslie Collins is the Executive Director of Scranton Tomorrow, a community non-profit group.



COLLINS



TIMES-SHAMROCK FILE

Shoppers pack the Scranton Cultural Center at the Masonic Temple in November 2017 at the start of the annual Buy Local Holiday Marketplace.