



Downtown Economics

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Ideas for Increasing Economic Vitality in Community Business Districts

Revisiting the General Store Concept

By Jamie Krug*

A focal point of many small, rural towns has long been the local general store: a place for supplies, groceries, a cup of coffee and a gathering place for local residents. Over time many of these businesses have had to close their doors due to a number of factors including increased competition with large, regional, retail giants. In some cases the lack of a general store gathering place has contributed to a decline in the quality of life for many small communities. This has lead some residents and entrepreneurs to work on reviving their local general store.

This issue of Downtown Economics examines the role that general stores play in enhancing the quality of life in small rural communities. It also summarizes products and services offered by a sample of stores that have creatively established themselves as a central place and also provide service to their communities.

General Stores and Local Residents

In “the good ol’ days” general stores were a way of life for many communities, but increasing urban sprawl and retail pressures have contributed to the closing of these businesses. There are a number of challenges that small town general stores face in the modern, fast paced, consumer society. The increase and conglomeration of large, regional retail stores provide shopping destinations with high variety and often lower prices. Owners of general stores often have a hard time maintaining profits when costs are high and sales are low. Despite these recent trends, some general stores have found new, unique ways to meet the needs of the local population and also appeal to regional visitors.

Local residents can still purchase food, household goods, supplies and other necessary items at local general stores. Most of these stores cater specifically to local resident needs by stocking small quantities of convenience grocery and hardware store items, and by providing local produce, furniture, and specialty items that make the store unique.

Many of today’s general stores still act as a gathering place for community members by providing a location to enjoy a cup of coffee, a game of checkers or to sit and chat by a fire. Many general stores rely on loyal customers drawn by neighborly service in order to keep their doors open.

General Stores and Tourists

An important component of the success of general stores is the ability to attract tourists and visitors while still focusing on service to local residents. Many general store owners are reaching out to these consumer groups as a way to increase sales beyond local expenditure potential.

One method of attracting visitors has been the trend towards preparing specialty foods, as a way to provide products and services unique to the area. Other stores cater to an authentic local niche by offering local produce or items specific to the area. These methods have allowed many general stores to become unique destinations and attract nonresidents traveling through an area.

Store Examples

A review of four general stores indicates that there is no single business model for success. Instead, each business has focused on its own unique products and services that appeal to both local residents and visitors. The organizations of these businesses also vary. Some communities have discovered creative organizations, such as community owned stores and coops, as opportunities for maintaining a local general store.



The Original General Store, Pittsfield, Vermont¹

When the owners of the Original General Store bought and restored the building, they envisioned recreating the old time general store where the 427 local residents could purchase necessities, but also provide services to visitors passing through town.

The general store has followed recent trends and turned to preparing specialty foods as an important portion of their income. The deli at The Original General Store accounts for about 60 percent of the daily business, and provides made to order sandwiches, pizzas and salads. The biggest pull for the store is their well known breakfasts in which customers come from many miles away. The Original General Store is an updated version of old general stores and provides modern amenities such as ATMs and wireless internet while also selling local produce and maple syrup.

Olivesburg General Store, Olivesburg, Ohio²

The Olivesburg General Store maintains their business by providing outstanding neighborly service. If somebody asks for an item not available in the store every attempt is made to track down and provide the item.

The store caters to the needs of the local residents by providing; groceries, antiques, Amish baked goods and furniture, chocolates and candy, pottery, hardware, penny candy and gasoline. They also sell hand dipped ice cream that can be enjoyed on old fashioned parlor stools. Olivesburg General Store is still a place where local residents gather to sip coffee, enjoy conversation and have a good ol' time.

Good Catch: Parkdale, Ontario³

Good Catch caters completely to their clientele and as the owner says if "you ask for it, we'll get it." The store offers a wide variety of items including locally baked bread and pies, school clothing, fishing licenses and live bait. All items are in response to customer requests. Like any good general store, Good Catch is also the hub of community events and hosts film nights, craft fairs and even plans field trips to pick local fruit.

Taylorstown General Store, Taylorstown, Virginia⁴

When the old general store closed down in 1999 residents of Taylorstown lost their local convenience store and many residents missed having a community gathering place. In order to revive the store, a group of

residents banded together to form a nonprofit group with the goal of reopening the local general store. At the same time the group hopes to incorporate new technologies to make the building a "green building" while creating a unique community center. The group was able to purchase the store and by conducting community fundraising events that continue to raise money for the necessary revisions. Along with the renovation of the general store, the group would also like to add a bakery, a café and possibly an art gallery.

Conclusion

Customers of local general stores repeatedly view the outstanding neighborly service as one of the main reasons for frequenting the stores. The owners, employees and customers of general stores become an extended family, an aspect that is often lost in large retail stores. If a general store does not currently carry an item that a customer is looking for, often the owner will make every attempt to obtain and stock the item in the future.

Other stores have begun to focus on visitors as a way to supplement their income. By offering made to order specialty foods or unique local products, these general stores have become destinations and attract customers from outside their area. In some cases the convenience and sense of place provided by a local general store is so important to a community that residents will band together to help a local store survive.

For related information on this topic, see:

Role of Cooperatives in Community Economic Development (May 2008, No. 141)

Community-Owned Stores Provide Alternative to Chains (December 2004, No 100)

<http://www.uwex.edu/CES/cced/downtowns/lfb/index.cfm>

*Jamie Krug is a graduate student in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

¹ Lyman, Julia. "Re-Storing Pittsfield", Business People-Vermont, 2007.

² Leggett, Esther. "Stores, in general." Amish-Heartland.com, 2005.

³ Thorne, Tammy. "She has convenience cornered." National Post, May 2008.

⁴ Somashekhar, Sandhya. "Restocking a Sense of Community.: The Washington Post, Nov. 2006.

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

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