



Downtown Economics

Ideas for Increasing Vitality in Community Business Districts

Issue 166
June 2010

“Buy Local” Campaigns *Getting Started*

By Andrew Dane*

The “Buy Local” movement continues to gain traction in communities across the United States. Local business and downtown advocates are finding common cause in emphasizing buy local strategies as part of the community’s overall economic development plan. But how does one go about actually developing a “Buy Local” campaign? The following steps are intended to provide a framework for developing your buy local campaign. While they are presented sequentially, your group will likely be addressing more than one step at a time.

Step 1. Generate Interest.

A critical first step to any successful local development strategy is galvanizing enough interest within the community to support a buy local campaign. In Kewaunee County, WI, buy local proponents generated enthusiasm through a series of community forums highlighting the economic impact of buying locally. In Rochester, Michigan, the Main Street program did a series of newspaper ads highlighting the unique products sold downtown. While education and awareness building are often critical, other times the threat of a highway bypass or a key local business shutting down can trigger widespread community interest in supporting local businesses. Threats to local business create opportunities for business owners and community leaders to galvanize their communities in support of a buy local campaign.

Step 2. Build Capacity.

Organizational capacity to pursue a buy local campaign is a prerequisite before moving forward. Communities may need to invest in the creation or strengthening of their local chambers of commerce or Main Street associations. Groups of businesses may also pursue an alliance through umbrella organizations such as the American Independent Business Alliance (AMIBA) and the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE). Successful buy local campaigns depend on strong organizations that can develop and sustain them.

Step 3. Organize a Steering Committee.

A steering committee should bring different people and organizations together to focus solely on the buy local campaign. The makeup of the committee will depend largely on who is promoting the campaign and why. In some communities, it is a coalition of support organizations that are the driving force. In other communities it may be an alliance of businesses that is pushing for the campaign. Regardless, an effective steering committee should include diverse representatives of local businesses, business support organizations, local consumers, community leaders, and the media. The committee should develop a rough timeline for their project, including a target date to launch the campaign. A preliminary budget might also be prepared, and the committee should begin determining how they can raise start up funding for the campaign.

Step 4. Develop Goals.

There are many different ways to promote local businesses within a community, and there are many different ways to define local. It is important that the steering committee first spend time defining their target audience of consumers and businesses for the campaign. The discussion should focus on the broad goals of the campaign. What is the group ultimately trying to accomplish? What types of businesses is it targeting? What are the top two or three target “markets” in terms of potential purchasing power?



Some groups choose to focus more narrowly on driving increased traffic to locally owned and independent businesses within a specific geography. Other groups choose a much broader approach, promoting any type of business within the community. In between these two very different approaches, there are many alternative ways to set up a buy local campaign. Deciding which types of businesses to focus on, and where to focus the campaign, can take several months or longer. These are difficult decisions to make and require a consensus-building approach that meets the needs of those driving the development of the campaign.

Step 5. Refine your Objectives.

The goals of the campaign define what the buy local steering committee seeks to accomplish. Defining a set of objectives should better define how those goals will be accomplished. Many buy local campaigns include a slogan and a logo, which often appear on stickers, window decals, newspaper ads, and other promotional materials. However, there are several additional ways to promote buy local within a community. Some buy local campaigns seek to influence local government purchasing policies, for example. Others promote increased business to business purchasing within the community. Supporting local supply chain development to serve existing industries reliant on imports from outside the community is yet another example of a buy local strategy. Once the objectives for the campaign are defined, the steering committee should develop a draft action plan that spells out how the campaign will be implemented.

Step 6. Develop a Memorandum of Understanding.

As the steering committee wrestles with step 5 they will want to begin formalizing how their buy local campaign is going to function. Developing a written proposal can be a useful step to make sure everyone understands the campaign. It can also serve as a tool for collaborating with other organizations to promote the campaign. A memorandum of agreement or similar document should clearly define:

- Start Up Costs - How much funding is needed to launch the campaign? Who will contribute?
- Membership - Will the campaign include some type of membership? If so, which businesses are eligible?
- Fee Structure - What are the proposed fees for participating businesses and/or project partners wishing to promote and/or use campaign materials?
- Governance Structure - Who will oversee the initiative? Will it be one organization or a steering

committee that includes representation from participating businesses and/or campaign partners?

- Partners - What will be the role of each campaign partners? How will the city or village participate? How will other development organizations participate?

Step 7. Develop your Campaign.

This step will look different depending upon the goals and objectives of the campaign. However, many campaigns include a slogan and a logo. Developing a professional brand for the campaign might involve hiring a professional or bringing in some local talent willing to contribute to the project in exchange for free membership in the campaign. The Institute for Local Self Reliance (ILSR) published a fact sheet *How to Start a Buy Local Campaign*, which includes several examples of buy local logos and slogans from around the U.S. The ILSR also offers other tools and support for developing buy local campaigns through their New Rules project, including an excellent DVD available for purchase. UW-Extension has also prepared a short PowerPoint presentation (see below) highlighting several buy local case studies from across the U.S.

Step 8. Launch the campaign with a splash.

Launching a buy local campaign should be done in a highly visible manner to generate additional awareness of the campaign and spur additional interest among local business owners. A special media event might include the “official” launching of the campaign at a participating business. Existing events, including farmers markets and community festivals represent excellent opportunities to target the campaign to local shoppers.

This article outlines several key steps toward “getting started” with a Buy Local campaign. However, each community is unique, with its own set of issues and opportunities. The exact steps and sequencing of steps are less critical for success than is the presence of someone who can bring the group together and harness their energy in a positive direction. The “right” steps are the ones that get you to your ultimate destination.

<p>Additional Resources for Getting Started</p> <p>Sustainable Connection: http://sustainableconnections.org/about/consulting/tiftips</p> <p>New Rules Project: http://www.newrules.org/retail/taxonomy/term/13</p> <p>The 3/50 Project: http://www.the350project.net/home.html</p> <p>UW-Extension Buy-Local Articles, Fact Sheets and Presentations: http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/downtowns/buylocal.cfm</p>

* Andrew Dane is Associate Professor of Community Resource Development with the University of Wisconsin-Extension (UWEX) The Buy Local article series is a project of UW-Extension’s Community Economic Development Preparedness Team.