

# Shop Local Campaigns for Small Towns



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## Making Buy Local Work in Small Towns

### Table of Contents

Do buy local campaigns work? .....	3
How do we do it? Here's the plan!.....	4
Step 1. Get some help.....	4
Step 2. Pick a theme.....	5
Step 3. Promote your most powerful benefits .....	5
Step 4. Create just the right promotional materials .....	7
Step 5. Kick off with events and media coverage.....	7
Step 6. Measure success .....	8
Step 7. Multiply your Shop Local campaign .....	9
Conclusion .....	10
Bonus: Sample list of 10 reasons to shop local .....	11
Inspiration Page: Ideas from all over .....	12

### About the Author

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# Making Buy Local Work in Small Towns

Thinking of creating a buy local campaign for your small town? Lots of towns are. It can make a difference to your local economy, your community, and your services. But how do you start? What works? And what works differently from big city campaigns?

We'll go over all that together. First we'll talk about whether buy local projects actually work today, a plan of action, how to measure success, some powerful buttons you can push in your campaign, and some specific tested tactics that work for small towns right now.



## Do buy local campaigns work?

Yes! Here are the results of four studies and surveys, to help you convince others to support your plan.

### 1. Nationwide holiday comparison

The Independent Business Forum (IBF) conducted a [survey on Buy Local campaigns](#) during the 2007 holiday season. They found that independent retailers in cities with a buy local campaign reported an average gain in sales of about 2% over 2006. Those in cities without a campaign saw an increase of less than 0.5%. The IBF repeated the study for the dismal 2008 holiday season. Independent retailers in shop local cities held their losses down. They were down only 3%, instead of the over 5% where there was not a buy local project.

### 2. Think Local First, Bellingham, WA

In 2006, a [survey on Bellingham's three year long Think Local First](#) program showed that 58% of residents had changed their behavior, and were now more deliberate about choosing local, independently owned businesses first.

### 3. Buy Local, Portland, Maine

Portland, Maine's Buy Local project also generated measurable positive results. In a [2007 survey](#), more than 60 percent of businesses said so, citing improved customer loyalty and sales. Almost 75% said customers had told them that they are making an effort to do more or all of their shopping at locally owned businesses. Forty percent of businesses said they had gained new customers from the project.

### 4. Buy Local Philly

After a month long pilot program in 2005, [surveys showed](#) that one in six people were aware of the initiative, and 40% of those had been motivated to shop at an independent business as a result. More than half of the participating business owners who were surveyed said the project had made a positive impact on their business. That's after one month.

Not enough examples? How about results from [Local First in Utah](#), [Keeping Louisville Weird](#), and [Austin Unchained](#). And just in case someone pulls out the [10 Reasons NOT to Buy Local](#) opinion piece on you (read it and be prepared), here's a link to a [well thought out response](#). And one last round up article, from May 2009 in the Thomas Industrial Market Trends, [Will "Buy Local" Help Your Business?](#) The answer is a resounding yes.



## How do we do it? Here's the Plan!

Keeping everything simple and straightforward is important. It's also important to adapt to your town's character, because every town is a little different.

### Step 1. Get some help.

You can't do all the work alone, so start gathering allies and workers. In a small town, you'll be calling on the STP, the Same Ten People or even the Same Two People who do everything together. But talk to other business owners. You might be surprised who gets excited by this project.

You know best what size of group works in your town, but somewhere between 5 and 15 people is probably best.

## Step 2. Pick a theme.

Common phrases are Buy Local, Shop Local, Homegrown, Think Local First, Stay Local, and Buy Close By. Incorporate your town's personality and best known symbols, like "On The Right Track" from railroad town Waynoka, Oklahoma, or "Keep Austin Weird". In big cities, the emphasis is likely to be on buying from independent local merchants rather than from chains. That might not even be relevant in your small town, so focus on what makes sense: shopping at all the local businesses, rather than heading out of town with your dollars.

## Step 3. Promote your most powerful benefits.

There are lots of lists of the benefits to shopping locally. You can find top 10 lists, long comprehensive lists, ones with lots of explanation, and ones with bullet points. You'll find one sample list and links to a few other good ones at the end of this booklet.

You'll want to make a short and a long version of your list. Short, bullet lists work on posters and table tents. Longer explanations can go in newspaper articles or handout flyers. Develop something that suits the style of your town, and pick the reasons most likely to motivate your residents. Here are my favorite ones:

### - Support your community services.

Jack Schultz found this [shop local campaign](#) example in Perkins, Oklahoma.

An advertisement from the Perkins Community Foundation really caught my eye in the Perkins Journal. It showed a picture of the local fire department fighting a fire in the community with this caption, "If you have a fire, you need help and you need it quickly.

**Every time you shop in Perkins three cents of every dollar goes to keep our city government running—including our Fire Department.**

**When you spend your dollars elsewhere, your money goes to equip somebody else's Fire Department.**

Be smart. Shop Perkins first. It helps you and it helps your neighbors."



In Escondido, California, the city is partnering with the chamber of commerce to promote "[Spend It! In Escondido](#)" with a similar message:

Every taxable dollar spent in Escondido benefits important City-provided services like police and fire, senior services, libraries, street maintenance, street lights and parks. Sales tax generated from Escondido transactions stays in Escondido (1% of gross taxable sales) and contributes to the quality of life you enjoy.

**- Support your local economy.**

You can tell everyone in your town how important it is to buy local, but it is just like any other common advice. We "know" it, so we don't really change our behavior. One way to track how shopping locally makes a difference and get people to change shopping habits is to make the money itself noticeable. Pharmacist Danny Cottrell, did an [experiment in Brewton, Alabama](#). He gave his employees \$700 bonuses using uncommon \$2 bills. Everyone in town noticed as the \$2 bills were spent at local merchants. People saved them to re-spend in town, and several visited merchants they had not been to before. Many towns do a similar thing with local currencies. The Berkshires region in Massachusetts has [BerkShares](#), one of the most famous local currencies. But you can also make something as simple as [Franklin County, Maine's Chamber Bucks](#).

**- Save money and gas.**

As I'm writing this, gasoline prices are headed up again. Lots of small town residents are accustomed to driving to the "big city" to shop. Here's your chance to remind your neighbors to save the gas and shop at home.

**- We have more than you know.**

All small towns have gaps, or holes in the bucket, where spending on a certain item has to go out of town. But you might be surprised at what all you do have. My friend Jeanne Cole needed lawn mower blades for her husband's lawn care business. She





was driving an hour away to a big box store to get them. But when the big box was out of the right blade, in desperation she called the local motorcycle dealer who also sells mowers, etc. (Typical small town business!) Sure enough, they had the blades in stock and for less than the big box was charging. Every small town has stories just like this. Look for them and use them.

#### **Step 4. Create just the right promotional materials.**

Big cities go all out, making everything from shopping bags to tee-shirts to buttons and everything in between. For a small town, you'll want to focus just on the few most effective items. Window signs can make the biggest splash, sparking discussion. Info sheets to put in customer sacks can also gain attention quickly.

After that, you can consider the next-most-effective tools, including stickers for local products, tee-shirts, local directories, and maps. Local coupon books, loyalty punch cards and buy local passports can also work and inject some fun.



#### **Step 5. Kick off with events and media coverage.**

In a small town, you know your local newspaper people. You know how much you can expect from them. Do your best to get as much as you can! Usually, that means writing your own stories, and delivering them straight to the paper. If you aren't sure, just pick up the phone and ask. Remember to include your radio and community TV. See if you can arrange to be interviewed on the local talk shows.

Participating in your existing local events is the second best tactic. Set up a special table at the car show, rodeo, or craft show. Ask local merchants to create special in-store events. Provide those materials you already created, and help promote the events. You can also connect with your local clubs, associations, and membership groups. Take your materials, your list of reasons, and offer to be their monthly program. You know they are desperate for speakers.

The [results from Buy Local Philly](#) showed that these two tactics worked best: direct outreach through events and press coverage. Positive press coverage was good, but it turned out that *negative* press coverage was also good. A scathing article

calling the campaign "protectionist" and "elitist" generated a debate in various media outlets. Many residents reported they remembered the campaign because they disagreed with the negative article. Advertising was much less effective.

Remember to put your shop local campaign prominently on your existing website. I'm surprised at the number of small towns that I *know* have a shop local campaign, but have zero info on their website.

Another new tactic that can work well is a Facebook Page or a Group. Almost every small town has quite a few people on Facebook now. The bonus is that what you build for your shop local campaign turns into a new network for community support. Beth Kanter wrote a great article on [using Facebook groups and pages for nonprofits](#) that can get you started. Go to Facebook, and search "Buy Local" or "Shop Local", and you'll get a truckload of examples to copy from. Some of the best for inspiration are:

- Buy Local Northern Nevada
- Buy Local Bangor
- Dane Buy Local



## Step 6. Measure success.

You'll want to be able to establish some real results, and to make changes as you go to make your project work better. The way to do that is to ask, ask, ask, through surveys, if possible. Where can you get inexpensive surveys to measure success? Check with your local (or nearby) community college or university. Students in marketing, statistics or public relations may be available at no cost or low cost to conduct surveys for you.

What's a good target? [Researcher Dr. Pamela Jull](#) said, "Normally, if 1 in 5 households claim familiarity with your program, and change their behavior because of it, you would consider it a success."

For some reason, coming up with good survey questions is an arcane art. It means thinking ahead about the information you most want to gather. Don't ask a question if you don't want to use that answer to improve your project. Here are some sample questions to get you started.



For residents:

- Are you aware of the campaign?
- Where did you hear or learn about the campaign?
- Have you changed your buying behavior because of it?
- Have you visited businesses you don't normally shop at?
- Have you spent more in town? How much per month?
- Were you surprised by anything you learned from the campaign?
- What would you do differently, if you ran the program?

For businesses:

- Has the campaign benefited your business?
- Have sales increased? How much per month?
- Have customers mentioned the buy local campaign?
- Have you seen new customers?
- Would you recommend the program to other businesses? To other communities?
- Will you continue to participate?
- What would you do differently, if you ran the program?

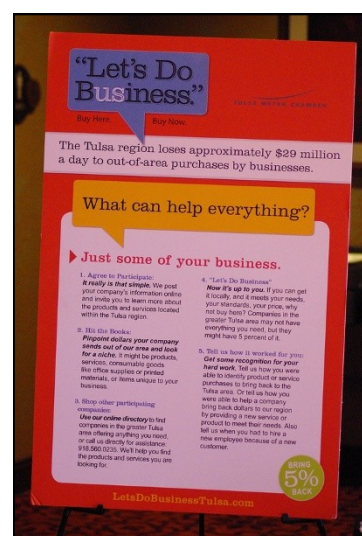
I recommend a survey at three months into the campaign, and another round after a year. If you are using students, you'll have to work with their class schedule, of course.

## Step 7. Multiply your Shop Local campaign

Once you've started a successful Shop Local campaign, you may want to extend its reach. Here are several ways you can do that.

### Promote buy local in business-to-business transactions.

If you can find out what materials and products your local companies need, you can help them find local or at least regional sources. [Tulsa, Oklahoma](#), is creating an online database where local businesses can register themselves, and other businesses can search for what they need. Their goal is to bring 5% of the out-of-state spending by local businesses back to the local economy.



### **Do group purchasing for business.**

When you find out what your local companies need, but can't purchase locally, you might be able to arrange for group purchases. All your local businesses benefit from the lower price.

### **Ask for a bonus for buying local in government purchases.**

Start with your town council. See if you can get them to adopt a policy to give a preference to local bidders in all kinds of purchasing. [Salinas, California](#), did. Salinas gives local businesses rights of first refusal if the local bid is within 10% of a non-local bid.

Or, just take the time to remind the town council and town administrators about buying local at least every couple of months. Praise them in public for buying local.

### **Include your local government services.**

Promote buying stamps at your local post office. Encourage support for your local utilities and civic services. Let people know about products and services your schools are offering.

## **Conclusion**

When you are trying to make the most of your scarce volunteer hours, a shop local campaign can be particularly effective to help your small town. If you have more examples, stories, surveys or ideas, we'd love to hear them. You can share them by commenting at [Small Biz Survival](#), or emailing [becky@smallbizsurvival.com](mailto:becky@smallbizsurvival.com). We're all in this together.



### Bonus: Sample list of 10 reasons to shop local

1. Dollars you spend locally support vital public services in our town and county.
2. Your community is unique, and our one-of-a-kind businesses are an integral part of our distinctive character. Local ownership ensures that important decisions are made locally by people who live in the community and who will feel the impacts of those decisions.
3. You can grow a relationship with your local merchants. They can get to know you, and cater to your preferences.
4. Local merchants care about and invest in your community. They donate part of your dollars back to local groups and charities.
5. Your local purchases support local jobs.
6. When you shop at one local merchant, you're supporting a whole host of other business. Banks, restaurants and other business cluster around our local shops.
7. Local shops are more accessible for everyone. This is especially important for elderly, vulnerable and young people and those without transport.
8. You save money by shopping at home. You drive less, save time, and you'd be surprised how often the retail prices are lower, too.
9. You can reduce your environmental impact by cutting out those long drives to the big city.
10. Your purchases help the town attract new entrepreneurs and skilled workers. Towns that preserve their one-of-a-kind businesses and distinctive character are more successful in recruiting.



### Even more reasons:

Need more reasons, or more explanation? Check out the lists on New Orleans' [Staylocal.org](http://Staylocal.org) and High Peak Borough Council's [Shop Local page](#).

# Inspiration Page: Ideas from all over



Top 10 reasons to buy local from [Sustainable South Sound](#), photo (cc) by [Dreamsjung](#)



Buy Dine Stay in Flagstaff by [Flagstaff Chamber of Commerce](#)

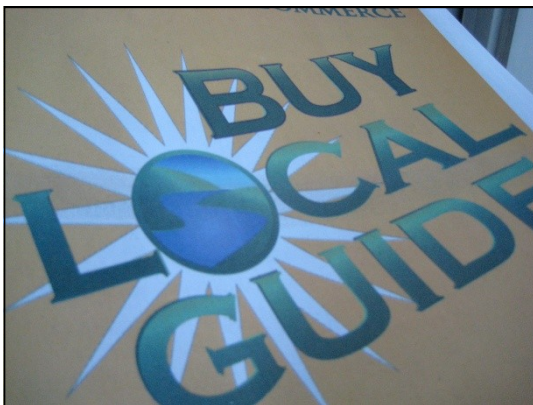
Buy Local Business Expo, [Columbia NY Chamber](#)



Buy local airplane banner, photo (cc) by [Karen Apricot New Orleans](#)



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[Think Bainbridge Buy Local](#), photo (cc) by [A Girl and Her Camera](#)