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Two campaigns seek followers to "shop local"

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By Carolyn Shapiro
The Virginian-Pilot
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For several years, my husband and I have bought our family members Christmas and Hanukkah gifts from Feridies, the peanut processor and retailer based in Courtland.

We send a holiday pack of three cans to each household, all of them out of town. Not only are we giving them a taste of Virginia, but we're supporting a long-running local business.

I also make a point of purchasing many, if not all, of my other holiday gifts from independent merchants. This year: earrings from a boutique in Virginia Beach; serving pieces from my favorite kitchen store, in downtown Portsmouth; nice-smelling soaps from a vendor at the Portsmouth Farmers Market; and other bath goods from a downtown Norfolk spa.

Shopping local is one of my most consistent consumer refrains and a topic I've covered in many forms for The Pilot. While the concept has built momentum nationally, Hampton Roads still lacks a comprehensive, regional campaign that encourages consumers to spend their money at businesses in this community. A few time-limited, food-focused or geographically specific efforts have popped up here and there, but nothing with a wider and ongoing mission.

Recently, I noticed that the website of a Norfolk gourmet food shop had a link posted for "Go Local 757." I clicked on it and went to a page that offered the Go Local 757 Card, a customer-loyalty program that offers cardholders discounts and promotions at participating businesses.

Marketing and advertising firm Go Local Media in Norfolk founded Go Local 757, which started offering the card a few months ago and plans a formal launch early next year, said Ken Suddith, the company's co-owner. A dozen businesses, most of them in downtown Norfolk, have signed up to participate, he said.

Cardholders get some kind of deal – a discounted purchase or buy-one-get-one-free offer – every time they visit a merchant, rather than racking up points with multiple visits to receive a reward.

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A group's "shop local" campaign in Louisville, Ky., adopted the motto Keep Louisville Weird. (Courtesy photo)

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"That's the main idea, is to drive traffic to the business," he said.

The Go Local 757 Card costs \$20 and is good for a year, though the company offers free or cheaper short-term versions at special events. It has sold fewer than 100 cards, with proceeds helping to fund the operation, Suddith said.

I'm not convinced that asking consumers to pay to patronize stores that already face enough hurdles to luring their business is the most effective way to encourage them. You could argue, though, that any savings from the deals the card brings would offset its cost.

Another spend-near-home effort is taking shape at Retail Alliance, the trade group for Hampton Roads merchants. The alliance, based in Norfolk, has formed a steering committee that has come up with a plan for a buy-local campaign. A small technology marketing firm is developing a Web-based component, said Kylie Ross Sibert, the alliance's marketing director.

"We want to make a big splash of this next year," she said.

I wondered whether the duplication of efforts between Go Local 757 and Retail Alliance was counterproductive. Sibert and Suddith said they see each other's organization not as competition

but as compatriots working toward the same goal.

Jeff Milchen, who co-founded the American Independent Business Alliance and helps communities develop their own coalitions, agreed that multiple groups can contribute to raising awareness. "The most important element is just sustained public education," reminding consumers every day and all year long about the value of buying local, he said.

The most successful efforts have a clear and consistent message and a catchy and easily identifiable motto or logo, Milchen said. In Durham, N.C., for example, the logo for "Sustain A Bull: Shop Independent Durham" embraces the mascot of the town's Triple-A baseball team. The Louisville, Ky., group adopted the motto Keep Louisville Weird.

Well-run campaigns also offer a printed and/or internet directory for consumers to find participating businesses. "It's not enough to just convince folks of what you want them to do," Milchen said. "You've got to make it easier for them."

All of this made me think about why I choose to shop local. I do expect to get better customer service in shops where owners staff the cash registers themselves. Many of my neighborhood merchants know me and show me that they appreciate my business - with friendliness, extra effort to find what I need and occasional discounts.

I also expect a more unique selection of products in locally owned places, stuff I don't see elsewhere. Those items aren't necessarily more expensive at the small shops, either.

But none of this is really the reason I give these stores my business. To me, independent merchants make a community more interesting, more vibrant, more extraordinary. They create a cool vibe. I want them to succeed and bring in others like them and stay around for a long time.

For that to happen, I need to support them. So I do.

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INTERESTING CONCEPT

Submitted by [i just wanted t...](#) on Sun, 12/22/2013 at 10:43 am.

--buy local things?

--we can't even get our local government to buy local products.

--what an interesting--our city leaders supporting the local producers?--nah-- never happened, unless they could get something for themselves out of it.--not even the milk for the schools.

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