

Buying locally gives quality to your shopping experience

BY RICK GOULD
Record-Eagle staff writer

During the holiday season, most of us become very familiar with the shopping choices in the Grand Traverse area.

And though there are many choices and deals to be had at local big box and chain stores, there are just as many reasons to shop at locally-owned businesses.

Bryan Crough, executive director of the Traverse City Downtown Development Authority, pointed out that there are over 125 retail businesses "anywhere from Rose Street to Elmwood Street."

Crough said he frequently refers to downtown Traverse City shops as where you can find the unique and rare. He feels that baby boomers in particular are wanting more of a good experience from shopping than just buying a product.

"It's less stressful and more engaging, basically," Crough said of shopping in downtown TC. "The experience you get when you walk into Marcia Bellinger's gallery or any of the stores where the owner is usually there is different from the rush and tumble of other places."

"A lot of downstate shoppers try to get up here for at least one weekend of shop-

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Bryan Crough, executive director of the Traverse City Downtown Development Authority

ping downtown — we hear that all the time," Crough said of the downtown's festive holiday atmosphere.

Aside from the DTCA's promotional events for downtown during the holiday season, Crough said one incentive is two hours free parking in the parking deck at State and Park Street from Thanksgiving through Dec. 31.

"Your vehicle is sheltered from the weather, and you step out and you're so near the shopping environment," Crough said.

The most common challenge for Traverse City, Crough said, is the dependence on the weather.

The national economy is a factor, too — especially this year — but Crough said that the general mood of downtown TC is cautiously optimistic.

Downtown gift certificates are another way of keeping dollars in Traverse City. Last year, over \$100,000 worth were sold. Crough said the amount "rises dramatically" each year and the certificates are accepted in any business downtown.

Sheffield's Gallery & Handmade Furniture, at 803 W. Front St., recently celebrated its fifth anniversary. Owner John Fisher specializes in hand-crafted furnishings, craft and art work by local and Michigan artisans.

Fisher has had the unique opportunity to work both in a local "big box" store and as small business owner with Sheffield's.

He pointed out that while chain stores entice customers with benefits such as lenient return policies, generally small businesses depend on every sale to cover overhead such as rent, taxes, utilities, salaries, credit card processing fees and inventory re-orders. And there is no parent corporation to cover these expenses

during a slow season.

"Quality costs more — period," Fisher said. "You get what you pay for. The present cost of fuel certainly has affected shipping costs and in turn, product costs nationally."

He added that although chain stores advertise "free shipping" or "no sales tax," it's pretty certain that it's built into the sales price. As a small business owner, what can Fisher do to stay competitive?

"Retail is a service-oriented business," he said. "And my business is about going over the edge in customer satisfaction — from placement of the order to placement in the home."

As for Fisher's business mission, it is a matter of staying true to himself.

"A local designer for whom I have tremendous respect said it best to me years ago. I had expressed that my mission was to keep up and stay competitive in the local trade," Fisher recalled. "Her response was simple: 'Concentrate on your own style and business and keep your front door open. Don't concern yourself with how other businesses are doing.' From this advice came immediate relief and the freedom to do my own thing."

The Nest of Grand Traverse, a home furnishing/decor store at 218 Front St., just had its second anniversary in September. Owner/interior designer Jennifer Ringl described Nest as featuring "high quality products, but they have to be at a reasonable price level."

Ringl tries to maintain reasonable prices every day, inspired by advice from a now-retired long-time downtown retailer: "Don't mark up to mark down."

She said the niche at Nest is featuring "creative, friendly, professional people that can truly help customers."

Ringl said of customers: "They don't always know what they want, but they know what they like. Our job is to put that together."

Ringl remembers her own family shopping downtown during the holidays, looking at the store windows competition, the lights and seeing friends. She commented how people who grew up here come back to visit, saying how great downtown Traverse City looks today.

As for shopping downtown, she cites the total experience, "With downtown, you take your time, it's a special thing to do and the environment is fun."

Marcia Bellinger, owner of Belstone gallery, is coming upon her 20th anniversary with the gallery, which fea-

tures fine art, glass, jewelry, metal, pottery and wood.

Bellinger has seen a lot at her 321 East Front St. location, from when Traverse City was a hot spot in the summer and when everything cooled down — in every sense — during the winter months.

"I was a little concerned when I first opened," Bellinger recalled, then a just-retired English teacher with no business background. During her first years, she saw a new mall coming in, downtown JC Penney's closing, followed later by landmark businesses like Milliken's and Hamilton's. Downtown Traverse City could have become another ghost town.

The benchmark, Bellinger said, was when Horizon Books bought the JC Penney's building and committed themselves to downtown Traverse City. She also cited "the creative effort of so many people and their faith in downtown Traverse City."

"We live here and we have an investment in the community, so we are set apart," Bellinger said of comparisons to malls and big box stores. "The downtown is far more vital, strong since the merchant association. It's all helping. Downtown is where people want to be."

TC Downtown Men's Night brings guys out to shop, snack and socialize

BY NANCY SUNDSTROM
Special to the Record-Eagle

Susan Ruoff, owner of Venus in downtown Traverse City, has an explanation for why the annual Downtown Men's Night event every December has become one which both shoppers and store owners anticipate.

"For the guys, shopping really can't get any easier or better than this," said Ruoff, whose boutique specializes in cosmetics and a wide range of bath, body, fragrance and gift items. "We offer personal shopping assistance and wish lists, wrap everything up, and let the guys enjoy microbrews and snacks while we get everything ready. When they come in with friends, it becomes a very social, festive evening, and when they leave, they know they'll have gifts that their significant other will really like."

That approach seems to provide the formula used by more than 30 downtown

stores and restaurants to provide one relaxing and productive evening of shopping catered toward men. The day of the event typically falls on the Thursday preceding Christmas, this year on Thursday, Dec. 22 from 5:30-9 p.m. The event is organized by the Downtown Traverse City Association (DTCA).

"Men's night has been a popular event in downtown Traverse City and seems to grow every year," said Colleen Pavaglio, marketing director for the DTCA. "Downtown knows how to take care of their customer's needs, especially on that night, by providing personal shoppers, models, refreshments and free gift wrap."

Ruoff said the success of the evening is demonstrated for their by two factors.

"We may not see some of our male shoppers any other time of the year, but we can count on seeing them at Men's Night, and usually, they'll bring in a friend or two hasn't done it before,"

explained Ruoff.

"They love how easy we make the whole process, especially the wrapping, and the result is that Men's Night is probably our single biggest day of sales all year long," she said.

Alison Knowles owns Cali's Cotton's in the 200 block of East Front Street, across from Horizon Books. With its line of natural fiber clothing, jewelry and home accessories, Cali's has long been a busy downtown store, and Knowles was holding an informal Men's Night of her own before the DTCA formally reinstated the event on its holiday schedule in 1998.

"I think it's awesome how the event has grown, in terms of the regular and new shoppers we see and the stores and restaurants who all join in to make the night special," said Knowles.

"It gets busy, so we make

sure to have all our staff on board that night, and throughout downtown, there's just a great energy that comes with people being in the holiday spirit, enjoying their friends and having the stress taken out of shopping," she said. "I also love that we've been starting to see more and more younger men shopping on that night. It tells me how much the event has grown."

So far, the list of participating stores include:

- Americana Collection (30 percent off selected items, refreshments)
- Art & Soul Gallery (refreshments, specials),
- Backcountry Outfitters (refreshments)
- Belstone Gallery (refreshments, drawing for a gift card)
- Cali's Cottons (refreshments, specials)
- Captain's Quarters (Grandma Betsy's Hot Apple

Cider)

- Cottage Garden (refreshments, free gift wrap)
- Dandelion (specials, free gift wrap)
- Ella's (20 percent off, refreshments, any sales over \$50 receive a \$10 gift card for January)
- Federico's (refreshments)
- Harbor Wear (specials, refreshments)
- Holiday Traditions (drawings, refreshments, free gift wrap)
- Items (refreshments, hors d'oeuvres), Kay's (refreshments, free gift wrap)
- La Moda (refreshments, specials)
- Miners North (refreshments, hors d'oeuvres, wish lists)
- Migration Home (refreshments)
- My Favorite Things (specials, refreshments)
- Peppercorn (gift basket drawing, 20 percent off sale,

refreshments)

- Pegggers and Pegggers 2 (refreshments, free gift wrap)
- Tiny Toes (refreshments)
- Venus (refreshments, free gift wrap, wish lists, personal shoppers),
- Votruba's (Specials)
- Watermelon Sugar (refreshments, free gift wrap)
- What to Wear (refreshments).

Downtown eateries are also a part of Men's Night, including Amical (free appetizers at the bar), Mackinaw Brew Pub (Men's Poker Night, 6-9 p.m., \$2 off appetizers, \$2 pints) and Minerva's (Happy Hour from 4-6 p.m. and 9-11 p.m.)

For more information on Men's Night in downtown Traverse City on Thursday, Dec. 22, 5:30-9 p.m., call 922-2050, or visit www.downtowntc.com.

Nancy Sundstrom is a local freelance writer.

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