

**ONLINE**

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and Germany, the store also pulls in customers from other locations in the region. Sheets explained that just the other day a lady drove here from the Twin Cities area just to visit their shop.

"We're a destination," Sheets said.

To reach people outside the area, the store advertises in a couple of national magazines and has a booth each fall at the Norsk Hostfest in Minot, North Dakota.

Yet, being successful online does not mean that having a storefront in downtown Alexandria isn't equally as important. Both Bergerson and Sheets were quick to point out that online sales are only part of their business. In addition to welcoming a lot of tourists in the summer, the store also boasts a strong base of local customers who are vital for its success.

And what the internet gives, it can also take away. While Sheets and Bergerson have harnessed the power of the internet, they still face challenges.

For example, sometimes people will still come in and take pictures and say they can get the same item cheaper somewhere else. In addition, many people now expect free shipping, which Bergerson said they cannot afford to do.

What they can do, she said, is offer customer service and products that are difficult to find anywhere else.

**Successful formulas**

Remodeling their home decor store, adding trendy women's clothing and showcasing outfits on social media are



Lowell Anderson / Echo Press

Heidi Bergerson (right), co-owner of Scandinavian Gift Shop in Alexandria, helps Julie Thompson find an item in the store Tuesday morning.

credited by the owners of another downtown Alexandria store for driving up sales by double-digit percentages two years in a row.

Dan Botker, who owns Creative Touch Boutique with his wife Pam, said the changes are drawing in younger customers who are in the market for both clothing and home decor.

"It's kind of crazy how our main customer base has switched now," he said. "It used to be (ages) 40-60 and now it's 20-45."

Other area businesses are adding digital components while continuing to rely on tried and true methods such as print advertising. One example

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— ELLIOT CHRISTENSEN, co-owner, Elden's Fresh Foods

is Elden's Fresh Foods in Alexandria.

While print advertising will always be a part of its strategy, co-owner Elliot Christensen said they are complementing that with an Elden's app that allows customers to get special ads and coupons on their phones and then get rewards.

He noted that although it is a challenge for retailers to compete with giants such as Amazon, the key is to have a business that keeps changing and investing in itself.

"You need to have a business that's up on the times, that's a part of online shopping, a part of the opportunities for the consumer," he said. "It's a changing world." In addition to the Elden's app, the store has also given customers the opportunity to call in or go online to order food, which can then either be picked up or delivered by the store.

Elden's store director JR Christensen added that one change he sees in the future is that people may buy more bulk items, such as toilet paper, paper towels and laundry detergent, online. However, there will always be a need for grocery stores where people can purchase fresh food items

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**Working together**

Another secret to what's working in Alexandria was identified by the Minnesota Retailers Association, which in October crowned the city as the state's 2018 Retail Community of the Year. In presenting the award, MRA President Bruce Nustad credited Alexandria's unique partnerships and cooperation for making the area a strong destination for shoppers.

"What is truly unique about Alexandria is the retail experiences that are created as the community works together," he said.

Tara Bitzan, executive director of the Alexandria Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce, has fielded questions from chamber directors who have empty storefronts. They want to know how Alexandria is able to keep those buildings filled.

She tells them that the cooperation and supportiveness of the business owners are essential elements keeping Alexandria ahead of the curve.

"Our business sector has a strong culture of mutual support for one another," Bitzan said, and the competition is healthy, without the bitterness found in some places.

"Instead of competing against each other, businesses are teaming up in many ways and working together for the good of the entire community. The impact of that has definitely been a positive thing for our community."

Ross Evavold and Karen Tolkkinen contributed to this story.

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- Doors & Windows
- Siding
- And More

\*Excludes electronics under 60 inches, Cullen's Great Buys, KA small appliances, previous purchases and bids, and labor. On Approved Credit. Minimum monthly payments required. Tax and installation not included. 26% APR if requirements not met. See store for details. Other in-store exclusions apply.

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