



# Downtown Economics

*Ideas for Increasing Vitality in Community Business Districts*

Issue 167  
July 2010

## Evaluating Your “Buy Local” Program

By Patricia L. Malone\*

So you have started your “Buy Local” campaign after convincing everyone that it is the right thing to do for your community. Now the powers that be want to know “So what?” Has the program made a difference? Are people buying locally? Is our community’s economic base more stable and secure because of this effort?

It can be easy to get caught up in the details of organizing and implementing a successful buy local campaign. However, the point of any effort should be to achieve the goals set by the group. How will you know if you have arrived at your destination? The answer is through evaluation.

### Definition of Evaluation

Evaluation is not an afterthought. It is a useful tool if it becomes part of the planning process. As you identify buy local goals you establish strategies to determine if you have actually met your goals. Evaluation specialists at Virginia Tech describe evaluation as the “process of determining the value or worth of a program, course, or other initiative... It is not assessment which looks for ways to measure or test performance... Evaluation is... more inclusive... making use of ... many other data sources...”  
<http://www.edtech.vt.edu/edtech/id/eval/eval.html> 4/2810

Evaluation is generally described as “qualitative” or “quantitative.” Quantitative evaluation is exactly what its name implies – numerical data is used to determine the worth of a program. In the context of a buy local campaign it could be the percentage increase in gross sales; it could be the number of members signed up to participate in the program; or any other countable descriptor.

Qualitative data is about looking at changes in some “quality” the program is supposed to generate. It relies on words to describe a change and typically involves some kind of dialogue between the evaluator and his/her subject. A buy local campaign may want to ask what consumers may most want to buy locally or what barriers exist that prevent someone from buying goods locally. Frequently used tools are interviews, focus groups, and surveys.

### Why Evaluate?

There are compelling reasons to include evaluation in your buy local campaign. First, results can be used to help you improve and adjust your program. Evaluation is an excellent learning tool and you will discover what worked and what could work better. Once you have this information it is important to use your knowledge to make changes to strengthen your program.

Second, a sound evaluation can tell you what difference your program is making. Evaluation answers “so what?” Is your local economy stronger? Are people actually buying locally? Are more people participating in the program? Evaluation is the tool you use to document your story so you can share it with funders or potential funders; participants – active and potential; and other groups interested in starting a buy local campaign.

### Goals and Objectives?

A two page article will not turn you into a master evaluator. It can get you started thinking about evaluation and asking the right questions.

Evaluation starts with planning your buy local program. Identifying your program’s goals is an essential part of your planning process. Go the next step. How will you know if you have achieved your goals? It is these questions that form the core of your evaluation. Goals look at the long-run. What will the future look like because of your program? For example one goal may be to increase the sales of entrepreneurs participating in your program.



Under each goal identify objectives that will help you measure the progress you are making. The folks at Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) say that one way to write an objective is to answer the following question: "We would feel successful if \_\_\_\_\_ occurred?" Objectives can then be created from what your group inserts in the blank.

### Indicators of Progress

Indicators need to be identified after you have written your goals and objectives. Indicators are "measurable data points that capture the progress" you make towards your goals and objectives (Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture).

Andrew Dane of UW-Extension had identified a number of indicators that may be of use to buy local campaigns. He included some possible evaluation tools that could be used to collect the data. This information is summarized below:

- Gross sales (from each business)
- Public dollars invested in building or restoring main street infrastructure (parking, signage, sidewalks, directional signs, street lighting, etc.)
- Percentage of consumers now buying locally more often now than 6 months or 1 year ago? (consumer survey)
- What products and services are entrepreneurs interested in providing for local markets? (business owner survey; augmented with interviews)
- Which local products and services are household consumers interested in buying? (focus groups; consumer survey; augmented with interviews)
- Which local products and services are local commercial buyers interested in buying? (commercial buyer survey; augmented with interviews)
- Which local products and services are local institutions interested in buying? (consumer survey; augmented with interviews)
- What key assets exist for developing an effective "Buy Local" campaign in our community?(from wise practitioners or focus groups)
- What key opportunities exist for developing an effective "Buy Local" campaign in our community? (from wise practitioners or focus groups)

- What key obstacles exist for developing an effective "Buy Local" campaign in our community? (from wise practitioners or focus groups)

Some tips to consider when you identify your indicators include the following:

- Choose a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators.
- Choose indicators your campaign can directly influence and that are not significantly impacted by changes in outside factors.
- Choose indicators that can show change within your time horizon.
- Gather the data.
- Stick with your indicators so you can track changes over time.
- Your resources (time, money, and staff) are limited so it is better to pick a few indicators rather than having a laundry list of indicators that you cannot measure because you are overwhelmed.

### Using your Evaluation

Once you have conducted your evaluation reflect on the results. What have you learned? What changes can you make? What lessons did you learn? After reflection, share the results; celebrate the good stuff; and share it with others.

\*Patricia L. Malone is a Community Resource Development with the University of Wisconsin-Extension – Trempealeau County. This article was written in collaborate with members of the UWEX Buy Local Team.

#### Additional Evaluation Resources:

This article is largely based on a document prepared by Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture(CISA), online at: [http://www.foodroutes.org/doclib/138/evaluationchapter\\_final.pdf](http://www.foodroutes.org/doclib/138/evaluationchapter_final.pdf)

Online resources for program planning and evaluation. [www.innonet.org](http://www.innonet.org)

Management Assistance Program for Nonprofits Free Management Library. [www.mapnp.org](http://www.mapnp.org)

Contact your local county Extension office for help with capacity building, planning, and evaluation.

Contact: Bill Ryan, Center For Community & Economic Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension  
610 Langdon Street, Madison, WI 53703-1104  
PH: (608)265-8136; FAX: (608)263-4999; TTY: (800)947-3529; HTTP://WWW.UWEX.EDU/CES/CCED  
An EEO/Affirmative Action Employer, UW-Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and ADA requirements.